

THE YOUTH SITUATION TODAY CALLS US TO VOLUNTARY RENUNCIATION OF ALCOHOL

- Jose Kuttianimattathil, sdb

Jesus asked the people to read “the signs of the times” (Mt 16:4). So also the Church asks us to read the “signs of the times” (GS 4, 10). To read the “signs of the times,” means that we have to search and find out what God is asking from us through what is happening in society, culture, etc. In other words, we are called to look at what is happening around us and make a Gospel response.

1. The Situation of Youth

When we look around we see that one of the things that is affecting society at large, as well as young people in particular, is alcoholism.

Referring to alcoholism Pope John Paul II said in 1984: “The conviction is becoming ever more widespread that alcoholism is one of the worst plagues of modern society ... the problem touches the human person. The life of individuals, families, communities and society as a whole is deeply affected, and untold suffering and anguish are involved...”¹

When the Pope said that in 1984, the average age of initiation to alcohol in many parts of India was 19. In some parts of India it has now become between 16 and 20² and in some other parts like Kerala it is reported that the average age of initiation to alcohol is 13.5³.

Recently we needed some blood for a surgery to be done on my brother. I told my nephew that it would be better to get the blood ready in the evening itself as the operation was to take place on the following morning. His reply shocked me: “Uncle, at this time of the day, we will not find any young people in a fit condition to donate blood. They will all be intoxicated! It is better to ask people tomorrow morning.” No sober young person to be found in the evening! No wonder V. R. Krishna Iyer, the former Supreme Court Judge and a human-rights champion said: “This nation will perish with the drinking bowl with atrabilious liquor because the powerful lobby can purchase the politician at any price to do away with dry days and flood the youth with liquor until blood colours streets and homes red.”⁴ The young today are being flooded with liquor and being destroyed.

2. Effects of Alcohol

2.1 Effects of the Harmful Use of Alcohol

According to the World Health Organization, “Worldwide, 3.3 million deaths every year result from harmful use of alcohol, this represents 5.9 % of all deaths.”⁵ It has also been found that alcohol consumption causes death and disability relatively early in life. In the age group 20 – 39 years approximately 25 % of the total deaths are alcohol-attributable.⁶

Alcohol is causally related to about 200 different diseases like liver cirrhosis, epilepsy, cancer, etc. In some parts of the world it is estimated that 85% of family quarrels and 90% divorce cases are alcohol related.

From the statistics we have presented above it is easy to see that alcoholism or excessive consumption of alcohol is evil. But what about moderate drinking? Is that also harmful? It is easy to realize that a flood or a storm is harmful, but isn't a moderate amount of water or a gentle breeze good and needed?

a. Effects of Moderate Use of Alcohol

i. Effect on Health

If we read through the studies about the effects of moderate drinking on health we notice that the opinions are divided. While it has been found that a small amount of alcohol is good for the heart as well as for memory, especially in older people, these benefits are offset by the many problems it can give rise to (e.g. unnecessary calories, possibility of addiction). Alcohol itself contains no vitamins or minerals. Therefore, the higher the alcohol content of a drink, the lower the amount of available nutrients in it. While alcohol has no nutritional value it introduces unnecessary calories into the body. A single shot (1.5 ounce) of hard liquor contains between 100 and 200 calories. Beer and wine average around 150 calories per serving. When all the effects of alcohol are taken together there is hardly anyone who holds that moderate drinking over a long period of time is good for health.⁷

Even those who say that moderate drinking is beneficial for health advise non-drinkers not to enter into the habit of drinking thinking of its possible benefits. In other words, the risks outweigh the possible benefits.

We may summarise the overall effect of alcohol on health in the words of the statutory warning found even on beer bottles (beer contains only about 5% alcohol): "Drinking is injurious to health."

ii. Alcohol is a Depressant

Alcohol is a depressant. This means that it slows down the function of the central nervous system. It blocks some of the messages coming to and going from the brain. This alters a person's perceptions, emotions, movement, vision and hearing. It slows down reaction time. That is why persons are told not to drive after drinking. It is because alcohol slows down the functioning of the brain that even a small amount of alcohol make people feel relaxed and less anxious. We feel relaxed and calm not because the problem has been solved, but because the problem has been temporarily veiled from our awareness.

iii. Alcohol is an Addictive Substance

Alcohol is an addictive substance. This means that it has an inbuilt power to lead you to a compulsive and uncontrolled consumption of alcohol. There are many routes to addiction. Hardly anyone starts by excessive drinking at the first instance. More often it starts with the reluctant drinking of a little bit of alcohol under pressure from friends and proceeds slowly from there. Then it leads to experimentation and gradually one becomes addicted. And once a person becomes addicted it is very difficult to treat the disease.

Because alcohol has no significant health benefits, is a depressant and is an addictive substance even consumption of a small amount of alcohol is not to the benefit of the drinker. The book of Proverbs points out the danger of alcohol in these words:

“Who has woe? Who has sorrow? Who has strife? Who has complaining? Who has wounds without cause? Who has redness of eyes? Those who linger late over wine, those who keep trying mixed wines. Do not look at wine when it is red, when it sparkles in the cup and goes down smoothly. At the last it bites like a serpent, and stings like an adder. Your eyes will see strange things, and your mind utter perverse things. You will be like one who lies down in the midst of the sea, like one who lies on the top of a mast. ‘They struck me,’ you will say, ‘but I was not hurt; they beat me, but I did not feel it. When shall I awake? I will seek another drink’” (Prov 23:29-35).

3. The Efforts Made by the Government

Because of the evil effects of alcohol Mahatma Gandhi once said, “If I were appointed a dictator for one hour for all India, the first thing I would do would be to close without compensation all the liquor shops, destroy all the toddy palms.” In deference to the wishes of Gandhiji the fathers of the Indian Constitution included prohibition as one of the Directive Principles of State Policy in Part IV of our Constitution stating: “the State shall endeavour to bring about prohibition of the consumption except for medical purposes of intoxicating drinks and of drugs which are injurious to health” (Part IV, no. 47).

It is said that “when Nehru was in power, Indian Embassies and High Commissionerates were asked not to serve liquor at Republic Day and Independence Day celebrations. The Embassy officials wrote to New Delhi that many local guests may not attend if there was no liquor being served. Nehru promptly replied that if our National Days can be celebrated only if alcohol is served and people are only fascinated by the liquor that is served, then we had better not hold such celebrations.”⁸

On 2nd October, 1975, the Government of India announced a “12-Point Programme” to discourage people from consuming alcohol. The first and twelfth point of this programme stated:

1. Discontinuance of advertisements and public inducements relating to drink.
12. Leaders of public opinion to set the tone by their personal example.⁹

Because alcohol consumption is increasing and becoming more widespread now, some State Governments are trying to take preventive action although they have many political hurdles to cross.

4. The Response Expected of Religious

Religious are called to be witnesses to a radical living of the Gospel. A witness means a visible sign. Radical means something that is beyond the normal and reasonable, something that is counter-cultural, something that challenges the unhealthy secular value system. Jesus invites the disciples to a radical way of living. The beatitudes offer us a summary of Jesus’ understanding of a radical way of living (Mt 5:3-11). In the spirit of Jesus’ call to radical living, we religious have to become a visible sign to the young people of today that happiness, joy and fulfilment are to be found not through drinking but through living according to the values of the Gospel.

Pope Francis, in explaining the purpose of the Year of Consecrated Life stated: “I am counting on you ‘to wake up the world’, since the distinctive sign of consecrated life is prophecy.”¹⁰

Earlier, speaking to the Superiors General he had said: “Wake up the world! Be witnesses of a different way of doing things, of acting, of living! It is possible to live differently in the world... Religious should be men and women who are able to wake the world up.”¹¹

So, it is our duty as religious to live and act in such a way that through our life, words and actions we show the young people that there is another way of living, that there is another way to happiness than drinking, which ultimately leads to one’s destruction. We have the duty to “wake up” the young people and the world to the evil effects of drinking.

To fulfil our role as witnesses to a radical way of living, and our duty to wake up the world it is appropriate that each one of us as individuals, and we, as communities, choose to abstain from the consumption of alcoholic drinks.

5. Some Motives for Abstaining from Alcohol

People abstain from alcohol for various reasons, the most common being its obvious ill effects. Some say that they abstain from alcohol because they have experienced the destruction caused by a father or close relative who was alcoholic and they do not want to be like them. Yet others say that the day they joined the seminary or made the first profession their father gave up drinking in reverence for the vocation chosen by their son and so they too have decided to abstain from alcohol. Here I would like to present some reasons for abstaining from alcohol based mainly on our vocation to be evangelizers of the young.

- 1) We are missionaries to the young. It is our duty to show the young that we can live happily and find fulfilment, without having recourse to things which could be harmful like drinks, drugs, etc. We can show the young that it is possible to live a happy and relaxed life without consuming alcohol, only if we refrain from taking drinks and still are happy and serene.
- 2) As religious and priests our main duty is to work for the salvation of the young. One way to do this is to do penance for the sins committed by the young as a result of drinking. So, we give up drinking as a penance for our own sins, as well as the sins of the young.
- 3) When we buy drinks we are promoting the alcohol industry, which kills about 3.3 million people every year, breaks down families, causes divorces, and brings about so many diseases and untold destruction. By refraining from it we make our contribution, however little it may be, to discourage, if not to put an end to the alcohol industry and the havoc it causes in the lives of people.
- 4) We are in the year of Consecrated Life, the Year of the Bi-Centenary of the Birth of Don Bosco. On such occasions there is the custom of erecting a monument. Usually the monument is something material, separated from us. Let giving up drinking be a “personal monument” that we erect in our life, as a lasting memorial of this year.

6. Conclusion

Speaking of the service that we can offer to the young people today, Fr. Ángel Fernández Artime, our Rector Major, states: “It is becoming ever more evident that our service to young people, to a large extent consists in being *role models of believers and adults to look up to*... Especially for us men and women educators, this has very serious implications such as being ready to ‘lose one’s life’ giving it up for the Kingdom, accepting poverty, austerity, *a sober lifestyle* as a freely chosen pastoral approach at personal and community level, always putting in the first place people, encountering them and being of service to them.”¹²

When we give first place in our life to young people and think of their good, and our duty to be models for them, it is best that we abstain from drinking.

¹ “Address of Pope John Paul II to the Participants in the International Conference on the Scientific, Social and Moral Aspects of Alcoholism,” 22 June 1984.

http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/speeches/1984/june/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19840622_conf-int-alcoolismo_en.html accessed 19-10-2013

² Rex Sahaya Raj, “A Study on Alcoholism Among Youth Residing in Trichirappalli Slums, Tamil Nadu, India,”

http://www.academia.edu/6262051/A_STUDY_ON_ALCOHOLISM_AMONG_YOUTH_RESIDING_IN_TRICHIRAPPALLI_SLUMS_TAMIL_NADU_INDIA accessed 12-02-2015

³ “Alcohol Our Socially Acceptable Addictive Poison,” <http://www.poisonswelove.org/blog/> accessed 12-02-2015.

⁴ V.R. Krishna Iyer, “The State and the Evil of Drink,” *The Hindu*, January 12, 2010.

<http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-opinion/the-state-and-the-evil-of-drink/article682265.ece> accessed on 25-2-2015

⁵ WHO, “Alcohol: Fact Sheet,” <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs349/en/> accessed 25-2-2015.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Kathleen Zelman, “How Drinking Affects Your Health,”

<http://www.medicinenet.com/script/main/art.asp?articlekey=56016> accessed 11-02-2015

⁸ V.R. Krishna Iyer, “The State and the Evil of Drink,” *The Hindu*, January 12, 2010.

<http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-opinion/the-state-and-the-evil-of-drink/article682265.ece> accessed on 25-2-2015.

⁹ Manish, “Essay on the Evil of Drinking or Prohibition,” <http://www.shareyouressays.com/3112/926-words-essay-on-the-evil-of-drinking-or-prohibition> accessed 11-02-2015

¹⁰ *Witnesses of Joy* http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_letters/documents/papa-francesco_lettera-ap_20141121_lettera-consacraati.htm accessed 12-12-2014.

¹¹ Antonio Spadaro, “‘Wake Up the World’: Conversations with Pope Francis About the Religious Life,”

http://www.laciviltacattolica.it/articoli_download/extra/Wake_up_the_world.pdf accessed 22-09-2014

¹² Ángel Fernández Artime, “Like Don Bosco, with the Young, for the Young! Bicentenary of the Birth of Don Bosco,” *AGC*, no 420 (January-June 2015), p. 13. Emphasis added by the author to “a sober lifestyle.”