



## ARCHDIOCESE OF INDIANAPOLIS

*The Church in Central and Southern Indiana*

# Leadership Briefing

By Archbishop Charles C. Thompson

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### Drug addiction is a contemporary form of slavery

In *We Are One in Christ: A Pastoral Letter on Fundamentals of Christian Anthropology*, published February 14, 2018, I addressed a series of social problems confronting us today. These include:

- Violations against the sanctity of human life (e.g., abortion, physician-assisted suicide);
- Plight of immigrants, migrants and refugees (e.g., policies for admittance, safeguarding family unity, treatment of undocumented people—especially children and youth, border security and the increasing threat and reality of deportation);
- Racism, including both the increasing number of overt, violent expressions and the subtle all-pervasive influences of racism on American culture (as well as an appreciation for the universal tapestry of languages, cultures and peoples in the Church and the human family as a whole. The importance of bridging the racial divide through mutual respect, responsibility and cooperation.)
- Various forms of drug abuse, especially including the opioid crisis;
- Increasing incidences and severity of gun violence in homes and churches and other public places;
- Threats against religious liberty in the United States and abroad, including the rights of health care workers and employers to conscientious objection to certain socially approved and even mandated practices and procedures that are immoral or morally problematic.



Now that we are emerging from 15 months of a pandemic that has caused widespread serious illness and death, social unrest, and economic hardships throughout the world, all these issues confront us with renewed urgency. How we respond to each of these grave social problems must be deeply rooted in the Church's understanding of the origin, nature and destiny of the human person as revealed in Jesus Christ (Christian anthropology). Where we come from, who we are and where we are headed as individuals and as diverse communities of people, determines our rights and responsibilities in human society.

One of the most serious problems we face—here in Indiana, in the United States and throughout the world—is drug addiction. “Drug addiction is a contemporary form of slavery,” Pope Francis observed in his remarks to participants in the International Conference on “Drugs and Addictions: An Obstacle to Integral Human Development,” on December 1, 2018. The Holy Father emphasized that forms of rehabilitation which can restore victims' joy and dignity are much needed. Addictive drugs, which for many people includes alcohol, “are a wound in our society,” the pope says. This wound traps far too many people from diverse nations, cultures and segments of society. Once enslaved by addiction, victims lose their freedom. They become totally dependent on substances that negatively affect their minds, emotions and spiritual development.

The dignity of the person is what is threatened most seriously by drug addiction. Addicts are people who have been taken-in by unreal promises of superficial happiness. The artificial “high” that is chemically induced when someone is addicted to alcohol or drugs is a fundamentally false form of spirituality. It promises peace, joy, contentment and happiness only to ultimately disappoint its unfortunate victims. Rather than bringing satisfaction, Pope Francis points out, this ephemeral satisfaction “in the end becomes a venom, corrodes, corrupts and kills. The person is destroyed and, with them, everything around them.”

There is no “single cause” that leads to drug abuse, but the factors are many, and often involve the absence of family, social pressures, propaganda from traffickers, and the desire to have new experiences. Recent studies have shown that isolation, loneliness and deep-seated despair during the pandemic caused many of these factors to increase substantially.

As Pope Francis has observed, each person addicted to drugs brings with them “a different personal history which must be heard, understood, loved and, as soon as possible, healed and purified.” More than ever, we need to accompany those who are struggling, and to walk with them on the arduous roads they must travel, rather than committing what the pope calls “the injustice of classifying drug addicts as if they were an object or a broken mess.”

The compassion due to victims of chemical addiction should not be seen as naïve or sentimental. We must care deeply about our sisters and brothers who suffer from the grave consequences of alcohol or drug abuse (including spouses and families), but our sympathy must also reflect the character of “tough love.” Addicts cannot be effectively treated until they are ready, willing and able to surrender their self-will and accept God's help. What spouses, family members, friends and employers can do is refuse to enable or cover up for

the alcoholic/addict's irresponsible or destructive behavior. The Catholic both/and comes into play here in an important way: We must treat the addict with *both* the dignity he or she deserves, *and* we must refuse to tolerate actions which will harm them or others.

Pope Francis has been a frequent, outspoken critic of government policies and programs that fail to address problems of addiction—including the manufacture and distribution of illegal drugs. In order to curb the demand for drugs, Pope Francis says strong efforts are needed, coupled by extensive programs aimed at promoting health, family support and education, which he believes are fundamental to ensuring both the prevention and treatment of addiction to alcohol and drugs.

More than 30 years ago, in their statements, *New Slavery, New Freedom* (1990) and *Putting Children and Families First* (1991), the bishops of the United States recognized that substance abuse creates many casualties, the most tragic are the children, putting unborn and other children at risk. Many children are placed in foster care as substance abusing parents are no longer capable of providing a home or a supportive family. Too many children are born addicted, the heirs of the drug slavery destroying their mothers. Abuse of alcohol and other drugs also victimize hundreds of thousands of other children in their own homes when it fuels the gratuitous violence and anger of their parents.

The bishops called for expanded national efforts at education and prevention, prenatal and other health care, and treatment and rehabilitation of abusers of alcohol and other drugs. System-wide reform was called for, including special attention to families where there is substance abuse. The bishops also noted—three decades ago—that our nation's continuing failure to guarantee access to quality health care for all people exacts its most painful toll in the preventable sickness, disability, and deaths of our infants and children.

I ask every Catholic, and all persons of good will, in central and southern Indiana to urge public officials in the Hoosier state and nationally to enact and enforce laws that address both the root causes and the practical effects of drug addiction. This means finally getting serious about prevention and treatment. It also means system-wide reform of our nation's approach to drug trafficking and the widespread distribution of opioids—prescription painkillers such as oxycodone, hydrocodone, or fentanyl and illegal substances such as heroin.

I also urge individuals and families who know someone who is addicted to alcohol or drugs to seek help. Catholic Charities agencies are available in various regions of the Archdiocese (Bloomington, Indianapolis, New Albany, Tell City and Terre Haute). While the services offered may vary based on the location, each agency will provide confidential assistance or referrals to other organizations to individuals and families who need help dealing with substance abuse issues.

Respect for the dignity of every individual demands that we all advocate for just laws and effective policies in dealing with this complex and difficult social problem. Let's pray that the Holy Spirit will inspire legislators, law enforcement officials, counselors and treatment

center staff to deal with alcoholics/addicts with both compassion and tough love. May God's tender love and mercy provide comfort and healing to all who suffer from the effects of substance abuse, especially spouses, families and friends.

+Charles C. Thompson

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## **A selection from *We Are One in Christ: A Pastoral Letter on Fundamentals of Christian Anthropology***

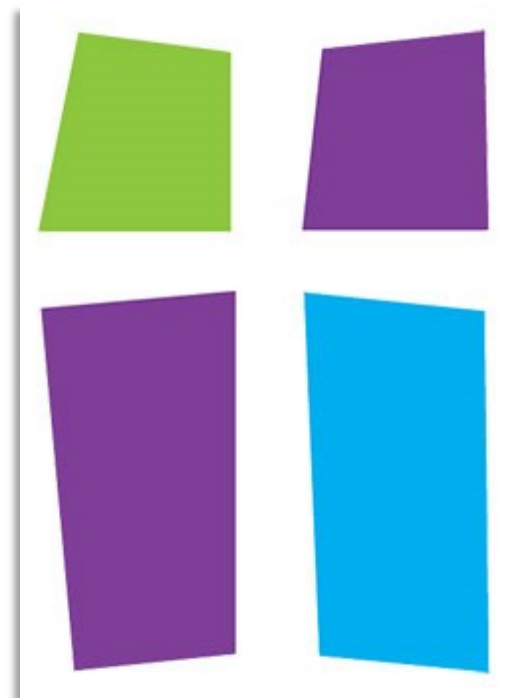
### **Drug abuse**

The use of drugs inflicts very grave danger on human health and life. Their use, except on strictly therapeutic grounds, is a grave offense. Clandestine production of and trafficking in drugs are scandalous practices. They constitute direct cooperation in evil, since they encourage people to practices gravely contrary to the moral law (Catechism of the Catholic Church, #2291).

In our country, drug abuse is a serious problem. Wars stimulate drug use as wounded soldiers return home wracked with pain, but even in peacetime, people turn to many different kinds of drugs, including opioids (prescription painkillers such as oxycodone, hydrocodone, or fentanyl and illegal substances such as heroin) to help them deal with painful illnesses, loneliness and the anxiety of daily life.

The abuse of any drug—legal or illegal—is deadly serious. Six out of 10 drug-overdose deaths involve opioids, and drug overdose is the leading cause of accidental death. In 2015, more than 33,000 Americans died from prescription drug overdoses or heroin, and an estimated 2 million Americans are addicted to prescription pain relievers while another half million are addicted to heroin.

In addition to the grave harm done to addicts, drug abuse also affects many other family members, co-workers, friends and society as a whole. It is estimated that every addict



affects at least four other people, especially spouses and children. Families suffer enormous emotional, physical and financial trauma when one or more of their members is addicted to prescription painkillers and/or illegal drugs. More than 40 percent of children placed in foster care come from families burdened with drug addiction.

This “life issue” threatens human life and dignity. Think of how many unborn children are exposed to opioids through their mother’s bloodstream. These children tend to be smaller and to weigh less than other newborns. They often exhibit symptoms of withdrawal after birth, and they are at a higher risk for behavioral problems as they grow older. It’s a vicious cycle—anxiety leads to drug use which, in turn, creates further anxiety and even more drug abuse.

What’s the solution? If it were simple or painless, we would have eliminated the drug problem long ago. In fact, this is a very complex and difficult problem that is broadly and deeply embedded in our society. No single solution—whether legal, moral, spiritual or sociological—presents itself as “the answer” to our current opioid crisis or to the long-standing problem of drug addiction here in Indiana or throughout the world. Still, we cannot afford to stand idly by while millions of our sisters and brothers suffer. We must act in ways that are consistent with our baptismal responsibility to bring the healing power of Jesus Christ to all who suffer—whether they are close to home or, as Pope Francis says, on the margins of human society, “the peripheries.”

As we look for ways to respond to this crisis, it’s helpful to refer to the Indiana bishops’ 2015 Pastoral Letter, *Poverty at the Crossroads: The Church’s Response to Poverty in Indiana*. Poverty results from many different causes and takes many different forms, but drug addiction is certainly one of the main causes, and effects, of poverty. Here is a selection from the introduction to *Poverty at the Crossroads*:

Using the simple formula of See, Judge, Act, we invite and challenge everyone, beginning with ourselves, to be more attentive to the poor in our communities, to identify the systemic issues that keep individuals and families poor, and to take concrete steps to reduce the long-term impact of poverty in our state, even as we reach out and help those who, here and now, suffer from its devastating effects.

Let’s open our eyes and recognize drug addiction for what it is. Let’s make serious decisions about steps we can take as individuals, families and communities to address all of the contributing factors to the current opioid epidemic. And, finally, with the help of God’s grace, let’s do whatever we can to help those who suffer now and in the future.

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## A Message from Pope Francis: Words of Challenge and Hope

Drug use is gravely harmful to health, human life and society, as you well know. All of us are called to combat the production, processing and distribution of drugs worldwide. It is the duty and responsibility of governments courageously to undertake this fight against those who deal in death. Dealers of death:



we must not be afraid to use this title. An area of increasing risk is virtual space; on some Internet sites, young people, and not only the young, are lured into a bondage hard to escape, leading to a loss of life's meaning and, at times, even of life itself. Faced with this disturbing scenario, the Church senses the urgent need to create in today's world a form of humanism capable of restoring the human person to the centre of social, economic and cultural life: a humanism grounded in the "Gospel of Mercy". There the disciples of Jesus find the inspiration for a pastoral action that can prove truly effective in alleviating, caring for and healing the immense suffering associated with different kinds of addiction present in our world.

The Church, together with local, national and international institutions, and various educational agencies, is concretely engaged in every part of the world in combating the spread of addictions, devoting her resources to prevention, care, rehabilitation and reinsertion, in order to restore dignity to those who have lost it. Fighting addictions calls for a combined effort on the part of various local groups and agencies in enacting social programs promoting health care, family support and especially education. In this regard, I readily support the desire expressed by this Conference for a better coordination of policies aimed at halting the growth of drug abuse and addictions — isolated policies are of no use: it is a human problem, it is a social problem, everything must be interconnected — through the creation of networks of solidarity and closeness to those suffering from these pathologies.

Dear brothers and sisters, I express my deep gratitude for your contribution to these days of study and reflection. I encourage all of you, in your various sectors, to pursue your commitment to increasing awareness and offering support to those who have emerged from the tunnel of drug addiction and various addictions. They need our help and accompaniment, so that they in turn will be able to ease the pain of so many of our brothers and sisters in difficulty.

*(From an Address to Participants in the International Conference on “Drugs and Addictions: An Obstacle to Integral Human Development,” December 1, 2018.)*

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### **My Prayer for You**

Let's entrust all who suffer from alcohol or drug addiction—either directly or indirectly—to the loving care of Our Lady, Health of the Sick. Let us pray that the Holy Family will intercede for the spouses and families of alcoholic/addicts. May the power of Jesus transform our society to a safe, drug free environment, and may all of us work to build a drug-free culture in our local communities and throughout the world.

*+ Charles C. Thompson*