

Our struggles with alcohol

One hundred and fifty years ago, in 1856, Father Theobald Mathew passed away after a life dedicated to tackling the problems caused by the excessive use of alcohol. His founding 'The Temperance Movement' was to cause a huge shift away from excessive drinking in Ireland at the time. Fr James Cullen, founder of The Pioneer Total Abstinence Association in 1898, acknowledged his debt to Fr Mathew, whom he described as the 'giant at his shoulder'. They both influenced The Venerable Matt Talbot, who today is a source of encouragement and hope to those who find themselves addicted to alcohol.

Ireland in the twenty-first century is a land of contrasting fortunes. We find ourselves, in a relatively short period of time, as one of the wealthiest nations in Europe. The economy has grown at a rate we never expected. There are jobs for our young people, and no longer is emigration the scourge it was for previous generations. The Government finances have improved dramatically, and as a result wealth can be redistributed for the greater benefit of society. There is no doubt that our new wealth has brought enormous benefits.

Materially, the majority of us have never been better off. We are rightly proud of the success that modern Ireland has become. However, there are new



stresses arising from the fact that very often both parents in a family are working outside the home and commuting, while the pressure to perform in the workplace is even greater. We struggle to retain the many worthwhile values learned from less pressurised times.

Our struggle with alcohol continues too. We still have Pioneers and others among us who, for a variety of motives, remain as total abstainers. We have others who drink in moderation and who find no difficulty in remaining moderate. We have others – perhaps a large proportion of us – with an ambivalent relationship with alcohol, struggling to keep a cap on our consumption, slow to say 'no' to an opportunity for drinking, yet uneasy about

the pattern or the frequency of our use of alcohol. Finally, we have those with a love-hate relationship with alcohol, for whom moderation is much wished for but rarely attained, whose use of alcohol is a roller-coaster with great expectations and even greater regrets.

Two sides of alcohol

Saint John tells us in the Gospel that the first miracle of Jesus was at Cana, where he turned several gallons of water into wine – and the best of wine at that – to save the blushes of the wedding hosts and to bring joy to the wedding feast.

Unfortunately, alcohol can also become destructive and anything but life-giving. We still use it to celebrate special occasions and it has become more and more common in our homes and on our dinner tables. Over a ten-year period, Irish people's overall consumption of alcohol has increased by 40 per cent, at a time when other countries in Europe are reducing their alcohol intake. Garda statistics arising from random breath-testing of drivers, indicate that thousands of drivers, continue to take the unacceptable risk of driving while under the influence of drink, and addiction counsellors can bear witness to the unhappiness in families where the unmanageability of addiction has taken root.

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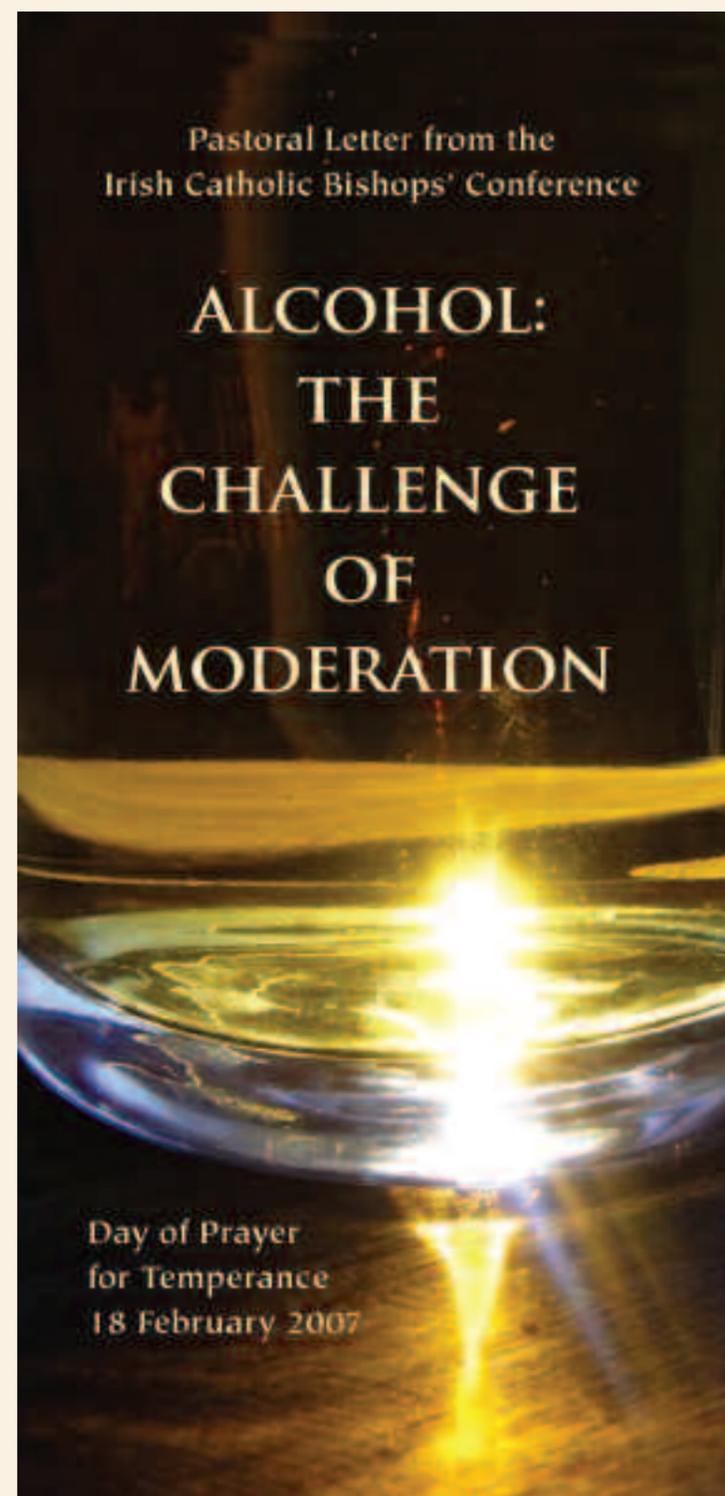
- We commend the many adults and young people who have chosen to remain abstinent from alcohol until 18 years old or for life.
- We encourage people who feel that for them alcohol has become a problem and decide to seek professional help from treatment centres, local health services or support groups in their local community.
- We commend all the good work which is done by support groups around the country and the many parishes and communities that provide meeting rooms and services for such groups.

What a great legacy and gift it would be for our children in this new emerging country of ours if we would be the generation brave enough to promote and work for an attitude and culture of moderation rather than excess in our use of alcohol.

If we could promote abstinence or moderation and create attitudes towards alcohol use that are conducive to a better and healthier way of life, then indeed we would be leaving a wonderful inheritance to future generations.

Practical Suggestions

- Refrain from alcohol for the weeks of Lent.
- Consider drinking non-alcoholic drinks when out with friends at the weekend.
- Reduce the intake of alcohol from what is your normal use.
- Encourage your friends to reduce alcohol intake.
- Donate some of the money saved from alcohol to a charity of your choice.
- Encourage discussion with your friends about the dangers of excessive drinking.
- Initiate a discussion in the home about the family's attitude to and use of alcohol.
- Nationally, we might encourage people to reduce their alcohol use, say by one-third or a half, during the weeks of Lent.





The challenge of alcohol

What response can we make to ensure that moderate drinking remains moderate and does not get out of hand? And what response can we make to those whose lives have already become unmanageable as a result of alcohol? The unmanageability, we know, is felt not only by the drinker, but by their family and friends and sometimes by work colleagues.

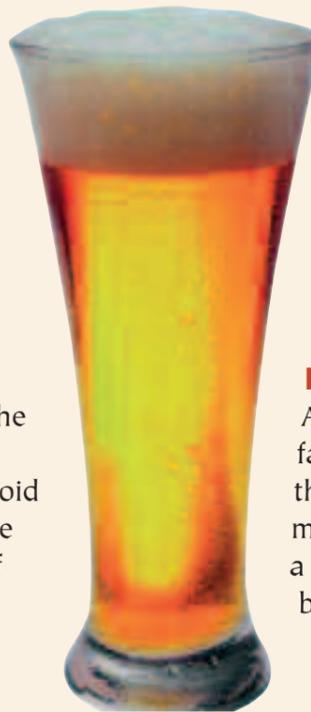
Around 1935, just half-way between the death of Father Mathew and the present day, Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) was founded in America by a group of people who had achieved sobriety after many years of chaotic drinking. One of these, a man named Bill, wrote the Big Book, as it is called, which captures the wisdom of those early members.

Although people achieve sobriety in many ways, AA remains the greatest route to recovery for people who have become dependent on alcohol.

AA has lessons for all of us. One of its crucial beliefs is that of a 'higher power'. As alcoholics, the early members found that their own willpower was inadequate to resist the temptation of alcohol. Time and again they had made resolutions to curb their drinking and, time and again, they had failed. It was only when they asked for help and support from a greater power that their path to recovery commenced.

Carl Jung, a psychoanalyst who had a strong Christian faith, in a letter to Bill wrote about how the belief in a higher power had helped alcoholics where psychoanalysis had failed, describing the action of the Holy Spirit as 'Spiritus contra spiritum', the Spirit overcoming the spirit of alcohol.

Alcohol confronts us with our own frailty and weakness. Even those who are not addicted need the support of a higher power in the journey through life if we are to avoid the perils of addiction. We need the support of friends, of family and of God. Indeed, there may be people around us who need our support. The love and support of God is



mediated through people just like us when we reach out to others, bringing God's love and care into our world.

There is a plaque which has been reproduced and which hangs on the wall in many treatment centres for addictions. It reads: 'You alone can do it, but you cannot do it alone.' This reminds us to accept that our willpower is not almighty and that, although 'the spirit is willing, the flesh is weak' (Matthew 26:41). It reminds us that, in our efforts to use alcohol and the other gifts of God in moderation, we need to ask for support from each other and

from God. It reminds us, too, that we may be the vital link that another person needs when they are searching for support from AA or from a treatment service or counsellor. While we may not have the time or energy or expertise to help them, we may be able to refer them to where they can get the support they need.

Responding to the challenge

Alcohol, then, forces us to face two facts of life. One is our vulnerability; the other is that as humans, and as members of God's Church, we are in a community together. We are social beings; we need each other, and we need to be sustained and nourished by a power greater than ourselves.

What does this mean in practice?

First, we must accept that 'more is not always better'. Moderation is good news for health, relationships, for personal expenses and, most importantly, it is good for the human spirit. It brings satisfaction and a sense of well-being.

Second, we need the humility to receive support from others. We should not be shy to express our concerns about 'the drink' and to share our belief in the value of moderation. We can then give and receive support with others of like mind.

Third, we can support the efforts of the State to promote moderation, for instance in tackling the problem of 'driving under the influence'. We can take our turn, without begrudgery, as the designated driver for others, and we can look on these legislative moves as a form of social support.

Fourth, we can give and receive good example. Young people aspire to many of the behaviours of adults; but young people can also inspire adults. For example, young people have grown up with a stricter code regarding not drinking and driving than their parents' group.



The State has an important role to play in responding to the challenge. Those who have experienced the misuse of alcohol (or other drugs) in their home know the heartbreak it brings. Family intervention skills and immediate access to treatment and recovery centres ought to be a priority, and could easily be funded from the revenue obtained through the drinks industry. The benefits would in time yield a huge dividend in restoring human dignity as well as deriving economic benefits.

But we cannot leave it all to the State. Legislation certainly influences behaviour, and we are calling for a change of attitude that is not dependent on the law, but which could influence our culture. For example, one simple idea might be that everyone who drinks reduces his or her consumption by one-third and assesses the difference this makes after three months. Imagine if all the communications media invited their audiences to undertake this experiment and then discussed and evaluated people's experiences, and also suggested other imaginative

initiatives. Such a debate would lift us out of denial and enable us to address honestly the challenge we face.

Many people decide to observe temperance during Lent, in the spirit of giving up in order to become better people. Should people decide to make giving up alcohol part of their Lenten fast and abstinence, the freedom and extra resources they experience could be channelled into helping others in need at home and in the third world. Prayer often motivates us to want to make sacrifices, and ongoing prayer linked closely to life can help us to see that making sacrifices is a positive force, not just arid self-denial.

Churches too have a role to play. One recovering alcoholic said, 'the real ministry takes place at the back of the church' – meaning the AA meetings which she found so useful and which took place in a room near the sacristy. The Irish Bishops' Drugs and Alcohol Initiative (IBDAI) at the Columba Centre, Maynooth, Co. Kildare, is a pilot project that supports parishes and Parish Councils in preventing drug and alcohol problems in their communities. The IBDAI will welcome suggestions as to how moderation can be promoted at local parish level. We owe it to this generation and the next to find a way which is not destructive or harmful, to enjoy alcohol as a gift from God.