

# The Book on Gambling

by Leon J. Suprenant, Jr.

**ISSUE:** Is gambling immoral? Should a parish use bingo or other games of chance as a means of supporting itself?

**RESPONSE:** Gambling is not intrinsically evil and can be a legitimate form of entertainment so long as it is kept within the confines of virtuous conduct. Given the tragic consequences of habitual or excessive gambling, one should exercise great caution and vigilance in this area.

Since bingo and other forms of gambling are not intrinsically evil, they may be used as a means of raising money for parishes. However, the promoters of church bingo should take extreme care in preserving a wholesome, virtuous environment for everyone involved.

**DISCUSSION:** There is a decidedly ugly side to the world of gambling, a world that now constitutes a \$600 billion-a-year (and rapidly growing) industry. Most of us have seen firsthand how the urge to gamble can become what the Catechism calls an “enslavement” (no. 2413) or what psychologists and counselors call an “addiction.” Reputable reports indicate that 15-20 million Americans are addicted to gambling and—tragically—many of them are adolescents.

Governments are well aware of our human frailty. Ten years ago gambling was legal in only two states. Now it’s legal in 48. State-sponsored gambling has become the most insidious and fundamentally unjust system of taxation used in this country, and families are the big losers.

Churches and dioceses often feel compelled to use bingo and other subtle forms of taxation because they’re looking for ways to make up for our own lack of generosity. Often the financial stability of the parish school—or even the parish itself—seemingly hangs in the balance. It seems that we can distinguish a Catholic Church from a Protestant church simply by looking at which advertises bingo night and which a Scripture verse. The widespread association of the Catholic Church with bingo is frequently experienced as a scandalizing, not evangelizing, phenomenon.

## Virtue and Vice

The two key virtues that apply to gambling are *temperance* and *justice*. The Catechism defines temperance as “the moral virtue that moderates the attraction of pleasures and provides balance in the use of created goods” (no. 1809). Temperance, also called “moderation” or “sobriety,” is frequently praised in Scripture, although not always by name. For example, St. Paul instructs Titus that we should “live sober, upright, and godly lives in this world” (Tit. 2:12).

Thus, when it comes to gambling, one must act moderately and not fall prey to the passion and excitement of the moment, which might lead him to wager an amount that is excessive for someone in his state in life.

The virtue of justice applies to both the game itself and to the participants. The game must be fair and free from all fraud or deception. The participants should only risk “disposable” income. In other words, at minimum, the money gambled should be viewed as a recreational expense that is not needed to meet one’s obligations to himself, his family, or his creditors.

Temperance and justice call for an examination of how one uses his time and resources. Even a wealthy, debt-free person needs to use moderation. Gambling ought not to be an occasion to excessively separate a parent from his or her family, even if the amount gambled is modest. And everyone should recognize that money

used on frivolous or excessive gambling can be put to better use, such as to help out those who are less fortunate. After all, as St. John Chrysostom said, “Not to enable the poor to share in our goods is to steal from them and deprive them of life.” (Catechism, no. 2446).

### **You Shall Not Steal**

The Catechism treats the subject of gambling in the section dealing with the Seventh Commandment (“You shall not steal”):

*Games of chance* (card games, etc.) or *wagers* are not in themselves contrary to justice. They become morally unacceptable when they deprive someone of what is necessary to provide for his needs and those of others. The passion for gambling risks becoming an enslavement. Unfair wagers and cheating at games constitute grave matter, unless the damage inflicted is so slight that the one who suffers it cannot reasonably consider it significant (no. 2413).

Thus the Church does not consider gambling to be necessarily sinful. It does, however, recognize the serious dangers in habitual or excessive gambling. For many people, especially those with a particular weakness in this area, games of chance are an occasion of sin. Perhaps that’s why St. Augustine once said, “The Devil invented gambling.”

### **Parish Bingo**

Gathering for a night of low-stakes bingo in the parish hall to socialize, enjoy a little excitement, and provide support for the parish is morally legitimate, both from the standpoint of the participant and from the standpoint of the parish that hosts the event.

However, since gambling can easily become a vicious habit, a parish or other church organization would be well advised to consider the following when it comes to sponsoring bingo:

**(a) *Promote virtue.*** There are many ways this can be done. For example, limit the amount that one can wager. Don’t serve alcoholic beverages. Create a friendly, Christian atmosphere. In short, do whatever can be done to promote the positive aspects of bingo (e.g., recreation, fellowship, etc.) while preventing, to the extent possible, its negative side effects.

**(b) *Avoid scandal.*** Many people are scandalized by the fact that many Catholic churches use bingo as a means of generating revenue. This sense of scandal not only affects many Catholics but also other Christians who tend to see gambling as evil. This problem could be considerably lessened if bingo is clearly presented to parishioners and to the public as being used to raise revenue for effective Christian ministries. The scandal is greater when bingo is perceived as a “Catholic institution” in itself, and where the parish does not seem to do much to spread the Gospel.

**(c) *Evangelize.*** All Catholics need to hear convincing, biblically sound teaching on tithing and generosity. Bingo may supplement this imperative, but not replace it. As for the non-Catholics or lapsed Catholics who are drawn to parish bingo looking for some “action,” reasonable efforts should be made not only to welcome the individual’s bingo money, but also the individual himself or herself. The fact that bingo is being played in a church building does not mean that people will soak in the Catholic faith through osmosis. In other words, if we are going to take their money, we should at least offer them faith in Jesus Christ, the most valuable prize there is (cf. Lk. 15:8-10; Phil. 3:13-15).

**(d) *Avoid enslavement.*** Parishes, and not just gambling addicts, can become enslaved by bingo, such that the parish may consider itself forced to keep bingo in order to keep its school or religious education program in operation. For those parishes that are willing and able to take this bold step, the new millennium, coming on the heels of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, offers a fitting occasion to experience liberation from the

slavery of bingo. This freedom could be a scary thing. It would present a new set of challenges and call for creative ideas to compensate for the loss of bingo revenue while providing new opportunities for Christian fellowship.

**(e) *Welcome other means of support.*** Even though parish bingo is not necessarily a sinful activity, some people are turned off by bingo and will not participate. Others simply may not have the time or interest. Still others may feel it is an occasion of sin for them and feel obliged to stay away. The parish should listen to the needs and concerns of these individuals and provide them alternative means of supporting the parish. Conversely, all Catholics are bound to assist with the needs of the Church (Code of Canon Law, canon 222), and should not use their distaste for parish bingo as a basis for not supporting the Church in other ways. Indeed, generosity is a fruit of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23) and a wellspring of renewal for the Church.

### **Giving with All Our Mite**

*Generosity* is the virtue directly opposed to selfishness, which is the refusal to give of ourselves. The choice to be generous—to give of ourselves to God and neighbor—is nothing less than charity lived out in concrete circumstances. Christ Himself, in word and deed, taught that such self-giving is at the heart of the abundant, Trinitarian life He has come to give us.

In this life, generosity involves sacrifice and even death. This is the test of faith—to give in the midst of suffering. Our society doesn't understand "sacrifice," and consequently we are prone to selfishness in all phases of our lives, including our relationship with the Church. We're a far cry from the Church of previous generations that was willing to build parishes, schools, and facilities with its own blood, sweat, and tears. If generosity literally means "full of giving life," then it's not a stretch to see that selfishness plays a significant role in what our Holy Father calls a "culture of death."

Let's look at ways that we can grow in generosity.

First, are we generous with God Himself? Is prayer a regular, vital part of our daily lives, or is it merely a weekly obligation or something we do only in times of need?

This sometimes apparent "waste" of time does not "change" God, but it does change *us* and is a source of profound blessing.

Second, are we generous in our support of the apostolate, putting our time, talents, and checkbook at the service of the Gospel? Do we tithe? Do we give our "first fruits" or our spare change? Do we give only out of our excess, or do we give whatever we can, like the widow in the Gospel (cf. Lk. 21:1-4)?

Third, are we generous to others? Are we generous with our family, especially with our spouse and children? Are we generous as married couples, opening our home to another child or perhaps a family member or even a stranger in need? Are we sensitive to the needs we see all around us, looking for the "hidden Jesus" in the poor or forgotten in our midst?

This generosity will go a long way toward reinvigorating our own lives of faith and will help build up the Church in our midst. Our Blessed Lord will not be outdone in generosity:

Bring the full tithes into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house; and thereby put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you and overflowing blessing (Mal. 3:10).

Let's put Him to the test.

**Last edited: 6/6/01**

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