

What does the Church teach about sports gambling?

The Super Bowl in February and the NCAA Tournament in March are about more than just who wins or loses on the football field or basketball court. Over the course of these and other sporting events, hundreds of millions of dollars change hands through wagers on winners, losers, point spreads and any number of so-called “prop” bets – wagering on such things as which team wins the coin toss, who scores the first touchdown, or makes the first quarterback sack, or hits the first three-point shot. Indeed, many people watch the games less for the entertainment value of watching the athletes than for the adrenaline of placing bets on the outcomes. Rooting interest is based on wagering rather than school or team spirit.

While this betting was once limited to a couple of states (or waged illegally), recent states’ laws have made legal sports wagering far more accessible. Online sports betting through downloadable phone apps has dramatically increased the number of wagers, as well as the dollar amounts that change hands. In-person sports betting is now legal in almost half the states. Some 20 states now permit mobile betting to one degree or other. Betting lines from various gambling sites are now integrated into pre-game shows, mid-game updates and post-game analysis. And the amounts of money in question are massive. An estimated \$300 million was bet on the 2021 Super Bowl alone. Since the U.S. Supreme Court struck down federal bans on sports betting in 2018, some \$100 billion has been wagered legally on all sports.

All of which raises an important question for the Catholic: Is any of this morally acceptable? Can a Catholic licitly gamble on the outcome of sporting events (or various occurrences within the events)? And if so, what are the limits to such activity?

This is the kind of question that doesn't yield an easy "yes" or "no" answer. The question of the relative moral status of gambling is a highly contingent one, requiring the application of principles of Catholic moral life to a variety of different scenarios, yielding varying answers. And these answers fall along a continuum, rather than on one side or the other of a bright line. Rather than asking if it's good or evil, we must ask whether (and if so, how) sports wagering can be part of a moral life ordered toward the good.

The Church does not consider gambling to be intrinsically immoral. The Catechism of the Catholic Church says, in part: "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" (No. 2413). This means that it is possible for sports wagering to be consistent with the good; but it is not necessarily so in every situation. And, the Catechism, cautions, "The passion for gambling risks becoming an enslavement."

Strictly as entertainment, it would be difficult to distinguish casual gambling (such as on the big game, series or horse race) from other kinds of entertainment spending such as ball games, a round of golf, amusement parks or similar innocent pastimes. It is permissible to spend disposable income on these amusements, consistent with principles of justice and charity. Indeed, such leisurely pursuits are an important aspect of a full life. The neurons that are fired by the thrill of the hole-in-one or the successful wager on the World Series do not seem to be morally distinguishable.

Of course, no money should be spent on such amusements if they deprive another of what is due. But that's true, for example, whether the money is spent on greens fees or a bet on the Kentucky Derby. (Of course, a bet is placed on the hope – but not realistic expectation – of a return. But for our purposes, we will assume that most bets are losers.) The axiom that one

should not bet more than one can afford to lose is probably not a high enough bar for Catholics. Rather, one should not bet more than is consistent with the good of the family and the broader common good. Again, that applies to any entertainment dollar, not just the one wagered on the outcome of March Madness.

Of course, this entire discussion must be bracketed by the problem of addiction. Gambling, like other stimulants, releases endorphins that give the risk-taker a feeling of exhilaration. For the vast majority of people, this is controllable. For those whom it is not, it is probably sinful to indulge at all. The analogy to drug or alcohol addiction is close, if not practically exact. It is not sinful, per se, to consume alcohol. But for the person who knows he is an alcoholic, it probably is. Put another way, for the nonaddict, both imbibing and betting can be ordered toward the good in certain circumstances; for the addict, neither ever can.

Finally, on an issue like this, the consciences of two Catholics may come to two different but equally valid conclusions. A Catholic may, in good conscience, believe that any gambling where it is pure chance is sinful because it is wasteful. Another might come to the opposite conclusion, based on the reasoning above. This is one of those not infrequent areas where the teaching of the Church might lead to different outcomes for two different people, based on the good-faith formation of the consciences of both. The Church does not condemn gambling; but neither does it condemn those who make a conscientious decision that they cannot gamble.

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