

# **PASTORAL CARE FOR DRUG ADDICTS IN VIETNAM: THEOLOGICO-PASTORAL IMPLICATIONS**

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## **Background of the Study**

Drug and drug addiction are phenomena that are invading all societies in the world. It affects almost every country, although its extent and characteristics differ from region to region. Drug abuse trends around the world, especially among the youth, the more number of drug addicts the more the younger they become. Drug related problems include increased rates of crimes, and violence, susceptibility to HIV/AIDS and hepatitis, demand for treatment and emergency room visits and breakdown in social behavior. Drug abuse damages individual, family, community and society.

In the report 2006 of UNODC, there are about 200 million people, or 5 percent of the global population age 15-64, who have used illicit drugs at least once in the last 12 months. Among this population are people from almost every country on earth. More people are involved in the production and trafficking of illicit drugs and still more are touched by the devastating social and economic costs of this problem. Partially a consequence of its pervasiveness and partially a consequence of the illicit and hidden nature of the problem, reliable analysis and statistics on the production, trafficking and use of illicit drugs are rare.

Vietnam is not an exceptional case. Problems on prohibited drugs are considered a big concern for all Vietnamese from rural to urban areas, which affects not only the one using it but also the family, community, the church, and the society. Drug abuse also affects the development of the nation for it is related to others social evils such as: crimes, violence, fragment of the family, and social diseases (HIV/AIDS) among others. According to the Standing Office on Drug Control (SODC) there were 170,400 drug abusers recorded nationwide in 2004. This is an increase of 6% when

compared to 2003. The Ministry of Labor, Invalids, and Social Affairs (MOLISA) reported over 30,000 drug users in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) and 15,697 in Hanoi in 2004. Together these cities accounted for 36% of all drug abusers that year, not including the number of drug users in prison. The Viet Nam General Confederation of Labor and the Ministry of Education and Training have estimated that over 3,000 government employees and 652 students were current drug abusers. 93% of all drug users are male, and around 70% of drug users are IDUs. According to a survey conducted by UNODC and MOLISA, in 2000 around 80% of drug abusers were below the age of 35, and 52% were below the age of 25.6. Many NGOs and community organizations believe that these figures underestimate the actual numbers. A total of VND90 billion (equivalent US\$5.5 million) is allocated each year for drug control activities countrywide.

The Church is not against the modern world but since she is a part of this world and in relationship to it, she therefore cannot ignore what is happening around her: "We must therefore recognize and understand the world in which we live, its explanations, its longings, and its often dramatic characteristics." To carry out the mission in the modern world: "the Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel." Out of her pastoral concern for individuals, families and the entire society, the church should be involved in the prevention of drugs and addiction. She desires to continue this work together with people of good will, in the light of her scholastic, health care structures, and institutions that are open to all.

Catholic pastoral care is based on the belief that every human life is worthy of dignity, respect and compassion, and that pastoral care is provided to preserve and enhance the quality of life of anyone who needs help. The Church offers her own specific answer as a guardian of human and Christian moral values, which are meant for all, can be proposed to all, and with methods open to all: believers and non-believers, drug users or persons at risk, young or old, persons coming from "healthy" families or those without a family. The Church's answer is about the values of the person as such. The Church's proposal is an evangelical design for man. She announces the love of God, which does not wish the death, but rather conversion and life, to those who are living the drama of addiction and suffer a miserable existence. Her proclamation is about the fullness of life, eternal life, particularly in situations, which threaten or put life in danger.

It is important to be aware of the harmful effect of prohibited drugs and drug addiction to the person who abuses them, their families, the communities, the church

and the nation. The Vietnamese Catholic Church is paying special attention to this problem in thoughts and in actions.

During the annual meeting of the Bishops Conference there was a report on the problems of prohibited drugs and drug addiction by the Commission on Social and Charity (CSC) in parishes, religious congregations and in various dioceses, the CSC has organized forums for the youth and the parents to discuss issues about the harmful effects of prohibited drugs. The CSC cooperates with the National Medical Hospital to offer trainings for priests, religious men and women, and lay people, who dedicate themselves to help victims of drug addiction. Even though, Catholic Church in Vietnam does not own any center of rehabilitations. Since the centers are managed and organized by the government, the catholic victims of addiction are not allowed to bring Bible, Rosaries with them. Furthermore, the mass and other religious activities for the victims are also prohibited in the rehabilitation centers.

Despite of those barriers, the CSC has offered many courses (Easter Class) for drug addicts to help them stop using prohibited drugs, through the method of spiritual treatment and help them to discover the meaning and value of their lives.

### **Statement of the Problem**

This study attempts to describe and analyze the present situation of drug addiction in Vietnam in order to be able to draw out some theologico-pastoral implications from the findings of the study.

Specifically, it will try to answer the following questions:

1. What is the situation of drug abuse and drug addiction in the Vietnamese society?
2. What is the Church teaching on pastoral care for drug addicts?
3. What are the activities of pastoral care for the drug addicts who are members of the Catholic Church?
4. What are the challenges and prospects for pastoral workers in the context of Vietnam?
5. What theological and pastoral implications can be drawn from the findings of this study?

## **Significance of the Study**

The results of this study may have great significance to the following:

To the Church: It will help in the advancement and application of knowledge in the field of pastoral ministry. Seeing the Church as service to mankind, Vatican II has stressed the dignity of all the people of God, the healthy and the sick, and the Church's mission is to promote and protect human dignity. Within the Church, all pastoral and spiritual authority "must be directed towards developing and making evident the dignity of man". So, from the perspective of the Church in *Gaudium et Spes*, this study becomes significant because it aims to reinforce and strengthen the role of the Church in the world as she becomes involved in the mission of the Church in proclaiming the Kingdom of God for all people especially to drug addicts. This would make the Church truly present and alive in the Spirit of God.

To Asian Churches: It is also an attempt to present how important a pastoral ministry in the Church's mission is in the context of the local Churches in Asia where the substances rooted and the drug addiction is in serious. It will respond to the call of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) for the service of love within the Churches.

In this regard, it will hopefully help to raise the awareness and an attitude of service among the clergy's leadership so that the lay people may be more involved in the mission of the Church to prevent and take care of drug addicts.

To the Viet Church: It will give to the Vietnamese Church's leaders and lay people some helpful information about pastoral ministry in the life of the Church, particularly in the pastoral care for drug addicts. Thereby, it will inspire lay people to join in the apostolate of the Church and will motivate the Church's leaders to be more concerned about the social problems as a way to encounter the challenges of today's society.

To the family: It hopes to serve as a source of information for Catholic families so they can protect their children from the problems of drug addiction.

## **Scope and Limitation**

The aspects under which the matter is studied are three, namely: the situation of drug use and drug addiction in Vietnam, the Christian understanding of pastoral care for drug addicts, the activities of pastoral care for drug addict in the Archdiocese of Ho Chi Minh City, and the challenges and prospects of pastoral workers in the context of Vietnam today, particularly for those who are engaged in helping drug addicts in Archdiocese of Ho Chi Minh City.

Because of the lack of information, this investigation is focused only on the pastoral care for drug addicts in the Archdiocese of Ho Chi Minh City and not to other social problems. Hence, no generalizations are put forward as applicable to other social problems or other religions in Vietnam.

The analysis here aims at the current pastoral care for drug addiction in the Archdiocese of Ho Chi Minh City, based on the situation and trends in the current society of Vietnam. However, due to the specific political situation of Vietnam, information about Vietnamese society is scarce, and its accuracy is not high. The researcher admits that the scarcity of resources limits the scope of the study.

At present, the use and trafficking of illicit drugs have increased since the Doi Moi, or "open door policy" announcement in 1986. Vietnam is facing many social problems related to drug abuse, such as: drug addiction, prostitution, HIV/AIDS and crimes. There is a very few formal studies concerning the pastoral care for the victims, particularly drug addicts in Vietnam. Therefore, it was made due to the lack of information and communication. The Church's activities and means of communication are usually limited and restricted by the government, so the information is inadequate and insufficient as a basis for analysis.

## **Research Methodology**

This study employs the see-judge-act theological methodology by Msgr. Joseph Cardijn, the founder of the Young Christian Workers, which has been used by many Catholic action movements since the mid twentieth century (New Hermeneutical Circle). It entails the teaching of the doctrines using a 3-step process: to be able to act in a Christian way, one has to consider the present realities surrounding a phenomenon (see); judge these realities according to the mind of Christ, according to the realities or events of Christ (judge); actions follow Christ's teachings according to the truth and gospel values we are convinced of (act). The discrepancy between the truth of experience and the truth of faith could be a fruit of this way of discernment. See, judge, act is indeed a prayerful way of looking at reality so that God's will may be externalized through action or an action plan.

To see. The researcher considers first the situation of Vietnam, looking at its historical background, cultural context, socio-economical situation and religious context where the encounter between the Christian message and drug abuse takes place.

To judge. The researcher will use different perspectives: medicine, socio-psychological and the church's teachings to examine drugs and drug addiction. To judge is to evaluate an aspect of this present reality in light of the wisdom of our faith

and our pastoral workers calling. We judge the present situation from the perspective of the gospel values and the teaching of the Christ.

To act. The researcher will reflect, generally on the pastoral care in the life of the church, focusing on the context of Vietnam, and particularly, on the pastoral care for drug addicts in the Archdiocese of Ho Chi Minh City which leads to a theology of praxis and proposed actions. For pastoral implications, this study will explore how much the church has done for drug addicts and based on this reality he will further actions for pastoral care for drug addicts for the Catholic Church in Vietnam.

In doing so, the author makes use of library research, data gathering procedure, a careful examination of all these related books and articles, carefully selecting suitable data, which are relevant to the topic. In the search for data, the researcher aims to use primary sources on pastoral care for drug addicts, especially in two aspects: pastoral ministry in general and pastoral care for drug addicts in particular.

## **Conclusion**

The study concludes that despite many problems and difficulties coming from the present contexts and circumstances, the local church has shown her enthusiasm and zeal in caring for drug addicts. Due to the restrictive policies of the communist government regarding religious activities and other challenges, the mission of the church in reaching out to drug addicts is still very limited.

The Church is more open to different kinds of pastoral ministry, such as being involved in reducing social problems and helping those in need, both Catholics and other religious followers. Also, since there are many pastoral workers who are not well trained in specialized fields, their works are not yet officially recognized by the government.

The study further concludes that the theological and pastoral formations of the pastoral workers need to improve in order to work more effectively. The Church has to dialogue more and with the government in order to participate effectively in the education, rehabilitation programs and other services.

## **Recommendations**

The following recommendations are proposed on the basis of the preceding findings and conclusions:

1. The Catholic Pastoral Health Care must continue to respond to the needs of the Vietnamese people, the Church must never lose hope in God's presence and

providence in this significant and relevant ministry. This study reaffirms the fact that the Catholic Pastoral Health Care is not an end in itself, but a fundamental expression of the healing that comes through the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus promised his disciples to be with them until the end of time. With this assurance, the church is filled with hope and renews her commitment to provide pastoral care as one aspect of participating in the healing mission of Jesus.

2. The seminary training program needs to make clear to the seminarians the proper understanding and significance of the pastoral ministry. A pastoral program should be available in all parishes, so that the future pastoral workers will have sufficient knowledge, understanding and experiences concerning their future ministry, especially in providing health care for those in need.
3. The Archdiocese needs to invite experts to organize regular training programs for lay volunteers, religious men and women and those who are interested in the pastoral care ministry. The content of these programs should include a bible study, theology, spirituality, pastoral and psychological skills as well.
4. The findings of this study show that the family has a very significant role to contribute in the educational awareness of drugs and to help in the rehabilitation of drug addicts, therefore, the parents should update their basic knowledge about various prohibited drugs to be able to talk about it in their family and to encourage their children to learn more about prohibited drugs and their harmful consequences. Parents also should be open to talk to and listen to their children with love, care, understanding, compassion and with sense of responsibility.
5. Further researches are needed in various aspects of the pastoral care program in order to help the Church's pastoral care for drug addicts more effective and relevant to the needs of drug addicts in the context of Vietnam.