

Twenty-Fifth
Year

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CATHOLIC Digest

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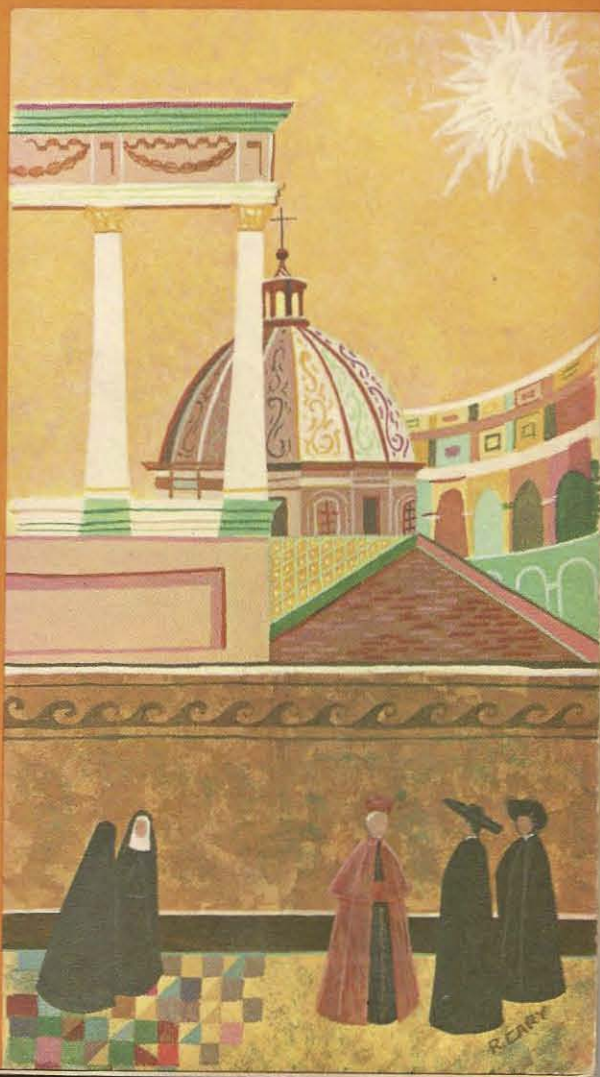
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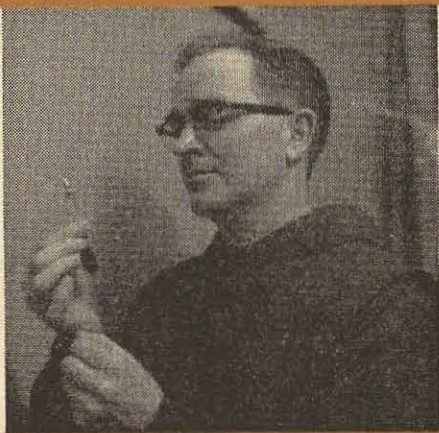
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Junkie Priest

Graymoor's Father Egan is servant to God's weak and lowly—narcotics addicts

By John D. Harris
Condensed from "View"*



Father Daniel Egan, S.A.

THE TELEPHONE RANG at 2 A.M. "Father, Jackie is very ill. She's taken an overdose. She's in Bellevue." The woman's voice was urgent.

It took Father Egan seven minutes to get to the hospital. He headed directly for the emergency ward.

A young intern was bending over a 20-year-old girl. He was trying to learn what drug she had taken. Father Egan glanced at the girl, and said, "Jackie's a goof-ball addict, doctor. If you don't mind my suggestion, let's elevate the foot of the bed. Now, let's keep the nasopharynx clear of secretion. I'll keep her awake with some light slapping and pinching while you give her about 15 mg of benzedrine. And some

nikethamide will help, too. Let the nurse administer oxygen."

The intern stared at the slender, gray-haired priest. "Wait a minute," he said. "Just who are you, anyway?"

At that moment another doctor arrived. "Go ahead and do as he suggests, doctor," he said. "He probably knows more about this than any of us. He's the Junkie Priest."

It has taken Father Egan ten years among thousands of addicts in New York City to earn that title, which he treasures. Father Daniel Egan, S.A., is a Graymoor priest. When not out preaching missions and retreats he lives at the Graymoor Friars' house in New York's Greenwich Village, two blocks from where he was born 47 years ago. Most of his

time is spent in the seething, festering jungle of pushers, prostitutes, and thieves.

More than 30,000 narcotics addicts live in New York City, the biggest concentration in the country. Their need for money to sustain their habits, often exceeding \$75 a day, make them the city's foremost crime problem.

Father Egan has devoted himself to the female addicts, feeling they need even more help than the men. They are all "precious souls and children of God," even though drugs have condemned them to a life unimaginable to the outsider. He holds that addiction is a sickness, not a crime.

Father Egan's journey into the nightmare existence led by addicts began ten years ago when a desperately sick woman came to him for help. "She was hooked real bad and was in agony, trying to kick her habit," he said. "I canvassed every hospital in town. None would admit her. She was shrugged off as a criminal."

Father Egan was appalled. He began to read about narcotics. He sought out addicts, learned their problems, and began to help them. Today he is chaplain to New York's Narcotics Anonymous, an organization that functions in roughly the same manner as Alcoholics Anonymous.

His philosophy is as old as the Church itself. "As long as they can be helped to die in God's grace, I will continue to work with them and

help them to their feet, no matter how often they fall."

Father Egan considers addicts as not hopeless, but helpless. "It's no use saying, 'Why don't you stop?'" he explains. "They want to stop. But their wills are weak. Their whole emotional system depends on the drug."

He insists that kindness and patience have succeeded in obtaining protracted abstinence, and even cures from addiction, where years of prison and psychiatry have failed.

Once a scrap of paper fell from a barred window of the Women's House of Detention in New York. It landed at the feet of a trembling 18-year-old girl addict on the sidewalk below. Five words were scrawled on it: "Try to find Father Egan." Other addicts had seen the girl from a cell window, and recognized her plight.

The girl, whom we shall call Anne, was new in town. Who was Father Egan? Where was he to be found? How could he help a girl like her?

She learned the answers from other addicts. Two days later she knocked nervously on the door of the Graymoor Friars' residence. A youthful-looking priest opened the door. Anne handed him the scrap of paper.

"I'm Father Egan," he said. "Come in." Anne, like hundreds before her, had found the Junkie Priest. Father Egan quickly got her into a hospital. He visited her frequently, often slipping a pack of cigarettes and a \$1

bill into her bedside table drawer.

During one visit, and after the usual conversation that "only junkies understand," Father Egan asked Anne if there was anything she would particularly like.

"Oh, yes," the girl whispered. "There's nothing I'd like better than a cold apple."

It was 10:30 P.M. Father Egan climbed into his car and searched the Lower East Side for an apple. He talked a storekeeper into opening up—and he brought Anne her apple. All she could say was, "Thank you, Father. It's so good."

The next day she eyed Father Egan quizzically. Her strength was returning. "Father," she demanded bluntly, "why are you so nice to me? I'm not even a Catholic. And I'm a junkie."

Father Egan answered, "You're a human being with human dignity. You need a friend, someone to help you. I'd like to be that friend."

That was a year ago. Father Egan received a Christmas card from Anne last year. She had written: "Thanks for being my friend. Thanks for getting me a job and a place to live. Thanks for giving me back my life."

Father Egan was the only priest subpoenaed by the Kefauver committee during its crime hearings. Gov. Nelson A. Rockefeller appointed him a state delegate to the 1960 White House Conference on Children and Youth.

But air-conditioned hearing rooms are not where Father Egan fights his

ADDICTION NO CRIME

The U.S. Supreme Court on June 25 ruled unconstitutional a California law making it a crime to be addicted to narcotics or to make unprescribed use of them. Justice Stewart delivered the 6-2 decision, stating that the California law had to be put in the same category as statutes which inflicted cruel and unusual punishment in violation of the 14th Amendment.

battle. His erect figure and ready smile have become fixtures in hospital wards, jails, courtrooms, and slums—anywhere that female addicts need help. He is a nocturnal prowler of streets, alleys, basements, and rooftops considered dangerous even for police.

His gentle voice often deceives people. But he is fearless when he thinks an addict is being treated, as he says, "worse than an animal in Central Park zoo." Police who handle addicts as mere criminals frequently feel his wrath. But to other officials he is a legend. Among those who offered hearty testimonials are Assistant Commissioner of Health Dr. Theodore Rosenthal, head of New York's Narcotics Coordination office; Dr. Fred Zimmerman, deputy superintendent of vast Bellevue hospital; and federal Narcotics bureau district supervisor Samuel Levine.

Father Egan is as much a part of

the Women's House of Detention as its grim walls and hallways. Nearly 700 women are held there, 80% of them addicts. Walter Logan, director of classification and treatment at the jail, shrugged and said the only way to talk about Father Egan was "in superlatives."

"A girl came here voluntarily the other night," he said. "She was writhing in pain from narcotics withdrawal. She was crumpled into a ball on the floor. We couldn't get her into a hospital. I called Father Egan. He was here in ten minutes. Somehow he got her a hospital bed."

The most powerful tributes to Father Egan come from addicts themselves. While sick recently he received dozens of letters from addicts and former addicts. One card arrived signed by all the women on a floor of the federal narcotics hospital at Lexington, Ky. "We need you more than any hospital," it said. "Please get well."

Slightly built, almost fragile, his face curiously unlined, Father Egan has taken no vacation in ten years. He cannot—he is a walking employment agency for his girls. He insists that most of them need a job more than anything else.

He may call one girl at 5:30 A.M. to remind her to be on time for that all-important job. By 7 A.M. he will have telephoned three more. At 9:30 A.M. he is talking to parole officers. At 10 A.M. he is coaxing the Department of Hospitals to check on available beds.

During lunch hour addicts call

him at pay booths by prearranged appointment, just to talk to him. To each he gives hope and encouragement. When he returns to the Graymoor House each evening there are dozens of notes: call this hospital, that judge, this junkie, that distraught mother.

He is continually handing out rent money for homeless girls until they find jobs. Father Egan's only help comes from the Legion of Mary. He has his own praesidium of Our Lady of the Atonement, 12 members who work in offices, banks, and at switchboards until 5 P.M. and then roam New York's slums seeking sick and helpless addicts. Last year his Legionaries made 863 visits to addicts in jails, hospitals, and crumbling tenement buildings.

Now an increasing number of New York judges are welcoming the chance to suspend a sentence and put a girl on probation "to Father Egan and the Legion of Mary." He has special car-parking privileges.

Once he decided that one of his girls, Marie, needed longer care than a city hospital could give her. He telephoned the federal Narcotics hospital at Lexington, Ky. The hospital agreed to admit her. Equipped with letters from the Bellevue Social Service department and from Father Egan, Marie boarded a bus.

Near the Kentucky state line she became quite sick. She telephoned Father Egan at 5:30 A.M. His instructions were swift and explicit: "Marie, get to the nearest hospital. Show them the letters. Ask for one

secondal pill. That will be enough for you to get to Lexington."

Marie showed the letters at the hospital. She was jailed as a criminal, and suffered two convulsions in her cell. Eventually she reached the federal hospital and was well treated. Soon, however, she will return to New York with no money, no job, no place to live, and no friend—except Father Egan.

Father Egan says he has known many addicts who were sentenced to five years in prison for thefts committed while trying to get into a hospital. And he has become convinced that many people in the medical and correctional professions care little or nothing about what happens to addicts after they leave a hospital or prison.

He dismisses as a "medical myth" the argument that special facilities are needed to treat addiction. Any hospital in the country could admit addicts as normal patients, he argues. "The only facilities needed are beds, doctors and nurses who are kind to them, daily doses of methadone and other withdrawal drugs, and a friend to visit them."

In recent months Father Egan has secured the admission of more than 100 female addicts to the hospital. They are treated in wards with other patients. He says they have proved to be as passive, quiet, and understanding as others. "The exceptions," he explains, "are not so because they are addicts, but because of their individual personalities, just like other patients."

Father Egan is strenuously opposed to "narcotics hospitals" as such. There, he maintains, addicts would merely "talk and think" drugs. In a general ward the change in them is unbelievable, he claims.

He is no starry-eyed dreamer in a tough, crime-infested world. He is fully aware that the rate of cure is discouragingly low. But he thinks he sees some of his efforts beginning to pay off.

He discerns a change in the attitude of New York doctors and nurses toward addicts. Increasingly they admit and treat junkies like other sick patients.

Millions in public funds could be saved and the addict population slashed in half, Father Egan thinks, if city, state, and federal agencies built "half-way" houses. These are his dream and prayer.

He envisions a house somewhere in New York, a sort of St. Christopher's Inn for women like the Inn for Homeless Men operated by the Graymoor Friars at Garrison, N.Y. It would be an old brownstone where about 20 women could live for a month or so until they found a job and an apartment.

Father Egan thinks authorities who fight small-time pushers are wasting their time. "Throw 100 in jail and 100 more take their places," he says. "Most of them are junkies themselves, desperately needing money to buy drugs. There aren't enough prisons to hold them all." But he is relentless in furnishing information to the Federal Bureau

of Narcotics about racketeers who wholesale drugs to the pushers.

Is there a way to "solve" the narcotics problem? Yes, Father Egan insists. But only by drying it up at its source. And this would take an aroused, world-wide public opinion calling for every type of sanction against nations producing illicit drugs.

Society's outcasts, addicts usually shy away from the sacraments for years. But they find it easy confessing to the Junkie Priest.

One night recently, Dolores, young but haggard, ravaged by years of dope and prostitution, lay dying in a hospital. She was the victim of 17 stab wounds. No one could get her to go to Confession.

Father Egan was notified, and hurried to her. He whispered, "It's me, Dolores. Father Egan."

Dolores opened her eyes and clasped Father Egan's hands. She cried, "Thank God you're here, Father." Another junkie's soul was saved at the edge of eternity.



HEARTS ARE TRUMPS

We have a 17-year-old son in a state hospital some 55 miles from our home. He is in a ward with boys his own age who are all in a school program. They are permitted to come home to visit just six times a year, at times specified by the hospital. We usually visit him every week.

Some months ago, during a campaign for retarded children in our town, I was doing some fund soliciting on the phone. I happened to talk to a man who told me that he also had a boy who was in the same institution as my son. He was in the same ward and same school program.

Some weeks later I learned that the man had died of a heart attack. I became concerned about the possibility of his wife's not being able to visit her son because of a lack of transportation. After the funeral, I called her up and told her that we would be glad to take her along with us to visit her son anytime we went.

She thanked me, and said that maybe sometime she would come with us but that for the present she would have no trouble getting there because she drives.

Some time later we had an accident which left us temporarily without a car. It was just a few days before our boys were due to come home for their summer vacation. When I realized that I would be unable to pick up our son, I called the woman and told her of our predicament. She immediately offered to bring my boy home along with hers if I would get the necessary release from the hospital.

Thanks to the kindness of this woman whom I have never seen, my son did not have to miss out on his precious two weeks' vacation from the hospital.

Rose Hertzfel.

[Our original accounts, 200 to 300 words long, of true cases where unseeking kindness was rewarded, \$50 will be paid on publication. Manuscripts cannot be acknowledged or returned.]