

Ask a Priest!
August 3, 2021

Question: Hey father so I was talking to my parents about it because I have heard many things. Anyway they said that they do not think underage drinking is a sin and they don't really have a problem with it once I reach senior year in high school (without their supervision with some of my friends) they said as long as I don't have hard alcohol, of course no drunkenness, and no driving after drinking. Do you believe this to be sin and if so does this mean any crime is a sin like speeding and j-walking?

Answer:

For starters, blessed are those who “shalt honor their father and mother”, as the 4th Commandment reminds us. Keep in mind, there is always the very subjective factor of an individual's own maturity in handling things with potential consequences or grave risks; not all of us share the same level of responsibility. That said, this commandment also applies to all legitimate authority. The question about so-called “under-aged” drinking is ultimately a question about respect for legitimate laws.

According to St. Thomas Aquinas, “laws framed by man are either just or unjust. If they be just, they have the power of binding in conscience” (ST I-II.Q 96.A 4). Now a law is said to be unjust when it is in direct contradiction to human reason or God's divine law. The current drinking age of 21 would not seem to be in contradiction to either of these things, so it should always be followed to the best of our ability—insofar as it remains the law of the land. It is important for us as Catholics to understand that, although having a couple of drinks at the age of 18 or 19 is not an intrinsic evil, we are always called to obey laws that are promulgated by the proper authority.

That being said, take a close look at **Louisiana's Law**, for example, where it is legal to drink under the age of 21 under certain circumstances:

[UNLAWFUL SALE, PURCHASE, AND POSSESSION OF ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGES](https://law.justia.com/codes/louisiana/2018/code-revisedstatutes/title-14/rs-14-93.10/)

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When taking all these things into consideration, if we find a legitimate law to be inconvenient for us, the next step might *not* be to encourage one another to arbitrarily break that law, but to follow legitimate means to change it. For example, perhaps additional clauses might be added to the law which allow for still other exceptional circumstances.

A noteworthy distinction: in many European countries, there is no drinking age and drinking is a cultural norm for everyone. In other areas, however, there may be a cultural

pressure not only towards “drinking”—which might be acceptable for anyone—but specifically towards “drunkenness” which is gravely immoral. We are never to intentionally forfeit the full use of our reason and will.

The Catholic Catechism offers additional ideas regarding citizenship and self-control:

No. 1898 says, “Every human community needs an authority to govern it. The foundation of such authority lies in human nature. It is necessary for the unity of the state. Its role is to ensure as far as possible the common good of the society.”

No. 1899 adds, “The authority required by the moral order derives from God: ‘Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore he who resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.’”

No. 2290 says, “The virtue of temperance disposes us to *avoid every kind of excess*: the abuse of food, alcohol, tobacco, or medicine. Those incur grave guilt who, by drunkenness or a love of speed, endanger their own and others’ safety on the road, at sea, or in the air.”

Additional references:

- Ascension press article:
<https://media.ascensionpress.com/2018/09/12/the-real-catholic-teaching-on-underage-drinking/>
- The following excerpt is taken from RC Spirituality:
https://rcspirituality.org/ask_a_priest/ask-a-priest-how-should-i-think-of-underage-drinking-on-campus/