NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Pope decries 'dealers of death,' opposes drug legalization

John L. Allen Jr. | Jul. 24, 2013 NCR Today
World Youth Day 2013
Rio de Janeiro

In his most pointed bit of political commentary since arriving in Brazil two days ago, Pope Francis this afternoon blasted narco-traffickers as "dealers of death" and came out against trends in Latin America towards the legalization of drugs.

The pope's comments came during a visit this evening to a Rio de Janeiro hospital that serves people suffering from alcohol and drug addiction.

"The scourge of drug trafficking, that favors violence and sows the seeds of suffering and death, requires of society as a whole an act of courage," Francis said.

Legalization, he said, will not bring about "a reduction in the spread and influence of drug addiction." The line drew applause from the small crowd.

Substantively, it's by no means a new position. Back in 2001, the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Health Care issued a manual titled "Church, Drugs, and Drug Addiction," which urged governments around the world to resist the push for legalization, including "soft" drugs such as marijuana.

The manual was drafted at the request of the late Pope John Paul II.

It's also consistent with the position the bishops' conference of Argentina took last February, while then-Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio was still a member, when a state governor floated the idea of legalizing "soft" drugs such as marijuana.

Even if it doesn't break new ground, however, Francis' comments today have fresh relevance in Latin America, where weariness over the body count and other costs of the fight against drugs have prompted several nations to consider various forms of legalization.

Last summer, Uruguay announced that it would consider state-sponsored sales of marijuana. Several nations, including the pope's host nation of Brazil, have decriminalized the possession of drugs for personal consumption.

In 2008, Ecuador adopted a constitutional provision identifying drug possession as a health care concern rather than a criminal matter.

In Francis' native Argentina, the country's Supreme Court ruled in 2009 that people could not be prosecuted for personal drug use because "adults should be free to make lifestyle decisions without the intervention of the state."

Underlying the push is a widespread perception that a "war on drugs" in several societies has been a failure.

In Mexico, an estimated 60,000 people are believed to have been killed over the last six years in violence related to a crackdown on cartels, and tens of thousands more are believed to have died amid similar conflicts in Colombia.

In early June, former Mexican President Vicente Fox openly called for the legalization of marijuana and other drugs in his country, saying the cost of fighting the cartels "is becoming unbearable."

In that context, the pope's remarks today will likely be seen as a fairly direct effort to roll back a legal and cultural trend.

In his remarks at the hospital this afternoon, Francis stressed the importance of outreach to people struggling with addiction.

"In every suffering brother and sister that we embrace, we embrace the suffering Body of Christ," the pope said.

Speaking of chemical dependency, the pope said that "dealers of death ? follow the logic of power and money at any cost."

The pope called on Latin American societies to deal with the problems underlying drug use, by promoting greater justice, educating young people in values, and helping people in difficulty.

Addressing people suffering from addiction, the pope told them "you are never alone" and urged them to not allow themselves to be "robbed of hope." Prior to his talk, Francis listened to several people being treated at the center describe their personal stories.

The pope thanked the medical personnel at the hospital, which is sponsored by the Third Order Franciscans, and told addicts and their families that "the church is not distant from your troubles." Once again the weather tonight was cold and rainy, and most in the small crowd in a hospital courtyard carried umbrellas or sported plastic ponchos.

A Franciscan from the hospital told Francis that the "leper of our day ... is called the drug addict."

Tomorrow, Francis will bless the banner for the Olympic Games in Brazil in 2016 and meet a delegation of athletes, including soccer legend Pelè, and will then visit one of Rio's favelas, or slums, in this case a zone that last year witnessed ferocious conflicts between police and drug cartels.

Tomorrow evening, Francis is scheduled to formally meet the pilgrims taking part in World Youth Day for the first time, in a welcoming festival on Rio's famed Copacabana beach.

(Follow John Allen on Twitter: @JohnLAllenJr)

Source URL (retrieved on *04/27/2015 - 06:29*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/pope-decries-dealers-death-opposes-drug-legalization