

“KEEP OFF THE GRASS!”: THE MORALITY OF MARIJUANA USE

“If you promise never to smoke until you are an adult, I’ll give you \$250.” I couldn’t believe my ears. For a 7-year-old, that is a boatload of money— the equivalent of **\$1,920** today! Was my mother joking? Did she think I’d forget? Fast forward eleven years and I **confronted her** on my birthday— “Show me the money!” Okay, **Moneyball** didn’t debut until 2011, but it’s a great line! I reminded her of her promise. She replied, “When I made the wager (1970), the adult age was **21**; you’ll have to wait three more years.” As the 26th amendment to the Constitution took effect here on March 23, 1971, she was **technically** correct. I cited the *spirit* of her wager; nonetheless, I demurred. And then, as summer vacation was fading before my final year in the college seminary, I found an envelope waiting at my place the morning of my 21st birthday breakfast? A note with two crisp “C-notes” (I love Roman numerals) and \$50. She remembered!

Funny thing, by then, it was no longer about the **money**. I had **no desire** to smoke; nothing has changed since. When opining about matters related to smoking, I’ll readily admit my **bias**. While I can conceive of the pleasure in smoking a cigar and even find the aroma pleasing, I can’t say the same about cigarettes! But this column concerns a **growing** (pun intended) pastime, the use of **recreational marijuana**. With many states already having legalized it, and Minnesota appearing to be headed in that direction, the Church’s **guidance** on this is needed. The Church must be **nimble** enough to **respond** to **issues of the day** in a timely manner. There are two issues before us: **recreational** marijuana and **medical** use. From a moral perspective, each should be evaluated separately as the intentions are largely distinct. Medical marijuana research produces conflicting conclusions. Some cancer patients defend its use saying it and it alone has enabled them to manage their severe pain.

About half of all American adults consume alcohol, while fewer than 15% smoke marijuana. While I claim **zero credibility** on matters of epidemiology or the dynamics of addiction, it seems self-evident that one can drink **without** getting **drunk**. Many adults regularly **limit** themselves to a beer or glass of wine or two. At least historically, most people consume alcohol long after they stop using cannabis. I suspect they outgrew it. Marijuana contains a mind-altering chemical called **tetrahydrocannabinol**. Try to pronounce (or spell) that one! It is typically referred to as THC and is now available in edible **gummies**. I’ve seen placards in neighborhood health food store windows in the Macalester-Groveland neighborhood advertising “carefully curated CBD, THC, and Delta 8 options.” Delta 9 is the more potent product found in states where recreational use is legal. Nevertheless, both delta-8 THC and delta-9 THC can produce **intoxicating** effects, known as a “high.” Edibles take **longer** to kick in, but their **effects** may be felt for many hours.

To me a fundamental **distinction** exists between products that **may** alter one’s mind and those that **do** cause it to be altered. Studies show that the regular use of marijuana leads many to experience trouble thinking, paying attention, or making good decisions. Producers of THC gummies tout their health benefits for a wide variety of diseases or medical disorders, such as cancer, multiple sclerosis, chronic pain, nausea and anxiety, even though the FDA has neither evaluated nor approved these claims. There are simply **no** FDA-approved drugs containing delta-8 THC. Does the Church **forbid** the use of marijuana? For starters, I would proffer a moral distinction between recreational and medicinal use. The Catechism of the Catholic Church states, “The *use of drugs* inflicts very grave damage on human health and life. Their use, except on strictly therapeutic grounds, is a grave offense” (para. #2291). Can you smoke pot **without** getting high?

Under the **Controlled Substances Act**, marijuana is listed as a **Schedule I** substance, indicating a high **potential** for **abuse**. Ten years ago last month, Colorado voters approved Amendment 64 legalizing the use and possession of cannabis for recreational purposes. It is now a \$2 billion industry. In Colorado, since legalization, the percentage of all Colorado traffic deaths involving drivers who tested positive for marijuana **increased from 11% in 2013 to 20% in 2020**. Marijuana use for ages 12 and older **increased 26%** and is **61%** higher than the national average; traffic deaths where drivers tested positive for marijuana **increased 138%** while all Colorado traffic deaths **increased 29%**. See the September 2021 report from HIDTA [here](#). In short, legalization leads to increased use, both of marijuana and alcohol.

St. Paul taught in 1 Cor. 6:19: “Do you not know that your body is a **temple** of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own?” Our **physical health** is a **gift** that we ought to preserve, both for our own benefit and for the benefit of others. We must first address the **reasons** why people feel a need to use recreational marijuana. What effect is sought, what need is being fulfilled. Until we know that with greater clarity, it is difficult to address the underlying issues. The simple answer is “having fun” or “relaxing” at the end of a long work or school week. But could it just as easily be that someone is trying to **forget** about their problems, to **distract** themselves from their responsibilities? If so, these factors must be addressed. Gov. Walz has signaled his intention to sign a legalization bill in 2023.

- In a sermon (118,1) on John’s Prologue, St. Augustine asserts, “Believe, so that you may understand.” (*Crede, ut intellegas*). Knowledge is **never the enemy** of truth, nor is science the antithesis of faith. When embracing one, we do not thumb our noses at the other.
- **Four centuries** have passed since Pope Gregory XV founded the Congregation for the **Propagation of the Faith** in 1622 to foster missionary activity. The world was expanding rapidly with exploration and hitherto, Spain and Portugal had written the rules. Now, the Church needed to be more directly involved in assuring the missions were managed ethically.
- On December 12, 1901, Italian physicist Guglielmo **Marconi** sent the first radio transmission 2000 miles across the Atlantic Ocean from Cornwall, England, to St. John’s, Newfoundland. Thirty years later in 1931, he helped to inaugurate Vatican Radio, still running after **more than 90** years.
- Have you noticed the added touches to the sanctuary each Sunday of Advent? We are progressively moving towards the great celebration, and **you can help** by donating to our **Christmas Flower Fund**. Envelopes are in the pews; write down the name of loved ones in whose honor you are donating.
- As a baseball fan, I’m thrilled the **Gophers** will be playing in Yankee Stadium. But for football? And at 1:00 p.m. on Thursday, Dec. 29? Yep– at the “Pinstripe Bowl” vs. Syracuse. It is one of **39 Bowl** games, **not including** the playoff of the top four teams. Oy vey!

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,
Rector