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## **The False Eden of Gambling**

The proliferation of government-sponsored gambling in our society has become a significant concern both for our Catholic community and our society. With government backing, the implication seems to be given that what is legal is therefore moral. Governments and other gambling proponents argue that gambling provides significant benefits to society.

Obviously, they point out, people wish to gamble. It has become a form of entertainment, often, even if not always, innocuous. In meeting this desire of many people, the government argues that it can best regulate the provision of gambling services, treating the income as a form of 'voluntary taxation.' Furthermore, besides providing jobs, the monies raised are almost always earmarked either for 'charitable causes' or general government expenses. And finally, if there are people who become addicted to gambling, then part of the proceeds can be put aside to treat the addiction problem.

This burgeoning fact of modern society deserves a commentary based on our Christian faith.

Traditionally, gambling has been looked upon with great suspicion in the Christian community. Marriages and families have been hurt or destroyed by compulsive gambling. The 'fantasy' motivation of entering the lap of luxury through winning is suspect. And the use of time and money in ways that hardly model Christian virtue and character suggest that the practice reflects neither Gospel values nor Christian inspiration.

Nonetheless, the Catholic tradition has never simply condemned gambling as such. Our own history in Alberta provides ample evidence of the use of gambling to raise funds for everything from the construction of churches to charitable works. While most of this practice has been associated with the involvement of local communities in such things as raffles, bingo and draws, the presence and fact of gambling has not been lost in the public perception.

"Games of chance or wagers," says *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* 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."(2413) The Catechism, of course, does not address the more profound questions associated with

an elaborate system of gambling.

Despite our history, there has also remained a deeper unease with compulsive gambling, ruinous gambling, and any gambling which detours the essentials of life, such as grocery money, away from their responsible use. This unease has at times in other Christian communities led to an understandable, complete moral condemnation of gambling in all forms.

Following our Catholic tradition, it seems important for the Bishops of Alberta to offer a more nuanced moral judgment of gambling and to issue a Gospel challenge to all Christians in the face of the increasing opportunities to gamble in our society.

### **The Morality of Gambling**

The 'harmless' entertainment of gambling can simply be immoral if the necessities of family life are sacrificed. These necessities are not simply monetary. When gambling steals time and attention from spouse, children and family responsibilities, it is immoral.

Gambling, of course, can also become an addiction. While the mechanisms of who gets addicted are not always clearly understood, it is estimated that between three and five percent of gamblers will have a serious problem beyond their ability to control. A simplistic solution to this problem would be to suggest that anyone in danger of an addiction avoid gambling completely.

Since this problem usually surfaces after recreational gambling or at the end of long-term gambling, recognition and remedies must become more than the responsibility of the individual gambler. Programs to deal with the admitted gambler need to be complemented by efforts to identify and aid the compulsive gambler before disaster takes over.

To associate all the evils of gambling with personal choice is to overlook the complicity of a system that needs gamblers in order to flourish. Thus, a major portion of an ethical response to gambling must come from a challenge to those who control the trade.

- First, problem gamblers need to be identified within the system and assisted before they 'hit bottom'.
- Second, those who are addicted need sufficient resources to help them.
- Third, those who commit crimes, especially theft, in order to feed a suddenly uncontrolled gambling habit should not be the only ones blamed for their crimes or be held solely responsible for restitution. When institutions are all-too-willing to take all the money a gambler throws away, ignoring the problems caused is not acceptable.

- Fourth, anything that contributes significantly to addictive forms of gambling - and video lottery terminals, which are proven to add the addictive power of television to that of gambling, must be mentioned here - should be banned or substantially altered in order to diminish the addictive power.
- Finally, if gambling is to be a personal choice, governments ought to restrict all promotion that serves to create a need as opposed to advertising services. One need only look at the glitter associated with gambling to recognize the temptation to make gambling a self-serving, 'growth' business.

Governments need an ethical perspective on their involvement in gambling.

First, studies ought to be done on where money that goes to gambling comes from; in other words, is this really disposable income or are such things as essential family needs or charitable donations or support for productive business being forfeited in favour of the easier, but less value-added dollar.

Second, as the major receivers of gambling monies, governments must take the responsibility for programs to aid addicts and to deter addictions. They also need to avoid seeing gambling as a cash cow to be milked for ever-increasing monies as pressure is liable to move gambling beyond entertainment.

### **A Christian Vision**

If gambling is not to be decried as intrinsically evil, and if governments seem to think it is necessary to the economy, how should the Christian respond to this phenomenon? To begin with, a negative attitude of 'not doing anything wrong or harmful' is scarcely adequate as a Gospel-based response. Of course, the Christian should avoid misuse or abuse of funds for gambling. However, the idea that gambling is simple entertainment needs to be challenged as well, for the involvement is often not simple.

An intrinsic part of the Christian tradition regards the monies available for gambling as the monies of the poor. That is to say, if those who gamble are wealthy enough to put money into games of chance, then a glance at Jesus' teaching in the Gospels suggests that they use the money to help the poor. The same could be said for much of the money and time most of us spend on various entertainments, so this is a meditation for all who have what is euphemistically referred to as 'disposable income.'

One might argue that the good causes to which wagered money is contributed fulfills this Christian challenge, as is often the case in local or community fund-raising events that use gambling. Many people do take advantage of such opportunities to donate to a good cause. However, when one participates in more serious 'gambling for

entertainment', it becomes important to examine one's motivations.

Donating to a good cause can often be completely lost track of in the thrill of gambling, in the escape from responsibility, in the almost anti-social atmosphere of commerce with a machine for hours. If there is money for gambling, perhaps we have simply not looked seriously enough at the gift of extra monies that God has given us to be used for good purposes. And if there is time for gambling, perhaps we need to look at whether we are allowing boredom to push us not into concern for others but the bright lights and action that will fill our hours for a price. The Christian challenge in the face of gambling is not to stop with a moral evaluation. Rather it is to look into the face and heart of Christ and see how Love motivates us to love our neighbour. Perhaps we cannot make this demand of governments, although if the poor are neglected because of gambling, then we must all raise our voices to demand at least a morally responsible control.

However, as Christians we can examine our own actions regarding gambling. And we can continue to look out for those who are harmed by gambling. And we can lobby that gambling is not allowed to harm communities and neighbourhoods. And we can preach and live the Word that ought to make gambling irrelevant in our lives. And we can live the hope of our faith that unmasks the false hope of greed.

We are the Body of Christ, living and carrying out His Will in our world. How Christ might respond in our place ought to be a constant reminder that we are standing, by His grace, in His place.

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