THE CHAPLAIN'S RESPONSIBILITY TO THE ALCOHOLIC: A RETHought
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In my experience with training military chaplains who are attempting to offer counsel to alcoholics, or other chemically dependent persons, I have become aware of how frustrated many of them are with this part of their work. Classically, the alcoholic presents such a rigid and thoroughgoing denial of his condition that there seems to be no adequate way to offer “help.” How can one help someone who does not want help?

There seem to be two factors in most situations presenting themselves to chaplains which mitigate against effective counseling. First is the very nature of the disease. As it moves through its progressive stages, the victim is rendered more and more incapable of recognizing either the presence of his symptoms or the severity of them. The fact is that, as the alcoholic’s behavior becomes more and more compulsive and bizarre, his memory of those behaviors is increasingly distorted.

This distortion is composed of three components. First are the blackouts which are increasing in frequency. A blackout is a form of chemically induced amnesia during which the individual functions as though he is remembering all that is occurring when, in reality, he will not be able to remember any of that period of time. Many times some of the most destructive behavior occurs during a blackout and, therefore, is unavailable as data to help the alcoholic to recognize the seriousness of the chemical abuse.

Secondly, repression acts to hide from the conscious mind of the alcoholic those memories of drunken behavior which are acutely painful or shameful. In this way the alcoholic spontaneously “forgets” the discomforting events of “the night before.”

Finally, euphoric recall plays havoc with what was remembered about “last night.” Euphoric recall refers to the phenomenon in which a person remembers the feelings of intoxication rather than the behaviors of intoxication. In this way the alcoholic truly believes that drinking is fun and that he is the “life” of all the parties. Others, however, who have

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