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Alcoholism prevention and recovery - an Orthodox overview

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Abstract. Alcohol produces devastating consequences on the human being and on society as a whole, starting with medical problems that directly affect the consumer, continuing with problems of a social nature (affecting the consumer's family as well), economic problems (regarding the amounts of money spent on the purchase of alcohol, but also problems related to the workplace), as well as problems of a legal nature (increased rate of divorces, the commission of traffic offenses or domestic violence, neglect of children, but also manslaughter or intentional murder), but especially of spiritual order (breaking the connection with God and deepening more and more into sin).

Keywords. Alcohol, alcoholism, addiction, spiritual medicine, spiritual father, Orthodox pastoral counseling.

1. Addiction therapy or the science of spiritual medicine

The healing process of the passions can only begin if man is aware of the disease in which he is. As is known, curing passions means changing them into virtues. The healing of passions is not an exclusively human, nor exclusively divine work, but a synergistic one, that is, man can save himself only with divine power. Thus, it is man's duty to oppose sin, but the uprooting of sin can only be done with God's help. In general, the sickness and healing of the soul signifies the sickness and healing of the mind, thoughts, and heart.

Alcohol is just one of the many causes that seem to lead to the sought-after state of euphoria. Many people who use alcohol or other illicit substances that mentally alter their sense of reality do so out of a desire to make life a little more exciting. This is similar to the philosophical analysis that places human in materiality, in what can be defined rationally, sensibly, and the resulting happiness can only be one limited to matter¹. Without a genuine spiritual experience, normalcy, in other words, everyday life, can be terribly boring. In addition, another issue to consider is the duration of happiness. Alcohol consumption results in a time-limited form of happiness. The ethical norms of Christian morality place human, through his spiritual part, through his immortal soul, in God's eternity².

¹ **Petrov, G. D.** (2021). The importance of the dialogue between theology and science from an anthropological analysis perspective. *Technium Social Sciences Journal*, 24(1), 785–790. Retrieved from <https://techniumscience.com/index.php/socialsciences/article/view/4872>.

² **Brînzea, N.** (2022). Happiness and morality in Christian moral ethics and in philosophical ethics. *Technium Social Sciences Journal*, 36(1), 552–561. <https://doi.org/10.47577/tssj.v36i1.7465>.

However, there are people who can oscillate between two or more realities and who are just as sick as alcoholics, even if they don't drink alcohol. This change of objective reality with another reality represents a spiritual disease in general, not just a disease specific to those who consume alcohol. For example, a liar creates his own reality, different from that of others, selfishly enjoying knowing things that others do not. The pleasure a mythomaniac feels in lying without any interest is also found in the case of a kleptomaniac who steals. Both cases are equally serious and are completely similar to the actions of those who consume alcohol.

Etymologically, the word alcohol comes from the Arabic language from the word *al-kohol*, which means the popular name of ethanol, being recognized for its psychotropic effect. The consumption of alcoholic beverages has the effect of inducing states of euphoria and excitement. In general, alcohol is made by distilling and fermenting fruits or vegetables that are rich in sugar³. For example, through natural fermentation with an alcohol concentration between 4 and 15%, beer is obtained from cereals, wine from grapes, cider from apples. Drinks with a higher alcohol concentration can also be made by an artificial process called distillation (eg whisky)⁴.

Alcoholism is, at the same time, an old problem, but also a very current one. It is "old" because humans have been dealing with the ill effects of alcohol consumption for millennia. At the same time, it is a current problem because each new generation is affected by alcoholism, as if no one has ever suffered from it or known its dramatic consequences.

As is known, alcohol consumption is both an old problem, characteristic of all times, but at the same time it is also a very current problem, which concerns the contemporary world and the future of mankind. The harmful effects of excessive alcohol consumption affected both our ancestors and contemporary people. The actuality of the problem of excessive alcohol consumption is that, although the negative effects of excess are known, each generation is affected at least as much as the older generations.

2. Statistical data regarding alcoholism

As for Romania, statistics indicate that approximately one million people in the country consume alcohol in excess or are addicted to alcohol⁵. Also, there are studies that highlight the fact that one person out of six or eight people who at least once consumed alcohol becomes an alcoholic⁶. Today there is a tendency to generalize the excessive consumption of alcohol, which tends to gain momentum in society. In this sense, we observe that alcoholism tends to be present at the social events of the contemporary world. Thus, within normal social events, such as baptisms, weddings, anniversaries, funeral events, but also in the case of social problems, such as poverty, divorces, crimes or family violence, alcohol abuse tends to generalize, capturing people who have a tendency to exaggerate.

³ Denis RICHARD and Jean-Louis SENON, *Dicționar de droguri, toxicomanii și dependențe (Dictionary of drugs, drug addicts and addictions)*, under the coordination of Pavel Abraham, Medical Sciences publishing house, Bucharest, 2005, p. 367.

⁴ Martín Ángeles LUENGO, Jose Antonio GOMEZ – FRAGUELA, Antonio GARRA, Estrella ROMERO, *Construyendo salud (Building health)*, Secretaría General Técnica publishing house, 2002, p. 65.

⁵ Fr. Iulian NEGRU, Nicoleta AMARIEI, Floyd FRANTZ, *Pastorația Persoanelor Dependente de Alcool (Pastoral Care of People Dependent on Alcohol)*, Basilica publishing house, Bucharest, 2012, p. 43.

⁶ Michel Alpízar LOPEZ, Pérez HOZ, García HERNÁNDEZ, "Previniendo el alcoholismo" (Preventing alcoholism), in: *Ignacio Revista Cubana de Salud Pública (Ignacio Cuban Journal of Public Health)*, XXXIV (2008) 3, p. 5.

In Europe there are substantial differences in the volume of consumption especially by gender, with men being three times more likely to consume alcohol, but also by age, as daily consumption increases with age and reaches values of 15% in the population over 65 years (Figure no. 1⁷).

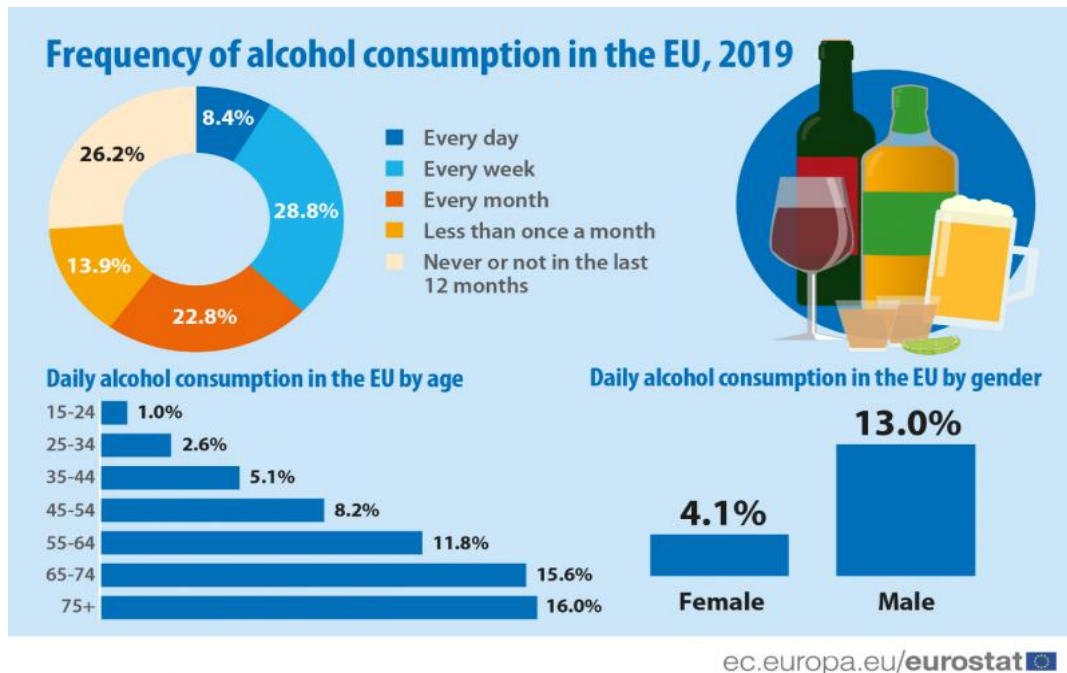


Figure no. 1: Frequency of alcohol consumption in Europe, 2019

Heavy drinking episodes at least once a month higher in Denmark, Luxembourg and Romania. "Heavy episodic drinking is defined as ingesting the equivalent of more than 60g of pure ethanol on a single occasion. Among the EU Member States, between 4% (Cyprus and Italy) and 38% (Denmark) of adults reported taking part in heavy drinking episodes at least once a month. Among these, the majority did so every month, while a smaller proportion (between 3 to 19 times smaller) engaged in the behaviour at least once a week" (Figure no. 2)⁸.

⁷ Source: European Core Health Indicators (ECHI): https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=File:Frequency_of_alcohol_consumption_in_the_EU,_2019_update.png, date of access: 02/11/2022.

⁸ Source: European Core Health Indicators (ECHI): <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/edn-20210806-1>, date of access: 02/11/2022.

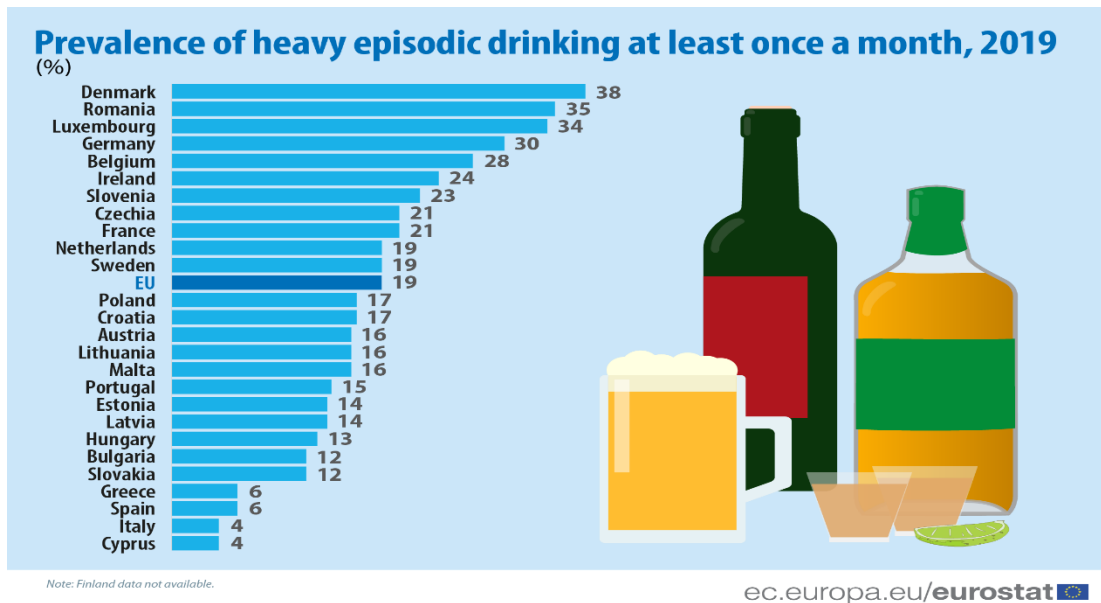


Figure no. 2: Prevalence of heavy episodic drinking at least once a month in European countries, 2019

Alcoholism is a disease, but not a simple disease that can be easily treated, but a devastating disease. We must think and look at it as a disease and not as a vice⁹.

It is very necessary that the programs of information and prevention of alcohol consumption are dedicated to both families¹⁰ and young people¹¹.

The excess alcohol consumption related to young people must give society a lot to think about, especially regarding the future of young people and implicitly the future of society¹².

This is precisely why the prevention of excessive consumption plays a particularly important role. In the following we will present some measures to prevent alcohol abuse:

- The presence of information and prevention campaigns to develop activities that are incompatible with excessive alcohol consumption¹³;
- Actions and courses aimed at reducing blood alcohol level for drivers;
- Local and national meetings to which specialists in the recovery of people addicted to alcohol are invited;
- Programs dedicated to young people and adults in which the effects of excessive alcohol consumption are presented;

⁹ **Nun Siluana VLAD**, *Deschide Cerul cu lucrul mărunț (Open Heaven with the little thing)*, Doxologia publishing house, Iași, 2013, p. 152.

¹⁰ **Francisca Lopes RIOS**, *Drogas y adicciones en la sociedad actual (Drugs and addictions in today's society)*, University of Almeria publishing house, Almeria, 2006, p. 178.

¹¹ **Silvia MENDIETA**, **Cezar PASCUAL**, "Sobre el alcohol, los jóvenes y la corresponsabilidad" (About alcohol, young people and co-responsibility), in: *Salud y drogas (Health and drugs)*, II (2002) 1, <http://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=83920108>, date of access: 02/11/2022.

¹² **John D. PRATTEN**, "What is «the alcohol problem?»", in: *Worldwide Hospitality and Tourism Themes*, I (2009) 2, pp. 88-96, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/17554210910962486>, date of access: 02/11/2022.

¹³ **Daniel Lloret IRLES**, "Alcoholismo: Una visión familiar, Salud y drogas" (Alcoholism: A Family View, Health and Drugs), in: *Instituto de Investigación de Drogodependencias (Drug Addiction Research Institute)*, Alicante, Spain, I (2001) 1, pp. 120-121.

- Public actions through which people are informed about the phenomenon of alcoholism;
- Forming responsibility and awakening young people's conscience by using spiritual, affective, volitional and cognitive resources¹⁴.
- Involvement of parishes in information programs and prevention of excessive alcohol consumption.

3. Orthodox pastoral counseling

The priest must be very well informed and know the seriousness of the addictions as well as the specific temptations of excessive alcohol consumption. That is why the priest must know the prevention and rescue methods that can save people from this terrible disease of alcoholism. The priest's action to save alcoholics includes a series of information regarding the awareness of the negative effects of the disease generated by excessive alcohol consumption. This awareness must foresee that they are suffering from a spiritual, psychological, physical and social illness. That is why the priest must make them follow a serious treatment program, which includes, in addition to medical treatment, a series of spiritual activities based on private and community prayer.

In such situations, the priest must assume his role as shepherd of souls and be directly involved in programs for the recovery of sick souls. Moreover, the priest has an important role to educate and inform correctly about the addiction that excessive alcohol consumption creates. Also, the priest must pay special attention to the bad thoughts that the sick person may have as a result of excessive consumption of alcoholic beverages. Thus, we notice that the role of the priest is an extremely important one, both as a clergyman and in the administration of the Holy Mysteries. The priest must teach the faithful the true values from the perspective of the Holy Tradition. This is possible by introducing the faithful to the Mystery of the Church through the services, such as: Holy Liturgy, Holy anointing of the sick, etc. Practically, in order to help people who have to deal with alcohol, the priest must consider several aspects.

First of all, the priest must be well informed and know before all the causes and effects of alcoholism. At the same time, excessive alcohol consumption must be considered a disease that can cause other diseases, both on a physiological, psychological and spiritual level. Treating this disease caused by alcohol abuse should be seen as a collaboration of people with God. This fact is translated both by the help received from doctors, priests, psychologists and from the Divinity. For this reason, the priest should not underestimate counseling programs or the role of groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous or Al-Anon.

Such groups may also be invited to meet in parish churches. The reason would be that each person can benefit from effective information, and people dependent on alcohol can be supported more, being able to have easier access to the services they need. The organization of such meetings in parish churches requires that each event of this kind be preceded by an explanation from which the importance of the recovery of such patients emerges. Some of the believers may rightly ask why such meetings are necessary and what role is there in counseling and preventing alcohol abuse, as long as the Church has many "special instruments" through which it can help any sick person. Therefore, the priest must emphasize that such meetings and

¹⁴ **Michel Alpizar LOPEZ**, "Preveniendo el alcoholismo" (preventing alcoholism), in: *Cubana de Salud Publica (Cuban Public Health)*, XXXIV (2008), p. 5, <http://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=21434312>, date of access: 02/11/2022.

groups can give the faithful the opportunity to fully live their faith and experience the power of the Sacraments in a way that they would not otherwise have thought possible.

4. Means of healing the addiction

4.1. Spiritual state awareness

The awareness of the spiritual state implies the recognition of sins. This fact is absolutely necessary in the therapeutic process. Without this process, people cannot enjoy full recovery and cannot turn to a spiritual doctor. Thus, people who are affected by various spiritual diseases must have the good thought that the prodigal son had in the parable of the Gospel. After tasting sin, the son who was lost in many sinful pleasures realized that it is good to return to his father and stop sinning, doing his best to straighten up and live in complete repentance, giving up the habit of sinning. As can be seen, this awareness is accompanied by a true spiritual awakening, which leads the sinner to the good state through which repulsion towards sin and flight from it is born¹⁵.

4.2. The spiritual father

People who have fallen into various sins or who are possessed by sins need a spiritual guide necessary in the healing process. As is known, Orthodoxy is the art of spiritual healing. This fact extends to all people who want to be spiritually healed and freed from the bitter tyranny of sin. This is possible because of spiritual doctors. These spiritual doctors have the duty to teach and guide sin-wounded souls so that they may return home to the heavenly Father. The true place of meeting people with God is the house where He dwells. This is the place where God unites with His creation, as Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae said that the Church is the union of all that exists, or is meant to encompass all that exists: God and creation¹⁶.

4.3. The repentance and Eucharist

Awareness of sins, or rather the evil generated by sins, is an important step in treating spiritual diseases. Basically, self-examination is related to repentance and confession. Knowing the causes and effects produced by committing sins can be beneficial in treating people who are addicted to alcohol. In addition, the recognition of sin and awareness of the harm produced by alcohol abuse is the first step of repentance. Normally, this step is followed by accepting the confession of sins in the Sacrament of Holy Confession. Viewed as a whole, the Holy Sacrament of Penance has two very important aspects. The first aspect refers to the fact that Repentance is the Sacrament of the Church through which the spiritually sick person is freed from sins. The second aspect considers the fact that there is a desire through which the repentant hopes to be saved. In this last aspect, the feeling of regret for the sins committed is very important¹⁷. Repentance is the positive engine of the soul¹⁸, which urges people to begin the true life, free

¹⁵ Stavros BALOYANNIS, *Psihologie Pastorală (Pastoral Psychology)*, Doxologia publishing house, Iași, 2015, p. 265.

¹⁶ Fr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă (Orthodox Dogmatic Theology)*, vol. II, publishing house of the Bible and Orthodox Mission, Bucharest, 1978, p. 208.

¹⁷ Fr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Ascetica și Mistica Bisericii Ortodoxe (Asceticism and Mysticism of the Orthodox Church)*, publishing house of the Bible and Orthodox Mission, Bucharest, 2002, p. 144.

¹⁸ Stavros BALOYANNIS, *Psihologie Pastorală (Pastoral Psychology)*, p. 256.

from sin¹⁹. Repentance causes people to forsake their sins and repent of committing them. Receiving the Holy Eucharist positively changes the one who receives it and makes him a theophor.

4.4. *Revealing the thoughts*

An especially important role in the prevention and recovery of people addicted to alcohol is the disclosure of thoughts. The work of healing souls involves, in addition to the awareness of sin, a disclosure of thoughts because it is imperative for the priest to know the particular situations of the sick. Thus, the disclosure of thoughts involves the disclosure of any disturbing thought, any unusual condition that disturbs the human soul. Through the disclosure of thoughts, certain details of the way of living are made known, to know if it is the right one, given that any bad thought, no matter how small, influences the spiritual life. Revealing of thoughts refers to those thoughts that trouble people's minds. These thoughts can be very insistent, fighting strongly against people. The disclosure of thoughts is good to be done every time there is a need, but this, of course, will be conditional on the possibility of meeting the spiritual father. Confession of thoughts has great liberating power. The importance of confessing thoughts comes from the fact that the battle with sin first begins at the level of thoughts²⁰.

4.5. *Fasting*

Fasting is considered to be abstinence from certain foods, actions, such as marital relations, and evil thoughts. Fasting should also be understood as abstinence from abuse in general. This fact also implies abstinence from alcohol consumption, especially in the case of people who exaggerate, consuming alcohol repeatedly and in large quantities. Thus, fasting provides for abstinence from passionate pleasure, this fact implying an act of will. In addition, fasting is an act of spiritual growth. It is a straining of the will and a restoration of the mastery of the spirit over the body. In other words, fasting is necessary for people addicted to alcohol because it is a means by which the Church aims to free people from this addiction and restore a life conforming to normality.

4.6. *The inner struggle*

The inner struggle refers to the struggle with evil thoughts, which push the soul to sin. In the fight against thoughts, prayer plays a major role, along with guarding the mind and heart. Besides all this, it is known that incessant invocation of God's name is a cure that destroys not only all sins but their very work. Moreover, for the one who is at the beginning of the spiritual life, avoiding the occasions that lead to sin is imperative, helping him to guard against the causes that could make him fall into sin. In this sense, the one who wants to get rid of the excessive consumption of alcohol must avoid any surroundings, any temptation and any evil thought that would make him fall into sin again.

5. **Conclusions**

Talking about alcoholism, I showed the fact that it has consequences that affect the entire human being, in all its complexity, with physiological effects, neuro-psychological, social, and spiritual (breaking the connection with God and deepening more and more into sin).

¹⁹ CALIST ȘI IGNATIE XANTOPOL, *Metodă și regulă foarte amănunțită pentru cei ce-și aleg să viețuiască în liniște și singurătate (Very thorough method and rule for those who choose to live in peace and solitude)*, coll. Filocalia (Philokalia) 8, Humanitas publishing house, Bucharest, 2005, p. 92.

²⁰ Jean Claude LARCHET, *Terapeutică bolilor spirituale (Therapeutics of spiritual diseases)*, translation by Marinela Bojin, Sophia publishing house, Bucharest, 2001, p. 410.

Considering these consequences, information and prevention measures are imposed with the utmost seriousness, to be taken both in the public and private space, as well as in the Church space (through the direct involvement of priests and parishes), as well as recovery measures (medical, social, psychological and pastoral), creating a collaboration between specialists (doctors, psychologists, sociologists, priests), in a multidisciplinary team that can bring recovery, where it is still possible. At the same time, the information and prevention measures must be prepared very thoroughly, there are short-term and long-term programs in this sense.

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