

ECCNA Porto 2006

Article “Em recuperação só por mais um dia”, Jornal de Noticias, 30.7.2006

Silvio, Sandro, Ana, Amilcar or Manuela. Never mind. Those are not their real names. They are between five thousand and ten thousand in Portugal. The poster says “Anonymous”. “Addicts”, they say, “in recovery, just for today”. After yesterday, and the day before, now and in the future, it’s a promise.

They talk about drugs in the past tense. And they celebrate— with water, smiles and music, some faces reflecting hard work and cigarettes; they come together for a few days at the Seminary of Vilar, in Porto City. They are “clean”. You can see in their soul. Outside that gathering they are “normal”. Normal is defined as a person like anyone else, lawyers, drivers, business people, doctors, constructors, unemployed. Parents, sons and daughters. Grandparents. Heterosexuals, gays. Clean.

If their names are Portuguese it’s just a coincidence. With a golden sunset as a backdrop, more than twenty nationalities mix together at the 23rd Narcotics Anonymous European Convention. They meet anonymously, according to the 12th of 12 Traditions that brought them back to life and complemented it by no identification. Silvio declaims it without even realizing – it’s one of their codes, like calling their sharing meetings “the rooms” and their groups “the fellowship”. “Anonymity is the spiritual foundation...”

It’s necessary to tell the world our names in order to tell the world that it is possible to live without drugs? And enjoy it? The NA’s don’t think so. Ana, around 30 and free for “11 years and a half” works as a spokeswoman. She says in NA if you say you are “recovered” you’d be prohibited. It’s a daily process, continuous, only ends with death. Quietly, Amilcar, or Sandro, or even Manuela admits: there were and there are tough days. “Of course sometimes I want to (use)!” To admit is another key word. Because alcohol is also prohibited, the first drug for many of them. It’s the most easy to find. “We are never sure of what comes next”

Silvio changes the subject of our conversation to the atmosphere around us. “Celebrating recovery”. There’s a child that plays with a noisy ball, another smiles in its mothers’ lap. There is a passionate kiss, a hand that never drops the others, two that get together clapping, a song that comes out from the speakers around the square garden. It’s the reward for getting together so many “recovery addicts” from so many countries in Porto City.

We were not allowed to participate in the sharing sessions. It’s only theirs. Just theirs. Those are moments that a “shining eye” convinces that they are not gambling their life. Just like in Alcoholics Anonymous but adding illicit drugs. It’s the identification with success, the Amilcar beach house, Manuela’s engineer college, or Sandro’s kids.

Relapses are swept under the carpet. Just like NA’s numbers in Portugal. We don’t keep records of our members”. As data, the info that that there are 220

fellowship meetings per week all around the country is enough. Is it much? Will be. Twenty-one years ago when this recovery tool started among us there was only one. Today, the NA's can put together an international convention. Success.

It's a simple rule: the desire to stop using drugs. The principles are more than 50 years old, created in USA and are adopted by many treatment centres. "We have nothing to do with that, neither we have an opinion about them", Silvio insists. The NA's are something beyond... They embrace those who come from a detox treatment center, or with a huge hangover or even with a shot in the pocket.

At the end of European Convention they do the "countdown". Of who was and who is clean for five, ten or twenty years. "We have a recovery person clean for 40 years!" There will be people with one, two or three days clean. Those who got here in the convention days, the "convention kids". It's always like this. Silvio had been involved for a while: six years and four months. He has attended several national conventions and a few European ones. He says hi to all those who come in and out the Seminary of Vilar. "Hi Anthony, hi this, hi that."

The stories get together: they are all different, have just one common point. No. Two. The path and the desire to stay clean for another 24 hours. Just been able to awake, this wonderful thing. "It doesn't matter what drugs you used, where you come from, or your religion", they repeat with more or less details. And they have huge and significant smiles. It's something pleasant to see. They walk with T-shirts in their hands, bought from this or that foreign group, choosing the funniest color. That's how they fund themselves. No outside donations.

At the end, they dress accordingly. Because for an addict that desire to stop using the image of a clean addict is inspiring. Guaranteed. "To know and say: what a hell! This person used the drugs I did, has been in the same places I have, so I can also get what they have." This phrase, due to anonymity, cannot be credited to anyone. In conclusion, says Ana, "arrive in NA with such a dysfunctional life in every way, get back to having a functional life. Stop using drugs to block feelings, and get a job. A family..."

And carry the message to the still suffering addict. Still and always. "To tell them: you're gonna make it!" even if they are in a huge hangover. To tell them about what happens when they open a small window, that becomes a door, that becomes a gate "and that people do get a better life." To talk about all those things in the fellowship meetings or in the convention, or in Seminary of Vilar hallway, or in square garden or in the bars chosen to celebrate. Seriously. Without alcohol.