

TOWARDS A THEOLOGY OF TEMPERANCE

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THE THEOLOGIAN IS *par excellence* the wise man among men; for it pertains to the wise man to judge and order things according to their ultimate causes, and the theologian orders all created things to their highest and absolutely Ultimate Cause, which is God. It might seem a bit incongruous, even indecorous, for sacred doctrine to concern itself with such gross and unspiritual things as the appetites of man, and the objects which attract and allure these appetites. Yet by these same powers, these forces and faculties within his being, man is led either closer to or farther away from God. Such significant elements in human nature must not be overlooked by the theologian: but his view of them is unique, it is uncompromising, in a sense it is final, and to perhaps most men in our savage age, it is not a little baffling.

An outstanding commentator on the *Summa Theologiae* of St. Thomas Aquinas remarked that, had our first parents not sinned, there would be no drunkenness in the world, for there should have been no ignorance, error, or ungoverned passion among us. Men would, in all probability, have set about fermenting the grape, mashing and mixing hops, barley, and all the rest, and obtained quite excellent results in the course of centuries, not to say quite invigorating and stimulating results. Let us avoid the half-humorous tone however; because man is in truth, the unhappy heir to all the debts, defects, and annoyances of original sin. The grape is sweet enough, no doubt, but poor human nature is decidedly sour in spots. Indeed many men are decidedly over-soured, in their estimation of and craving for intoxicating liquor, certainly from a theological viewpoint. For, unfortunately, strong drink has the power to overcome the senses, depress the nervous system, and befuddle the brain to such an extent that the use of reason is, at least for a time, violently dislodged. That men get drunk at all, then, is possible because of original sin—as well as because of each man's personal sins, whatever they may be. Man's lower appetites are no longer, since the Fall, of themselves and invariably subject to the wise direction of reason. Man's internal unity and perfect personal harmony have been lost, scattered by the chaotic and disruptive force of sin.

Now sin is certainly the theologian's business; that is, it pertains to the theologian to investigate and examine the nature and causes of sin, as well as its remedies. Sin itself consists in a refusal, the most terrible of refusals: the deliberate refusal to follow the dictates of right reason. Right reason tells us invariably what is good for us, or rather, what is best for us. In one sense the two are the same, but we often have a difficult time agreeing that, for example, not touching that extra Martini is the only thing to do, and not merely better for us. Hence the importance of keeping our wits about us, for without them we are unable to recognize what is right and what is wrong. True enough, we lack this ability while we are sleeping, but there is no harm under this circumstance, for we are also unable to perform any human act, good or bad.

This is not the case with the man who has allowed himself to become inebriated. He is quite frequently only too ready and anxious to be up and about. Others may be at hand with evil suggestions and enticements. And basically, at the very essence of his intoxication, is the willful and violent loss of his most precious faculty, reason, laying him prey to these and other evils. Shall we consider the harm done to his health, the consequent economic and social repercussions his over-indulgence and that of thousands of others is gradually inducing? All of this is against reason: it is bestial at heart, as well as in its obvious manifestation. Much is being written in our day lamenting these blows at the common welfare. A good deal of present day thought and expression on the subject is mostly trite: ranging from the slushily sentimental to the statistically severe. There is a strange coldness over it. No love, no real personal concern. Very little sensible morality. The fact of insobriety is a national scandal, yet there is not one word about the fact that insobriety is a vice, an affront to reason, an offense against God.

This may be an exaggeration. Father John Ford, S.J., for one, has been studying the problem of alcoholism for a number of years. He has worked closely with Alcoholics Anonymous, and has integrated his observations of this type of work with the pertinent principles of Moral Theology. His book, *Depth Psychology, Morality, and Alcoholism* (Weston College, Weston, Mass. \$1.00) is an earnest, penetrating approach to several of the psychological and moral factors involved. There is, however, no complete, properly theological study of sobriety and its opposite, insobriety. St. Thomas Aquinas devoted two questions of the *Secunda Secundae* (qq. 149 and 150) to the virtue and the vice. Guided by the keen insight and accurate analysis of the Angelic Doctor, we may hope to make a start in the right di-

rection: to define, initially at least, the theological outlines of this pressing matter.

Because sobriety is a part of the virtue of Temperance, and because of the admitted difficulty of its attainment and practice, this special virtue, concerned with the reasonably moderate use of alcoholic beverages, has appropriated to itself, in ordinary speech, the name of Temperance. We do not quibble over this restriction of a term, so long as the whole truth of the matter be not overlooked or denied. There is more to Temperance, understood as the classic philosophers and theologians accepted the word, than moderation in the desire for and the consumption of strong drink. The teetotaler may be a rank libertine or a consummate glutton (and, incidentally, the teetotaler may not be truly sober in the moral sense of the word, at all). Of inebriating drink St. Thomas has two things to say: its moderate or measured use is extremely beneficial, while even slight excess may be extremely harmful. The use of alcohol can be a great good for man: hence its reasonable consumption is always attributable to a virtue. Did you ever think there was virtue at work (or should we say: at play) when you took that cooling highball? In fact there was probably more than one virtue involved: fraternal charity, and amiability, and eutrapelia or the virtue of good companionship might have played their bit. Why a virtue of sobriety at all? The answer is obvious: inebriating drink has a special force of its own for impeding the use of reason, which it does by disturbing the brain and other faculties. Now it is the office of moral virtue in general to preserve the good of reason against whatever might impede it; and where there exists a special impediment to reason's proper functioning there must of necessity be a particular virtue available to remove the impediment.

It is quite likely that ours is the first age in history to witness the appearance, vociferous and belligerent, of Prohibitionists, strictly so called. There were, it is true, heretical and usually fanatical groups in the early years of the Church who condemned wine as evil and a devil's brew. St. Augustine is rather scathing in his reference to these 4th century "drys." Actually they held that blasphemous doctrine that all matter is intrinsically evil, and so, quite logically, came out in opposition to wine, as gross in itself and a cause of further wallowing in matter. The position of Catholic teaching has always been at loggerheads with all forms of prohibitionism. "Wine taken with sobriety is equal life to men: if thou drink it moderately, thou shalt be sober. . . . Wine was created from the beginning to make men joyful, and not to make them drunk. Wine drunken with moderation is the joy of the soul and the heart. Sober drinking is health to soul and body"

(*Ecclus.* 31/32, 35-37). St. Paul recommends a little wine for the sake of health, while Our Blessed Lord Himself sanctified marriage at a banquet where wine was served and even supplied fresh and better wine by a miracle when the host's supply failed. Christ provided us with a universal guiding principle when he said that: "Not that which goeth into the mouth defileth a man" (*Matt.* 15/11). Alcoholic drink then, in and of itself, is not evil and its use is not morally illicit. This point is essential in the theology of Temperance: Wine, etc., is good in itself; when taken with moderation it is the matter of a virtue. This is what may be called the first and positive side of the theology of Temperance and Sobriety. There is, unhappily, another side to the picture.

When St. Thomas wrote his Commentary on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard, he said that insobriety, or just plain drunkenness, is not of its very nature, or by reason of its object, a mortal sin. He thought better of this opinion as he grew older, wiser, more experienced with life and its trials. Thus, in the *Summa*, written shortly before his death, he declared that the conscious, willful overindulgence in inebriating drink is a mortal sin. Even here, however, there is evidence of Thomas' sympathetic understanding of the weakness of human nature and the mitigating element of circumstance. Drunkenness *can* be venial, if the inebriate is aware only of his immoderation in consuming the liquor, but ignorant of the latter's power of stupefying him. For mortal sin the violent loss of the use of reason must ensue: and by this loss a man is unnaturally deprived of acting virtuously, besides laying himself open to serious temptation.

Insobriety is or can be seriously sinful; yet it is not the worst of sins. We can recall scenes of fervent, almost ecstatic zeal, in the twenties, when the more fanatical "drys" set about in earnest to detect and punish violators of the Volsted Act. We are not concerned here with the legal or juridical validity of this Act, but with the moral implications of its origin and purpose. In spite of the unwearying hue and cry of prohibitionists, drunkenness is by no means the vilest and most contemptible of sins. Certainly it is a scourge, to individuals, families, and society at large. Christian tradition is severe, and with good reason, in its indictment of the personal and social evils of insobriety; nor does St. Thomas himself fail to recognize and approve of this steadfast abhorrence. Drunkenness robs a man of a very precious human good, namely, the use of his reason. The divine good, however, is infinitely higher than any human or created good: and so sins which are directly against God are graver than insobriety, which is directly opposed to the good of human reason. The argument

here is based immediately on the nature and gravity of sin or moral evil: the greater the good of which sin deprives one, so much the graver is the sin.

St. Thomas acknowledges man's tremendous proneness to sins of the flesh, however, when he remarks that these sins are more frequently committed than others because the satisfactions and pleasures for which they are sought are, as it were, connatural to our state of being. When it is a question of the moral culpability or responsibility of acts committed while a man is drunk, his answer takes the form of an applied distinction: In the sin of insobriety two elements must be considered, the act of getting drunk and the defects of sense and reason which ensue. With regard to the latter element, insobriety may excuse from sin, in so far as what is done is done out of involuntary ignorance. If the act itself of becoming intoxicated is for some reason not sinful, then any subsequent act is completely inculpable. If the act of becoming intoxicated is sinful and culpably so, then one cannot be totally excused from any sinful acts which might follow while the subject is inebriated. His guilt of course may be lessened, just as the voluntariness of his actions is diminished. The general rule is this: sins committed while under the complete influence of alcohol are to be imputed in the manner and to the extent to which they *could* and *should* have been foreseen and provided against.

The question of moral responsibility may serve as an introduction to a cursory study and evaluation of the present day non-theological approach to the "problem of alcoholism." We have presented the theology of Temperance and Insobriety as virtue and a vice, respectively. Modern studies and treatment of the matter at hand are confined almost exclusively to the fact of drunkenness—alcoholism as it is called—and this is regarded, not as a moral evil, but as some unfortunate affliction which may be classified quite readily as a disease, which probably has a physiological basis and certainly includes a compulsion of mind. This past summer, courses were conducted at three leading secular universities, studying alcoholism as a type of illness, explaining why "alcoholics usually show a marked deficiency in B vitamins," showing how to inform the child of an inebriate father or mother that his parent is "the unfortunate victim of a disease similar to that of diabetes; that these people drink too much because they have not yet learned that they have an ailment which can be helped." The youngster is to be told "the simple facts about alcoholism—that is the combined effect of wrong thinking plus a body chemistry which does not tolerate alcohol."

Are modern physiological and psychological efforts dealing with

the same subject matter that we spoke of in the first half of this article? Do the proponents of such methods even speak the same language as the theologians? Consider again the three basic elements in the theological essence of insobriety: 1) voluntary excess in inebriating drink; 2) even to the violent loss of reason; 3) from an inordinate desire of the inebriating drink. The first element insists on the voluntariness of the sin of insobriety. Yet the reality of this freedom and deliberation is largely denied and ridiculed by many modern psychologists and sociologists. The denial is based chiefly on alleged discoveries of the Freudian school, or of schools derived from the Freudian (although proponents of this denial not infrequently disclaim any affinity to Freudianism). The fundamental rebuttal to this charge of moral irresponsibility may be found in a close attack upon the very nature of the methods used by defenders of this charge. Surely we can hope to find out more about the freedom and moral responsibility of man from the careful testimony of his own consciousness before, during, and after his deliberate acts than we can from an analyst with Freudian presuppositions who explores the quicksand of his unconscious mind. Certainly some insights have come to us from the psychologists of the unconscious, from depth psychology. But human freedom and inevitably human responsibility have by no means been destroyed or eliminated by those insights. Man is morally free and morally responsible in the normal exercise of his normal faculties. For every deliberate, which is to say moral, act of his life, he is eternally accountable to Almighty God. This must be realized and properly averted to; this however is not to deny that certain forms of alcoholism may in fact have taken on aspects of pathological disease. The theologian bases his critique of the morality and imputability of the use of alcohol on the honest and uncolored testimony of the normal man reflecting on his own deliberate acts. We may and must admit a distinction between the man who gets drunk or becomes intoxicated, even habitually, but who *can* stop this getting drunk merely by a firm resolution, and the truly pathological alcoholic, the excessive drinker who gets into serious difficulty with his drinking and who generally cannot stop drinking, even if he wants to, without outside help. Whether or not the latter individual was initially responsible for sinking into this sad state is another question—it reverts to our previous consideration of the “ordinary” drunkard. The inveterate alcoholic definitely requires medical care as well as psychological assistance, and moral and religious help. He is the man who “cannot live with alcohol and cannot live without it.” He can neither take it with impunity nor leave it alone without aid and encourage-

ment. Indulgence in alcoholic beverages, for whatever reason it was first undertaken, has degenerated into addiction, and with addiction has come compulsion. With him therefore, there is a new problem of responsibility. It is no longer the problem of mere drunkenness and its morality; it is the problem of the morality of alcoholism. How far is the alcoholic responsible for his drunkenness and for the things which he does while he is drinking? We shall not attempt to answer this question with exactitude. There is a point, however, that has been ignored or missed entirely by the many psychologists and psychiatrists who have studied the problem of addiction. Alcoholism is a sickness of the soul and the remedy for it which has thus far proved most effective is a spiritual remedy, the program of Alcoholics Anonymous. We do not intend to pass blanket approval of the over-all aims of this organization; nor is it possible here to outline in detail those aims. It is true, nevertheless, that no other organization has been as effective in large scale rehabilitation as has Alcoholics Anonymous. Its tools of rehabilitation, the Twelve Steps, are admittedly a program of moral and spiritual regeneration, a program of self-discipline and asceticism. This much at least the Catholic theologian must approve and admire. We must not forget that the average alcoholic is sick in body, mind, and soul. He needs help and above all the encouragement of patience and charity. His responsibility for drinking is generally diminished to a considerable extent, and sometimes eliminated, but each alcoholic, each drinking episode, and even each act of drinking must be judged separately. The judgment must be made in each case in the light of the alcoholic's condition of body, mind, and soul; but the honest and enlightened testimony of his own conscience is the best criterion we have of his responsibility. Since his condition and his craving are pathological we should tend to be lenient in assessing the subjective moral responsibility; and in the final analysis, the judgment must be left to a merciful God.

This is not the approach of the modern pagan psychologists and sociologists. This is the judgment of Christian theology on a grave moral problem of our day. Theology, supreme human wisdom, orders and judges all things created in relation to God, Creator, Redeemer, and Judge of the world. In point of fact men are faced, almost daily, with the necessity of forming their judgment on this and countless other moral questions. Sobriety is but one of the several parts or subordinate species of the general virtue of Temperance. We have tried to indicate, in terse and rather informal outline, the guiding norms and directive principles of the theology of this virtue and of in-sobriety, the vice opposed to it.

At the present time the national ratio of alcoholism is almost 4% of the population over twenty years of age. The theologian, much less the priest, religious, and lay apostle dedicated to the Christianization of secular life, cannot afford to be hazy in his notion of the elements involved in this pressing problem, especially the theological elements. Above all, let him remember that alcohol is good in itself; if it were not so good, so beneficial for man, men would in all likelihood leave it alone. It was not meant to be left alone, save for a good reason. Neither was it meant to be used, save for a good reason and in the right way: which means, ultimately, for the love of God.