

University of Notre Dame
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Question: When Is Drunkenness a Mortal Sin ?

Reply: The Catholic Church has always maintained a common-sense attitude toward liquor. The voice of fanaticism is more strident than the Church's modulated tone. The Church sides with neither the wets nor the drys.

Common sense ceased to rule when the Eighteenth Amendment was adopted, and the Volstead Act was passed. When human action leaves the middle ground of virtue, the pendulum swings just as far to the left as to the right. The fanaticism which made our country dry de jure gave occasion to the fanaticism which made it wet de facto.

The attitude of the Catholic Church, which is the attitude of right reason, is, always was, and always will be, the following:

1. Temperance is a virtue which imposes moderation in the use of all God's creatures, and guards against any abuse of them.
2. Total abstinence from intoxicating liquor (or from any other created thing that is not essential to bodily or spiritual welfare), if undertaken as an act of penance and for the love of God, is an act of religion that is highly pleasing to God and profitable to our souls.

While the Catholic Church encourages total abstinence for all, she imposes it as an obligation only on those who demonstrate that they cannot use liquor in moderation -- they fall under the natural law governing proximate occasions of sin. Total abstinence may be legitimately imposed by a social group for a particular need; thus, a railroad may forbid its employees to drink; a school (particularly a boarding school) may include total abstinence in its rules, because of the dangers inherent in its use by these particular people. But no one has to work for that railroad; no one has to attend that school.

The Indiana Catholic once giving the following adequate reply:

"If a man deliberately drinks to such an extent that he loses reason, he is guilty of mortal sin. If he deliberately sets out to get drunk, but is prevented by some accident from achieving that state, he is guilty of mortal sin -- by reason of his wrong intention. If he knows from experience that he uses impure or profane language, or falls into other sins through drunkenness, he is guilty of these sins -- even though he may not be in command of his reason at the time they were committed. The drunkard is not only guilty of mortal sin; but one who entices or urges another to drink to excess is also guilty of mortal sin. A person who would sell or give liquor to one who he knows will become intoxicated, deliberately cooperates in the grievous sin through drink, even though he does not drink to excess. When he knows that drinking causes distress to his family; that he is squandering for drink the money which is needed for their support, he is guilty of a mortal sin against charity and justice. It may be that the love of drink will lead a man to neglect payment of lawful debts in order that he may secure drink. Such a one is guilty of grievous sin if the deferred debts are of a serious character, and grave injury to the persons to whom he is indebted. The great evil of drunkenness is not only the sin itself but the horrible results that so frequently follow it."