

## The Catholic Church's Drinking Problem



Creighton Prep, a Jesuit High School in Omaha, Nebraska, will begin testing their students for drug and alcohol use next year. A first positive test will result in counseling, a second in disciplinary action, and a third in dismissal. While some libertarians are irritated, many parents are thrilled the school is creating an environment that addresses the problems of drug use and underage drinking, providing students who need help with assistance, and making it easier for students to say 'no,' thereby diminishing the power of peer pressure.

But Creighton Prep's new program is a tiny bright spot on the dark landscape of Catholic education in the United States. What makes Creighton Prep's actions so noteworthy is the Church's overall poor performance when it comes to addressing these problems and educating its adherents about the dangers of drugs and alcohol and their inverse relationship to living virtuously and joyfully.

From parishes to parochial schools to university classrooms, the Church is failing in its responsibility to talk about the pernicious impact of alcohol (and even drugs) on so many people in our society, along with the detrimental impact it has on achieving the common good. One is more likely to see devout Catholics being flip about drinking—or even romanticizing and glorifying it—than confronting the nihilism, escapism, and despair that are a big part of our nation's drinking culture and the wreckage that it leaves in its wake. The Church takes a harder line on drugs, but how often is the topic really discussed? How often does the Church address why people turn to drug use and explain its incompatibility with human flourishing? The Church provides some assistance, but most often it comes after people have already had their lives and the lives of their loved ones (and possibly strangers) devastated by the ruinous costs of addiction. The Church can and should do better.

In its religious education to young people, the message on drinking seems to be: wait until you are older. This is neither sufficient nor persuasive. Whether because of affluenza, the middle-class malaise, or hopelessness born of poverty, many teenagers are tempted to drink and use drugs. They seek

substance-induced pleasure to distract themselves from feelings of meaninglessness or to flee from reality, the same reasons many adults turn to these substances. Others use these substances to distort their authentic personalities and overcome their insecurities or inability to connect with others socially. It is hypocritical and unrealistic to ask them to wait simply because the physical and emotional impact is worse for teenagers. Whether driven by nihilism or insecurity, at root, it is a spiritual problem, and the failure of the Church to express that and to provide a real answer to those who are fruitlessly trying to fill a spiritual and emotional void with a substance is a profound failure.

It is strange that those who identify the emptiness of materialism, consumerism, the sexual objectification and exploitation of others, the lust for power, and other false paths to happiness are failing to address the illusory nature of the “happiness” generated by drugs and alcohol. It is downright embarrassing when one compares the Church to the world’s other religions. Buddhism, Taoism, Mormonism, Sikhism, Islam, the Baha’i faith, and various Hindu sects and protestant denominations either teach that alcohol should be avoided entirely or used in moderation (defined in such a way that many Catholics would find fairly extreme). While engaging in interfaith dialogue, the vast majority of thoughtful, virtuous young people I have met from other faiths have been teetotalers (those who abstain from alcohol entirely), while I have witnessed many of my fellow devout Catholics, who are otherwise morally serious, acting foolishly due to their consumption of alcohol. The contrast is cringe-worthy.

But none of this is surprising given how many of those charged with teaching the faith drink alcohol intemperately—willingly diminishing the intellectual abilities given to them by God, polluting their bodies, and distorting their authentic personalities and the authenticity of their interactions and relations with others, along with their ability to experience the genuine joy of God’s true presence and love. If those expected to teach and lead equate happiness with artificially altering their brain chemistry, who will teach the next generation of Catholics that lasting joy is found elsewhere?

## **Alcohol and the Common Good**

Alcohol use, particularly alcohol abuse, is one of the gravest threats to the common good on the planet. Alcohol use causes almost 4% of deaths around the world each year (roughly 2.5 million), more than AIDS, TB, malaria, or violence, according to the World Health Organization. It leads to higher rates of auto accidents, physical assaults, sexual assaults, and child and spousal abuse. It can lead to several forms of cancer, cirrhosis of the liver, and various other diseases. It contributes to higher levels of divorce, infidelity, unplanned pregnancies (which means a higher abortion rate), and risky sexual behavior. Money spent on alcohol contributes to higher rates of poverty, food insecurity, bankruptcy, credit problems, and the failure to pay child support. In short, it makes our society worse in almost every conceivable way.

Few would contest that heavy or consistent drinking is morally problematic, but what about drinking more casually? It too is highly problematic. First, it can lead to alcohol abuse and alcoholism (and other dangerous addictions). Second, casual drinking often exists at a level that is sinful and acts as an obstacle to human flourishing. Finally, casual drinking typically involves participating in an unjust social structure—a drinking culture that ruins millions of lives. This is participation in structural sin.

Alcoholics rarely intend to become alcoholics. Alcoholism most often begins with the casual desire to briefly escape unhappiness, fit in socially, enjoy a bit of pleasure, or some other relatively innocuous objective. Debilitating addiction is not something people typically intend when they take their first drink, but that initial decision to use alcohol is what sets many down a path that they may feel unable to escape.

While marijuana is undeniably a gateway drug that eventually leads some of its users to seek greater highs through the use of more dangerous drugs, it is also true that alcohol is the ultimate gateway drug. In one study, “students who used alcohol exhibited a significantly greater likelihood — up to 16 times — of licit and illicit substance use.” Reducing hardcore drug use begins with reducing the use of alcohol.

A second issue is that casual drinking is often sinful. In the *Summa Theologica*, St. Thomas Aquinas identifies drunkenness with gluttony. If the immoderate use of alcohol is voluntary, it is a sin. This is also rooted in the scriptures. Ephesians 5:18 warns against getting drunk with wine. Romans 13:13 states, “Let us conduct ourselves properly as in the day, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in promiscuity and licentiousness, not in rivalry and jealousy.” Not surprisingly, it is included with other sins that offer a false path to happiness.

Drinking becomes a sin when it starts to impair one’s reasoning. In fact, Aquinas argues that when drunkenness is intended, it is “a mortal sin, because then a man willingly and knowingly deprives himself of the use of reason, whereby he performs virtuous deeds and avoids sin.” When one’s intellectual or emotional reasoning is intentionally distorted or blurred in order to achieve a buzz, to get high, or to get drunk, one is engaging in a sin. It is a sin because it inhibits one’s potential as a person; it goes against precisely what Catholics consider the key to human flourishing (to fully develop that potential).

Aquinas cites St. Ambrose, who notes, “For the things we avoid when sober, we unknowingly commit through drunkenness.” Anyone who has been sober around those who are not is aware of how quickly

alcohol can impair a person's reasoning. Often alcohol use is intended to lower one's inhibitions, to dull one's moral and emotional sensitivity. This in turn can potentially lead to behavior that would otherwise be recognized as immoral or foolish. Many drink casually for the sake of these distorting effects; they should be aware that this behavior is unethical.

Finally, purchasing and consuming alcohol means participating in a drinking culture, one that in the United States and many other places around the world has a ruinous impact on the lives of millions. Many of those who have recognized their inability to consume alcohol moderately or wish to abstain for other reasons, nevertheless feel pressure to drink because of the widespread use of alcohol in many segments of our culture. Those who intentionally create peer pressure are obviously engaging in indefensible (and perhaps reprehensible) behavior. But even simply joining in with everyone else (unthinkingly isolating a person who would suffer greatly if they drank in order to feel included) may be morally problematic, particularly if this indirect pressure was a frequent occurrence when they sought out community.

Purchasing alcohol from large alcohol companies also means providing them with revenue to advertise to alcoholics and others who may harm themselves or other people because of their decision to consume alcohol. Alcohol companies target vulnerable populations to maximize revenue; this is a particular concern for those of us who believe in a preferential option for the poor and vulnerable. This is certainly an indirect connection, nothing like directly pressuring someone in person, but increasingly consumers are rightfully considering the ethical nature of companies and boycotting those that engage in harmful or unethical practices. Personally, I have little desire to give money to companies that profit off of the misery of alcohol's many victims.

This raises the larger question of how ethical it is to spend money on alcohol, particularly alcohol that is quite expensive, when that money can almost certainly be used in better ways. Alcohol is never a need. Spending hundreds or thousands of dollars a year on it for personal consumption when there are cheaper, wiser, and arguably tastier beverage choices seems irresponsible in a world where buying a \$10 mosquito net may save a child's life. An austere rejection of enjoying anything simply for its taste does not seem to be required ethically, but genuine moderation is required to avoid both gluttony and unjustly wasting money. This would seem to severely limit how much alcohol one could purchase ethically (in terms of both cost and quantity). Of course, this standard challenges many Americans, including myself, to examine the excesses (not just with alcohol) we so easily embrace in our hyper-consumeristic society, where it's so easy to confuse wants and needs.

## **Why the Church is Failing**

Why is the Church failing to clearly identify these problems and help more people to break away from the chains of alcohol?

The most obvious factor is the life of Christ and the centrality of the Eucharist, which requires the use of wine. Jesus did not abstain from wine like John the Baptist did, and wine is part of the Last Supper, as well as the Miracle at Cana, which prefigures the Eucharist. For proponents of alcohol use, following the Way of Christ does not seem to require abstaining from the use of alcohol. And the Church's long approval of alcohol use and even participation in the creation of alcoholic beverages is seen as an affirmation of this.

This is perhaps true. But there are some other matters to consider. First, there is the historical context. In a country where virtually everyone has access to safe, clean water (not to mention a seemingly infinite variety of other non-alcoholic beverages), it is hard to place ourselves in the context of a society where wine cut with water might be a healthier choice than drinking water alone or any alternatives. This could certainly alter the ethical balance surrounding its use. Second, Jesus did not come to usher in a new set of legalistic rules. He established an ultimate standard: what does love demand? This shapes our understanding of what is right and just. Certain behavior is always unethical, other behavior may or may not be depending on the era in which one lives or other particular circumstances. Moral reasoning is required to discern what is right when circumstances change. Third, while Jesus may have been maligned as a drunkard, there is no evidence he was intoxicated during his life. Are we to think that Jesus stumbled around and slurred his words at some point to enjoy the pleasure of intoxication? This would require us to believe that Jesus was not in fact sinless or that drunkenness is not a sin. If we reject both of these, we can only conclude that the very limited use of alcohol is the most that is permissible if we follow Christ's lead. Widespread intemperate use is therefore something that should remain a concern of the Church.

In terms of the motives of individual Catholics, more personal motives seem to be at play, and some of these are rather unfortunate. Some Catholics appear to praise and glorify drinking to insulate themselves from charges of puritanism, particularly those who may be accused of it because of their conservatism on human sexuality. Many glorify and romanticize alcohol use to show that they are normal and can appreciate pleasure. One defender of 'Catholic drinking' has even stated, "If you want to be a good Christian, you should drink carelessly," as opposed to drunkards who are slaves to drink and the puritans (or Muslims) who are enslaved by their reaction to it. This shoddy reasoning, distortion of Church teaching, absurdly irresponsible use of language, and sheer foolishness is far too common. It is astonishing how many Catholics—from journalists to scholars to ministers to the average parishioner—mention alcohol in their twitter profiles or feature it in their facebook profile pictures. This is how integral it is to their identity.

If they had a proper understanding of what constitutes temperance and adhered to it, this might not be a problem. But virtually every Catholic I know who drinks goes past the limits of temperance and abuses alcohol at some point. Romanticizing drinking within this context is fueling a culture that does far more harm than good. It means participating in structural sin. For some it entails glorifying their own sins, their own intemperance and gluttony. It is a sad sight.

And what's worse, some actually attack those who abstain from the use of alcohol and contend that temperance demands some use of alcohol or that moderate use as opposed to abstinence is a "healthier" view of alcohol, ridiculous claims that are both intellectually incoherent and divorced from Church teaching (along with Augustine and Aquinas). Some contend that embracing the goodness of God's creation calls for the use of alcohol, though presumably not poisonous berries and hallucinogenic mushrooms. Some argue for its benefits as a social lubricant. But to use a substance to increase one's sociability is to substitute an artificial connection for joyful social interactions rooted in authentic relationships. This is an abdication of one's responsibility to seek full emotional development. Further, members of the various other faiths and Christian denominations that reject alcohol use do not lack the experience of authentic community. Their members are not excluded from experiencing the fun and gaiety of camaraderie and fellowship. It is fairly absurd to argue otherwise.

Finally, there is the secular argument used by some Catholics that drinking in moderation is better for one's health. Some studies have shown health benefits or increases in life expectancy from moderate drinking. But experts are quick to highlight the inadequacy of the existing scientific literature. There is an absence of quality studies (with sufficient n sizes) on alcohol consumption that hold socioeconomic status, diet, exercise, prior alcohol use, tobacco use, mental health, number of close friends (levels of loneliness), and other key factors that impact life expectancy constant, all of which might be the actual factors that produce the results. For instance, abstainers are more likely to have a lower socioeconomic status, which is connected to lower life expectancy. The most important point, however, is that few Catholics use alcohol primarily for health reasons (it's not their intention) and most who make these arguments do not limit themselves to a single drink in a night, the moderate level that may not carry increased health risks for some. If they really intended to seek the supposed health benefits, alternatives are available that are not intoxicants. Further, promoting moderate drinking in a general way is problematic because many are unable to maintain this level of alcohol consumption and instead suffer the enormous health risks associated with heavier levels of drinking.

## **What the Church Should Do**

The case for being a teetotaler should seem pretty straightforward and clear at this point. While the use of alcohol is certainly not intrinsically evil, abstaining may seem like the best response to avoid personal sin or contributing to social injustice. A case can be made that it is the best response in

helping to overturn a drinking culture that contributes to the epidemics of addiction, rape, violence, family problems, and unhappiness.

None of this is to argue that the Church must change its teaching on temperate drinking. A legitimate case can be made for the limited use of alcohol, perhaps just to enjoy the taste of a drink that one has come to find pleasurable. But far greater clarity from the Church is needed on what constitutes the amount that is compatible with temperance. The use of the term “buzzed” to justify a certain level of intoxication highlights the need to explain at which point consuming alcohol becomes sinful. Now is an opportune moment, since some are beginning to claim that marijuana use is fine as long as one only achieves a similar buzz, an entirely illegitimate claim that shows how distorted understandings of temperance and moderation have become.

The Church can also emphasize that those who choose to drink alcohol should be conscious of the context and impact on others. Alcoholics are often told that they just have to learn to deal with people drinking all around them. Perhaps, but we can do better as a community to make life easier on those with addictions. In general, Catholics should help to foster a culture where those who choose to abstain from alcohol do not feel isolated or alienated. Catholics should be instructed that to encourage others to drink when they wish to abstain can constitute a fairly serious sin.

The Church (through homilies, religious education, and other forms of instruction) can talk about the devastating impact of alcohol use and abuse in our society. This will help Catholics develop a more well-formed conscience that they can then use to apply Christ’s law of love and pursue social justice. For Catholic high schools, they can institute programs like Creighton Prep’s, providing proper support and a full explanation of why they should not be using drugs and alcohol. It must move beyond a discussion of America’s laws to an explanation of the moral law.

Catholic thinkers and writers can stop glorifying drinking, especially to cover for their insecurities. They can stop being defensive and disparaging teetotalers. They can stop pretending that GK Chesterton’s pugnacious prose now trumps the teachings of the Catholic Church, along with the wisdom of Saint Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas. It is important to remember that to encourage the sin of inebriation is itself a sin. If that’s not convincing enough, perhaps they can be reminded that if you have to try really, really, really hard to be cool, there’s a good chance that you’re not.

Finally, perhaps a special appeal can be made to millennials. Pope Francis has encouraged young people to “be courageous” and “go against this civilization” where people say to “have a little alcohol, take a bit of drugs,” which is causing us so much harm. The Church can encourage young people to

think about who they want to be, the life they want to lead, and how that might be a life in which they don't turn to substances to alter their brain's chemistry in order to experience greater pleasure or temporary happiness. The Church can encourage them to embrace authenticity, which so many already value, and the radicalism of Christ's way. It can explain that drug use and the intemperate use of alcohol detach the person from his or her authentic self, even if it might seem liberating. It can teach them that real freedom, real liberation does not come from a bottle or joint, but from following the advice of St. Catherine of Siena: "Be who God meant you to be and you will set the world on fire."

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