



A CATHOLIC APPROACH TO ALCOHOL

A discussion of the virtuous use of alcohol
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The Catholic approach to almost anything finds a balance between two extremes. Alcohol is no different. We might think immediately of the extreme of drinking too much, especially on college campuses; but many Christians respond to that extreme by another, rejecting the legitimacy of alcohol outright. Any Catholic assessment of drinking must acknowledge the real social problems that arise with the abuse of alcohol, but it should address these problems by showing its proper use. A Catholic approach to drinking draws upon the Catholic tradition of festivity to integrate alcohol within rightly ordered relationships and the Church's efforts for evangelization.

America and the Catholic Vision

The Catholic Church offers a sacramental vision of reality. God uses physical signs and means to communicate with us and to bestow his grace upon us. The Son of God even took on our flesh to unite our humanity to his divinity. The Catholic tradition views alcohol through this sacramental lens, seeing it as a sign of God's blessing and even an object taken up in sacramental worship. Jesus continues to make himself present in the Eucharist, using the matter of wine to become his blood. Our secular culture, however, does not understand this vision, as it keeps the spiritual and temporal at odds in anti-sacramental fashion.

The United States, furthermore, has a troubled history with alcohol. As colonists and pioneers spread across the frontier, they used hard liquor as a way to store grain indefinitely and even as currency. This led

to a problem of drunkenness, which led in turn to strong temperance movements and the eventual banning of all alcohol during Prohibition in 1920. Some states still have restrictive liquor laws and the United States has a drinking age higher than most countries. Our country struggles with extremes—strong restrictions coupled with the use of alcohol as an act of rebellion against these restrictions. Alcohol can also be used as an escape, with alcoholism leading to serious health problems, destroyed relationships, and even death.

The Catholic view, on the other hand, grew out of the ancient use of wine and beer as daily beverages, sometimes consumed in place of contaminated water, and which were integrated into normal social and religious life. Both drinks were used in the Bible for religious ritual, with wine serving as a key component of the Passover and beer (in its ancient form of *shekar*) used in the ritual libation of the drink offering. Jesus' first miracle at Cana showed God's blessing of alcohol as necessary for festivity and wine became an essential element of Catholic worship in the Eucharist. Throughout Church history, the monks have been instrumental in the production of beer and wine, as well as witnesses to how they should be ordered to the glory of God.

The Bible points us to the purpose of alcohol, as a blessing from God to "gladden the heart" (Psalm 104:15). The Psalms further instruct us to "raise the cup of salvation" as we call on the name of the Lord (116:13), an action used by Jesus at the Last Supper. The Church also offers an official beer blessing in the Book of Ritual, which it states God has offered to us as a "salutary remedy to the human race," so that "whoever shall drink it, may gain health in body and peace in soul." According to the Church's vision, alcohol should be ordered toward giving honor to God in thanksgiving and to promote our health and happiness. God sees alcohol as a sign of life, when consumed properly, rather than something that is undesirable or harmful in every case.

The Problem of Excess

The Bible also shows the other side of drinking: its abuse. Anything good that God has created can be abused when we do not order it properly to him and to our own good. We become too attached to material things and allow them to divert us from higher things. The first abuse of alcohol can be seen in Noah's drunkenness, which occasioned the rebellion of his son Ham. Paul also speaks very clearly of how the abuse of alcohol can become an impediment to entering the Kingdom of Heaven, placing it within two of his lists of deadly sins (see 1 Cor 6:10 and Gal 5:21). Although some treat excessive drinking lightly, the Bible makes its gravity clear.

God's prohibitions do not seek to impose undue burdens on us but intend to direct us away from things that harm us. Drunkenness strikes at the very heart of our humanity by overshadowing and impairing the use of our distinctive faculties: reason and free will. These two faculties—our ability to know the truth and to choose the good freely—distinguish us from animals and enable us to enter into relationship with God. Anything that leads us away from our true good and from relationship with God we must affirm as evil. We know clearly enough that excessive drinking leads to many other sinful actions precisely because we lose our senses and true freedom.

Furthermore, excessive drinking hurts our health and impairs the safety of those around us. The *Catechism* lists drunkenness as a sin that violates the fifth commandment, undermining our own good and the good of others: "The virtue of temperance disposes us to avoid every kind of excess: the abuse of food, alcohol, tobacco, or medicine. Those incur grave guilt who, by drunkenness or a love of speed, endanger their own and others' safety on the road, at sea, or in the air" (§2290). This quote not only points us toward what to

avoid—every kind of excess—but also how to do it, through the virtue of temperance.

Virtue directs us to act according to right reason and to make good use of our freedom. The virtues are habits that perfect our mind and will. Temperance, in particular, directs us toward moderation in regard to the material things we desire: physical pleasure, eating, drinking, and sexuality. Many young people drink alcohol excessively in an attempt to escape from reality or as an act of rebellion. They want to lose control so they can engage in actions they know they should avoid. Through temperance, we can approach drinking with maturity and can order it toward the good of our health and our relationships with others.

Some Guidelines for Catholic Drinking

Rather than using alcohol as an escape, it should be consumed in affirmation of the goodness of life and others, through festivity and friendship. Chesterton famously said, "drink because you are happy, but never because you are miserable." We should always drink for the right reason, ordering our drinking to God in thanksgiving and praise. Catholic festivity has always included a role for celebratory drinking, alongside of eating, music, dancing, and fellowship, in order to mark the great feast days and important occasions. The feasts remind us of why we should be happy, and properly ordered drinking adds joy to these occasions.

We also should drink in friendship, with our drinking building toward genuine community, rather than in isolation. It should bring us closer to others and facilitate conversation, helping to center discussion and make it easier to share with others. Drinking with family or friends in the proper setting provides a good check against drinking too much.

This is especially true over a meal, which reminds us that wine and beer are foodstuff, made from ingredients meant to be consumed as part of a healthy diet—grapes and barley. This distinguishes them from drugs, substances not part of an ordinary, health diet and that cause bodily harm and social isolation. Eating with food limits the absorption of alcohol and shows its connection to health, as part of one's diet rather than a crutch.

Furthermore, it is important to limit how much we drink, both on a single occasion and in our lives in general. We should know how much we can reasonably and safely drink without becoming impaired. An individual's limit varies by weight, sex, and age, but most people can consume two or three drinks in a day. We also take care not to drink too often, making sure they we do not become too attached. The Church offers us periods of penance and fasting throughout the year (every Friday and the season of Lent), which provide a natural time to check our drinking habits and make sure they are properly ordered. Finally, Catholic drinking should respect the law (see Romans 13). In traditionally Catholic countries, young adults learn how to drink in the context of the family. It is legal in most states at any age to drink with parents at home, enabling parents to be the ones to model a virtuous and Catholic approach, rather than leaving adolescents to learn poor drinking habits high school and college. Although the United States has a higher drinking age than other countries, this does not mean the law should be overlooked; this could foster an unhealthy rebellious attitude. Furthermore, underage drinking frequently occurs in unhealthy and even dangerous environments. Catholics should encourage drinking with maturity and respect, with the appropriate group and at the appropriate time.

Conclusion: Holiness and Evangelization

The Bible and the Catholic tradition make it clear that alcohol can be rightly ordered in accord with a healthy and holy life. That does not

take away from the real danger that exists from its abuse. Alcohol is not a necessity of life (apart from the necessity of wine for Mass), and we must be willing to abstain from it if it serves as a temptation or distraction. We must subordinate everything to our ultimate goal: eternal union with God in heaven. To be holy, God must shape all that we do, including our drinking. Ultimately, our habits must pass this holiness test. Either our drinking can be ordered toward the glory of God, or, if it cannot, it should be plucked out as something that takes us away from him.

One way in which drinking can serve holiness is by directing it toward evangelization. Many parishes and apostolates have used alcohol to engage in conversation and to promote festivity. Many young adults, of the proper drinking age, find themselves more willing to attend an event or talk about personal things in a pub, rather than receiving a direct invitation to church. Using alcohol (following the proper guidelines) for the New Evangelization actually takes us back to the Church's own tradition. The monks were the great producers of wine and beer for a reason: they used them to foster their own community life, which included hospitality and the service of the sick and pilgrims.

A Catholic approach to alcohol must be countercultural, offering a witness of health, happiness, and holiness to a society lacking all of these. Bl. Pier Giorgio Frassati may provide a perfect model in this—rolling a barrel of wine down the street and buying his friends a round of beer, while remaining more focused on prayer and service of the poor. As Catholics we should model the virtues, especially temperance, while also witnessing to the great joy we have in Christ and expressing that joy festively and in friendship. In this we will anticipate Jesus' promise to "eat and drink at my table in my kingdom" (Luke 22:30).

Discussion Questions:

- 1. What convicted or challenged you the most in this article and why?**
- 2. According to the article, alcohol has been a part of American culture from its earliest days. In what ways has drinking in excess impacted our culture, both historically and in the present?**
- 3. How has alcohol affected your life, both positively and negatively? How has it impacted your relationships? Your health? Your free time?**
- 4. This article lays out the reasons against drinking in excess and drinking underage. What aspects of this issue are you still wrestling with?**
- 5. What is one step God is inviting you to take to grow in how you live out this teaching?**

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