



THE ARCHDIOCESE OF SAN FRANCISCO

OFFICE OF THE ARCHBISHOP

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High Uncertainty Plagues Marijuana Legalization Question

When the State of Washington legalized the recreational use of marijuana, traffic fatalities related to cannabis doubled. Emergency room visits have risen sharply in Colorado primarily among toddlers who consume marijuana edibles. And this spring, right here in San Francisco, 19 people went to the emergency room when they unknowingly ingested marijuana-laced candies during a celebration.

In California, Proposition 64 asks voters to follow the same path. As these two states have demonstrated, such a dramatic change will have radical consequences – some predictable and others unanticipated. Why would we want to legalize a substance with such potentially dangerous impacts, especially when we don't understand the full extent of those impacts?

Increased road fatalities alone should give us pause. Incredibly, California voters are being asked to allow the widespread use of marijuana despite the fact that, unlike alcohol, there is no reliable standard for measuring the effect marijuana has on a driver.

Drivers are well aware of the .08 Blood Alcohol Content (BAC) standard in the Golden State. Yet we still take chances and tell ourselves we are "OK" to drive.

Unfortunately, I am all too familiar with how easily we can fool ourselves, as four years ago I myself was found to be over the BAC standard at a sobriety checkpoint. While at the time I judged myself safe to drive, I recognize the wisdom of such a strict standard in order to avoid drivers endangering others and jeopardizing the precious gift of life and health entrusted to us by God. Temperance, the virtue which extols moderation and restraint, leads to healthy relations with others and care for our own health. Excessive use of almost any substance or overindulgence in any activity can damage our own health and the wellbeing of others.

In the case of marijuana, the effects are not fully understood and the proposed standards are arbitrary. Legalization of marijuana in California will have to be followed with years, if not decades, of education in temperance in its use, let alone the time needed for exact legal standards, which are currently completely lacking for marijuana, to be put into place.

According to a study by the *AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety*, traffic deaths doubled in Washington after legalization, in effect, increasing the chance that you or a loved one will be killed on the highway. In 2014, *one in six drivers* involved in a fatal accident had recently used marijuana. Colorado is seeing similar results. This study also found no objective basis for determining if a driver is impaired. THC, the active ingredient in marijuana, can stay in a person's system for extended periods. High levels might not indicate impairment so the testing may actually lead to convictions of *innocent* drivers. Conversely, a driver with relatively low levels of THC might actually be very impaired. Where is there justice in that?



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At the very least, this uncertainly should be a red flag to voters. It is enough of one for the California Highway Patrol to oppose Proposition 64. These men and women are the first-responders on our highways. They witness the fatalities on a daily basis. They know the cost our families and communities will pay.

There are many more reasons to question the wisdom of legalizing marijuana. It sends a message to children that drug use is acceptable. If you don't think teens will take up marijuana, look at the history of tobacco. It was "cool" to smoke until the dangers became all too apparent. It then took decades for the smoking rate to reach today's low levels. Will legalized marijuana follow that same pattern?

No one knows the answer to many of these troubling questions and that's why I am personally opposed to Proposition 64, and invite you to vote against it as well. The cost in lives is unacceptable. The parallels with other substances like tobacco are too striking. And the impact on our young people too uncertain.

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