

The Scourge of Drugs

Fighting the Pressure for Legalization

Rome, July 06, 2014 (Zenit.org) Father John Flynn, LC

In a recent address Pope Francis deplored what he called “the scourge of drug use.” His comments on June 20 were addressed to participants in the 31st International Drug Enforcement Conference in Rome.

There is a growing trend, however, towards the legalization of marijuana. Voters in the American states of Colorado and Washington approved its sale for recreational use. In addition, 20 other states and Washington D.C. allow people to purchase marijuana for medicinal purposes. Federal law, nevertheless, continues to ban its sale.

Uruguay also legalized the sale and use of marijuana in December last year.

More than 200 points of sale for marijuana have opened since January 1 in Denver, Colorado, with another 100 in other parts of the state, according to a detailed article on the Colorado experiment published by England’s Daily Mail newspaper on June 20.

Meanwhile, in Washington state, the first retail licenses for 15 to 20 outlets are expected to be issued by July 7, according to a July 1 report in the Denver Post.

The Daily Mail article pointed out that the first months of legalization in Colorado have brought a number of problems. The proliferation of biscuits, candy, and even soft drinks with marijuana has been responsible for a number of deaths, with people not realizing the potency of the drug they were consuming.

Authorities, however, seem to be more interested, as with the case of extending gambling, with the revenues gained, with licensed dispensaries in Colorado paying 36.2% of revenue in tax.

Liberalizing the laws on marijuana use will lead to an increase in consumption, and resultant problems, according to the experience in England, where the Labor government re-classified marijuana to a lower level of legal penalties from 2004 to 2009.

More use and more crime

According to an April 5 report by the Telegraph newspaper in this period there was a 25% increase in the use of this drug and also a sharp increase in crime.

A study carried out by academics from Newcastle University found that in this period occasional smoking of cannabis increased by 25%, and regular consumption by 8 per cent.

Another issue is with the effects on children, a number of whom consume products containing marijuana, not knowing they are laced with the drug.

“According to the National Poison Data System, calls about accidental ingestion of marijuana in children 9 and younger more than tripled in states that decriminalized marijuana before 2005,” wrote David Sack in an opinion article for the Los Angeles Times dated June 26.

Sack, qualified in psychiatry and addiction medicine, noted that in states that enacted legalization from 2005 to 2011, calls increased nearly 11.5% per year. Over the same period in states without decriminalization laws, the call rate stayed the same.

On June 26 the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) issued its 2014 World Drug Report. “Globally, cannabis use seems to be down but a perception of lower health risks has led to more consumption in North America,” it said.

Legalization will most likely reduce the production costs of cannabis, the report observed. In turn this will “probably lead to higher consumption.”

The report also noted that, “more people are seeking treatment for cannabis-related disorders in most regions in the world, including North America.”

Health dangers

The health dangers of marijuana use are well-known. Information on the Website of the U.S. Office of National Drug Control Policy says that:

+ “Yes. We know that marijuana use, particularly long-term, chronic use or use starting at a young age, can lead to dependence and addiction. Long-term marijuana use can lead to compulsive drug seeking and abuse”

+ “Marijuana places a significant strain on our health care system, and poses considerable danger to the health and safety of the users themselves, their families, and our communities.”

In relation to its use for medical ends the office commented that the raw marijuana medical plant contains nearly 500 chemical compounds and that it has not been approved by the Food and Drug Administration.

“It is this rigorous FDA approval process, not popular vote, that should determine what is, and what is not medicine,” it added.

“Let me state this in the clearest terms possible: the problem of drug use is not solved with drugs!” Pope Francis exclaimed in his June 20 address. “Drug addiction is an evil, and with evil there can be no yielding or compromise. To think that harm can be reduced by permitting drug addicts to use narcotics in no way resolves the problem,” he added.

An affirmation that not only refers to the legalization of drugs, but also to the use of safe-injection sites, which the Church has long opposed.

“No to every type of drug use,” he said. A message that might not be popular, but which is consistent with the medical evidence and practical experience regarding drugs.