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## "V. D." A MATTER OF MORAL CONDUCT

THE REVEREND DONALD A. MCGOWAN \*

I SHOULD like to begin my brief talk on V.D. "A Matter of Moral Conduct" with a quotation from an article by Dr. G. Marshall Crawford in the February 13 issue of the *New England Journal of Medicine*: "With the termination of World War II and the return of several million young men to civilian life, the program for the control of venereal disease is faced with a great problem. In spite of the lowest war-time venereal disease rates for any nation in history, it is exceedingly important that consistent effort be maintained to eradicate syphilis. Even extremely difficult military supervision at separation centers cannot prevent the release of some cases of uncontrolled fresh infection. The cessation of large-scale effort by the armed forces requires increased public-health activity. Plans for the future in this respect, in addition to the continued study of new methods of therapy, constitute the most significant phases of the problem of V.D. at present."

From a purely medical viewpoint this article is excellent *but* all the newer methods of therapy, wonderful though they be, yes even those methods and treatments still to be discovered will never, in themselves contain the answer to the V.D. problem. We say *never* because science alone has never given a complete answer to any problem when the morals of an individual or of a nation are involved. As the able Father John O'Brien of Notre Dame has observed with regard to modern programs for social protection:—"Failure is inevitable unless men and women develop moral stamina strong enough to control the biological urge for their own welfare,

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for the benefit of their neighbors and for the good of those yet to be. The Battle against V.D. is lost unless science is strongly re-enforced by both morality and religion."

Dr. Thomas Parran, Surgeon-General of the United States Public Health Service summed up the basic aspect of this problem when he declared recently, "The solution of this problem is a personal matter of basic clean living, of avoiding the sources of infection."

If the subject here discussed were merely medical, the committee would hardly have invited a non-medical person and certainly not a clergyman to present his views. But actually the problem of venereal disease has a profoundly moral aspect. It is my earnest, carefully considered belief that this moral aspect is its most important phase.

The doctor, the medical man, deals with the fact that here in his consulting room is a human being suffering the ravages of a frightful disease. As a priest, as a follower of the Christ Who commanded, "Love one another", I too feel a concern for that sufferer.

Very earnestly I protest the attitude typified by one letter received in the office of the Social Hygiene Committee. Asked to contribute in support of the work, one correspondent wrote indignantly: "I shall contribute nothing! These people should suffer the consequences of their misdeeds."

Now the first error here is that a minority of V.D. victims are wholly innocent. They are as guiltless as the child who inherits his mother's eyes or his father's aquiline nose. They are as blameless as the babies of an infected parent. But what about the others? What should be our feeling toward V.D. victims who can thank their own serious transgressions for their plight?

My comment here is that you can't cure this situation by a symbolical washing of hands, after the manner of Pilate. It is not realistic to pronounce a pharisaical "I told you so" and then proceed nonchalantly about our own business. Because, the fact is that venereal disease is everybody's business. It is the concern even of those who most heartily condemn the moral surrender.

If there were an open sewer in the gutter outside your house, you would insist that it be sealed up. You wouldn't tolerate a malarial swamp in a field at the back of your home. You don't like sewers and you have no fondness for swamps. But from the motive of self-preservation, you would interest yourself in these nuisances, if they existed, and labor to abate them. I suggest that, even if no other motive were present, sheer self-interest should prompt us to study this problem of V.D. and support those who are trying to stem its ravages.

However, I do very sincerely believe that Christian charity has a word to say on this subject.



It was a murderer who first said—"I am not my brother's keeper." God branded the forehead of the man who said it and cast him out a wanderer on the face of the earth. When Christ said: "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself", He never intended to exclude V.D. sufferers from the ambit of human compassion. They are not outcast from Divine pardon and mercy. It was to a woman taken in the very act of her shameful sin that our Saviour said: "Go and sin no more."

I'd like to be very clear on this point. In the viewpoint of this committee there is nothing maudlin, nothing of the merely sentimental. Not for an instant do we accept the cynical notion that the only crime is in "getting caught."

Every person who incurs this frightful penalty as the effect of an illicit act, is guilty of a sin solemnly and expressly forbidden. Only sincere repentance, a conversion of heart, can square accounts with the eternal court of appeal and judgment.

While this committee hopes to do something about V.D. as a physical problem our first and most earnest endeavor is to get to the roots, to promote prevention so effective that in some future time, talks like this won't be necessary.

So since the problem is primarily moral, since venereal disease is largely the penalty of lust, of uncontrolled desire, the permanent solution must be sought in the realm of theology. So we appeal for the support of the home, the church and the school. In these nurseries of childish and adolescent character, personality is directed and perfected, or it is dwarfed and thwarted. Here ideals are inculcated, or they are neglected. In God's plan, children are like flowers. Unless they are cultivated, either they perish or they flourish wildly—a menace to all growth about them.

Of the three agencies which bear on the development of a child, the home, without any question, is most important. Parenthood is a sacred trust. It is the duty of parents to instruct their children in such manner that in a time to come they may stand on their own feet and face the challenge of life unafraid. The boy and girl who come from a sincerely religious home know the facts of life. Among those facts is the truth that human beings are different in essence, not just in species, from the dog crouched down in front of the radiator or the cat dozing on a kitchen chair. Among the facts of life which a well-trained child has learned is that, since human beings are a nobler essence than the animal, they must respond to a different code; they must freely refuse themselves certain indulgences; they must be forever conscious that the saddest penalty of any sin is not its physical effects, but the spiritual. The boy and the girl thus truly educated, knows life's evil as well as its good. Such a child, clear in conscience and strong in character, will never cause his parents heartbreak. He will never present a problem to the adult society he must one day enter.

Indeed if I were asked to name one element above all others that is effective in combatting this problem of social diseases, I should say without hesitation, the home, the home in which Almighty God is the Master, the home in which His commandments are the rule of life, the home warmed by His love, enlightened by His wisdom, strengthened by His grace. Only a healthy nation can be a strong nation and just as surely as the earth draws its warmth from the sun so does a nation draw its strength from its individual homes and families.

After all, V.D., frightful and ugly though it be, is only another symptom of something even more evil and insidious. We might call it part of a Social Syndrome—one of a group of concurrent symptoms characterizing a disease, a disease of moral lassitude and indifference that threatens the very social fiber of our land.

Venereal disease, spiraling divorce rates, broken homes, juvenile delinquency, marital infidelity, unrestrained use of alcohol, bad books and magazines, immoral plays, etc.—all are part of the same picture. All are the results of confused thinking and Godless patterns of living. Our weapons against these ills are found in many armories. Medicine, social science, public health programs, sound educational methods—all these have a definite place in the ranks but if God is not our General we fight in vain, we beat the air to no avail. The infants of today are the saints or sinners of tomorrow. Let us prepare them for a happy and healthy tomorrow by a character training that will enable them to live decent, wholesome, productive lives. The home ruled by God is our fortress, surrounded by the bastions of church and school. In this way and in this way only can we stamp out V.D. Medical Science alone cannot possibly achieve the goal. Considering the personal equation, medical progress may even be a boomerang, smoothing the path of the transgressor and developing a sort of revolving door method of infection and treatment—reinfection and re-treatment.

Briefly I have tried to indicate one approach of this committee to the problem of venereal disease in the state of Massachusetts. We recognize that the difficulty is primarily one of human behavior, that only secondarily is it technical and medical. For those who have fallen victim to this disease, we extend a well-founded hope that a great deal can be done to alleviate their ailment. In a vast number of cases, complete cure is possible.

Because I feel that this committee views the problem sanely, realistically and highmindedly, I feel privileged to say a word in support of their endeavor. It is my hope that the community will accord them the most generous moral and material support. Their objective is a difficult one—to achieve it they must have your cooperation.