

Why Some Catholics Drink and Others Don't *-Fr. Dean McFalls*

This year, our parish festival (next weekend) will finally be alcohol-free.

In doing so, we do not criticize other festivals which include beer or wine.

Our decision to eliminate alcoholic beverages was the result of a long process of dialogue among parish leaders. It was highly influenced by the presence of charismatic prayer groups who advocate total abstinence.

It was also motivated by our desire not to enable irresponsible behavior.

But the decision was not an easy one, nor a foregone conclusion. As the whole Christian world knows, Catholics have a reputation for drinking.

This penchant for beer, wine, and other heart-warming liquids is in part a fruit of the absorption of Catholicism into cultures which love drinking.

But it wouldn't have been possible if the Catholic Church had taught that drinking alcohol is evil. Many other Christian communities, including many fervent Catholics, do prohibit drinking, even moderate consumption.

They are free to do so. But, as Christians, they are not free to declare all drinking, and all alcoholic beverages, evil. The Bible does not state that alcoholic beverages are in themselves evil, nor does it prohibit drinking.

True, there were individuals and certain communities which chose to abstain as a matter of spiritual discipline, preparation for battle, or total dedication of themselves to the service of God. Announcing the coming birth of Samson, the deliverer of Israel, an angel admonished his mother:

“Though you are barren and have had no children, yet you will conceive and bear a son. Now, then, be careful to take no wine or strong drink and to eat nothing unclean...for this boy is to be consecrated to God from the womb. It is he who will begin the deliverance of Israel from the power of the Philistines.” (Judges 13:4,5). To make its point, the Book of Judges repeats this instruction three times (see also 13:7 and 14). Unfortunately, Samson himself did not take the angel's advice, and thus was defeated.

The angel of God had designated Samson a “Nazarite”. This form of consecration was first documented in Numbers 6:2-8. Nazarites were to be holy unto the Lord, separated from all that would render them unclean.

Paul himself appears to have taken this vow, as the time of his martyrdom drew near (Acts 18:18, and 21: 24, 26). And consistent with all Biblical teaching, he condemned drunkenness (Galatians 5:21, Romans 5:5-8, etc).

After all, the original sin of intoxication began with Noah (Genesis 9:21), and led tragically to the cursing of his youngest son Canaan (v. 25).

Drunkenness was part and parcel also of the Golden Calf disaster, when the people of Israel set up an idol in place of the God who delivered them from slavery, and were punished severely (see Genesis 32: 1-20, esp. 6).

But in spite of all this, the Scriptures never state that wine is in itself evil.

If Deuteronomy 32:33 states that the wine of a condemned people is the “venom of dragons and the cruel poison of cobras”, this is not because the wine itself is evil, but because it came from the “vineyards of Gomorrah” and therefore was corrupt. And if a foaming chalice of wine was at times used by the prophets as a symbol of horrendous punishment, this was not because wine itself was considered evil. If this had been so, Jesus would never have drunken wine, nor would he have provided wine for others.

In fact, Jesus initiated his public ministry, and “revealed his glory”, by means of transforming somewhere between 90 and 150 gallons of water into the best of wines (John 2:6-11). So much did he associate with those who drank, clearly drinking himself, that he was condemned with them:

“...The Son of Man...both ate and drank, and you say ‘Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.’” (Luke 7:34).

In other words, to claim that all alcoholic beverages, and all drinking, is evil, is not only unbiblical, but it is blasphemous, insofar as it condemns our Lord Jesus Christ. He was God in human flesh and, yes, he also drank wine. In fact, at the Passover Seder meal, the Jew’s most sacred ceremony, at which four cups of wine were to be drunken, Jesus chose to fulfill the symbolism of Cana, transforming wine into his Sacred Blood.

You, reader, may have trouble moderating your intake. Or you may have family members who suffer from alcoholism, that horrible addiction and deadly disease passed down from generation to generation. You may have witnessed the devastating effects of drunkenness in your own family. But please don’t call what God has blessed “evil”, and don’t condemn those who are able to drink in moderation. We simply have to learn how to use the good things God has given us in a more godly way. –Fr. Dean McFalls