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Message of the Prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development on the occasion of the International Day against Abuse and Illicit Trafficking of Drugs

The following is the Message from the Prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development on the occasion of today's International Day against Abuse and Illicit Trafficking of Drugs:

Message

The International Day Against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking in Drugs, established by the United Nations, is an important opportunity for drawing attention to the fact that narcotics continue to “rage in impressive forms and dimensions”.^[1] It is a phenomenon that is fuelled – not without concessions and compromises on the part of institutions – by “a shameful market that crosses national and continental borders”,^[2] intertwined with mafias and drug trafficking.

Nowadays we are faced with a scenario of profoundly changed dependencies, compared to the recent past.^[3] Drugs have become a consumer product made compatible with everyday life, with leisure activity and even with the pursuit of well-being.

Cocaine consumption is associated with a greater spread of heroin, which “still represents the highest percentage (80%) of new requests for opioid-related treatment in Europe”.^[4] In addition, new intoxicating, psychoactive substances, available at low cost and anonymously on the market via the internet, also find their way into places of detention and mobilize in trafficking many people recruited from peripheral areas of hardship where they also find new consumers.

The most commonly consumed recreational drug, however, is cannabis, about which there is an international debate which tends to overlook the ethical judgment of the substance, by definition negative as with any other drug,^[5] focusing on possible therapeutic uses, a field in which we await scientific data to be validated by monitoring periods, as for any experiment worthy of public consideration.

Before deciding on these issues, starting from various kinds of prejudices, it would be better to understand trends in the use of cannabis, related damages and the consequences of regulatory policies in the various countries, that push the illegal market to develop products intended to affect patterns of consumption and to reaffirm the primacy of the desire that is compulsively satisfied by the substance.

Pathological gambling or ludopathy has for some time been a rampant scourge that further diversifies addictions. The legalization of gambling, even when it is supported by the intention of unmasking its criminal management, exponentially increases the number of pathological players; moreover, taxation by the state is to be considered incompatible from an ethical standpoint and contradictory in terms of prevention. The definition of models of intervention and adequate monitoring systems, associated with the allocation of funds, is highly desirable to tackle the phenomenon.

As the landscape of addictions diversifies, indifference and at times indirect complicity in this phenomenon contributes to diverting the attention of public opinion and governments, focused on other emergencies. But faced with surprising events, which require unexpected efforts, resources and responses, it is often the emergency solution that prevails over a serious culture of prevention capable of being equipped with goals, tools and resources to ensure consistency and durability in addressing the problems.

This is confirmed in many countries by the collapse of planned efforts, institutional services and resources; the offering that has for decades seen the advancement of addictions has, in many cases, been reduced to a marginal bulwark, invested in the task of curbing in solitude the desertification caused by years of inattention.

The present-day picture of addictions shows, in many cases, gaps in planning, policies and prospects, the sign of sluggish progress, inadequate faced with the drug market, which is highly competitive and flexible to demand, and always open to novelties such as recently-created, extremely powerful synthetic opiates, ecstasy and amphetamines. It is precisely the growing and widespread consumption of ecstasy that may serve as an indicator of how the use of illicit substances has now spread into everyday areas of life, and how the user no longer identifies with the heroin addict, but rather with the new profile of the user of multiple substances and alcohol.

As a result, intervention strategies can not solely specialist or directed at damage reduction, nor can drugs still be considered as a phenomenon that is collusive with social disorder and deviance. Damage reduction must necessarily involve taking on board both the toxicological aspect and integration with personalized therapeutic programs of a psycho-social nature, without giving rise to forms of chronic use, which are harmful to the person and ethically reprehensible. Designed to avoid the collateral damage of addiction, risk reduction instead expresses a more epidemiological rather than therapeutic approach, taking the form of a strategy of social control strategy and hygienic prophylaxis. The real risk is that this can lead in a more aseptic and less visible way to the psychological and social death of the addict, by differentiating it from the physical one.

Considering people as irrecoverable is an act of capitulation that denies the psychological dynamics of change and offers an alibi for disengagement from the addict and the institutions that have the task of preventing and treating. In other words, it can not be accepted that society metabolizes drug use as a chronic epochal trait, similar to alcoholism and tobacco, withdrawing from exchange on the margins of freedom of the state and the citizen in relation to substance use.

Naturally, one must not minimize the addictions that arise and develop with complex characteristics related to existing clinical evidence or that which is consequent to the use of psychoactive substances: it is the case of the so-called "double diagnosis", in the field of psychiatric disorders, which is very demanding during treatment.

"Clearly there is no single cause of drug addiction. Rather, there are many factors that contribute to it, among which are the absence of a family, social pressures, the propaganda of drug dealers, and the desire for new experiences. Every drug addict has a unique personal story and must be listened to, understood, loved, and, insofar as possible, healed and purified. We cannot stoop to the injustice of categorizing drug addicts as if they were mere objects or broken machines; each person must be valued and appreciated in his or her dignity in

order to enable them to be healed”.[6]

“Good practices” against resigned standardization, or delegation to the few with good will, require us to assume the duty of prevention, an attitude of concern oriented towards taking care, in terms of promoting health in its broader and more comprehensive sense. Broad policies and strategies, based on primary prevention, cannot but invoke all social actors, starting from the commitment to education.

The scenario which we must all face is marked by the loss of the ancient primacy of the family and the school, the emptying of authority of adult figures and the difficulties that arise in terms of parenting; this proves that this is not time for “protagonism”, but rather for “networks” capable of reactivating social educational synergies by overcoming unnecessary competition, delegation and forms of dereliction. To prevent young people from growing up without “care”, bred rather than educated, attracted by “healing prosthetics”, as drugs appear to them, all social actors must connect and invest in the shared ground of basic and indispensable education values aiming at the integral formation of the person. In this regard, the commitment and perseverance of private social workers and volunteers is to be noted; since the emergence of the drug problem they have provided the first responses. Their work, often undervalued, deserves concrete support and careful attention. From the therapeutic communities, among other things, there come signs of change of high educational value, useful in rehabilitation paths and even more so in the field of prevention.

Educational aspects are crucial, especially in the vulnerable and incomplete time of adolescence, when there is an alternation of intense moments of discovery and curiosity, but also of depression, apathy and behaviour that may symbolically or genuinely endanger life. These forms of conduct, deliberately transgressive, are aimed at overcoming the suffering caused by the sensation of being in front of the insurmountable wall of a never-ending present and an unseen future. They are appeals to live, but also appeals for help and support addressed to adults who are able to convey the taste of life and the sense of how precious it is.[7]

Young people, as Pope Francis has said, “They look for that “vertigo” that makes them feel alive. So, let us give it to them! Let us stimulate all that which helps them transform their dreams into plans, and that can reveal that all the potential they have is a bridge, a passage towards a vocation (in the broadest sense of the word). Let us propose broad aims to them, great challenges, and let us help them achieve them, to reach their targets. Let us not leave them alone. So, challenge them more than they challenge us. Let us not allow that “vertigo” to reach them from others, those which only put their lives at risk; let us give this to them. But the right vertigo, which satisfies that desire to move, to go ahead”.[8]

To combat the ephemeral happiness of addictions requires creative love and adults capable of teaching and practising healthy self-care. A spiritual vision of existence, projected towards the search for meaning, open to the encounter with others, constitutes the greatest educational legacy that must be handed down between generations, today more than ever.

Otherwise, addictions will contribute to killing humanity, as we are well aware that he who does not love himself is not capable of loving his neighbour.

Vatican City, 26 June 2017

Cardinal Peter Kodwo Appiah Turkson

Prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development

[1] Pope Francis, Address to participants in the 31st Drug Enforcement Conference, 20 June 2014.

[2] Ibidem

[3] Department for Anti-Drug policies, Annual Report to Parliament on the use of illicit substances and drug dependency in Italy for the year 2016.

[4] European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, European Report on Drugs, 2017.

[5] The “No to any type of drug” has been reiterated several times by Pope Francis. Cf, for example, the General Audience of 7 May 2014.

[6] Pope Francis, Address to participants in the meeting organized by the Pontifical Academy of Sciences on *Narcotics: Problems and Solutions of this Global Issue*, 24 November 2016.

[7] Cf. David Le Breton, *Shedding one's skin in adolescence*, Bologna, EDB, 2016.

[8] Pope Francis, Address at the Diocesan Pastoral Convention on the theme: “Let’s not leave them alone! Accompanying parents in the education of teenage children”, 19 June 2017.
