

PASTORAL LETTER ON
“A RETURN TO CHRISTIAN STEWARDSHIP”
A RESPONSE TO THE ISSUE OF GAMBLING REVENUES
AND PARISHES IN THE EPARCHY OF EDMONTON

February 1, 2010

Dear Christian Faithful:

Glory be to Christ!

Introduction

The faithful often times seek guidance on the issue of gambling revenues and the Ukrainian Catholic Church. The question arises most directly in relation to their own parishes and parish organizations and applications for funding from casinos.

To respond to these queries, is helpful first to recall a Pastoral Letter issued by the Catholic Bishops of Alberta in 1998, “The False Eden of Gambling.” This document grounds us in the Catholic tradition regarding the morality of gambling.

Then it will be important to situate the question within the context of the Eparchy of Edmonton. To this end the Eparchy commissioned a study on the degree of dependency of Ukrainian Catholic parishes in Alberta on gambling revenues.

The results of the study are sobering – many parishes are addicted to gambling revenues as an ordinary means of sustaining their parish life.

But what to do?

One way forward is to re-embrace the Early Church’s practice Stewardship as a way of life.

The False Eden of Gambling

In January 1998, the Catholic Bishops of Alberta, including Bishop Lawrence Huculak, issued a Pastoral Letter on “The False Eden of Gambling” (copy attached).

The Pastoral Letter addresses the morality of gambling from a Christian point of view.

The letter quotes from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* stating that “Games of chance or wagers are not in themselves contrary to justice” (no. 2413). In other words, the Catholic tradition has never condemned gambling as such.

Indeed, historically the Catholic Church in Alberta has reverted to gambling – oftentimes in the form of raffles, bingos and draws, and most recently, casinos – in order to raise funds for such things as the construction of churches to charitable works. The practice, however, has not always met with the approval of all Catholics. Why?

In responding to this question, the Pastoral Letter draws again from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* which states that games of chance or wagers “become morally unacceptable when they deprive someone of what is necessary to provide for his or her needs and those of others” (no. 2413).

“Traditionally, gambling has been looked upon with great suspicion in the Christian community. Marriages and families have been hurt or destroyed by compulsive gambling. The “fantasy” motivation of entering the lap of luxury through winning is suspect. And the use of time and money in ways that hardly model Christian virtue and character suggest that the practice reflects neither Gospel values nor Christian inspiration” (Pastoral Letter, *The False Eden of Gambling*).

Unfortunately, many of us know individuals who have lost family and friends, home, a job, entire life savings, or even taken their own lives when gambling has turned from a means of entertainment to a problem out of control.

And for the rest of us, few are willing to admit how much he or she loses at a casino, the race track, VLT venues, bingo halls or on-line gambling websites. We forget that the House always wins. We only report our wins. We forget that gambling is a form of entertainment and not a way to make money.

It would do us well to educate ourselves on the ill effects of gambling on society in general and on our loved ones in particular.

Gaming Revenues and the Eparchy of Edmonton

To bring the reflection closer to home, what about the Ukrainian Catholic Church? To what degree is the Eparchy of Edmonton dependent upon gaming revenues?

In an attempt to answer that question, the Eparchial Finance Council undertook a study of the 88 Ukrainian Catholic parishes and missions throughout Alberta, focusing solely upon casino revenues for an eligible eighteen-month application period.

Of the 88 parishes and missions, 24 received casino revenue while 64 did not. Almost all large urban parishes conduct casinos on a regular basis.

During the period under study, Ukrainian Catholic parishes across Alberta received just over \$1.5 million casino revenue.

Of the 24 parishes, the casino revenue represented as a percentage of total parish revenue was:

- 4 parishes over 75% of total revenue;
- 6 parishes over 50% but less than 75% of total revenue;
- 7 parishes over 25% but less than 50% of total revenue;
- and 7 parishes under 25% of total revenue.

The major conclusions derived from the report are:

1. Casino revenue is a major source of funding for several parishes in the Eparchy of Edmonton.
2. The number of parishes requesting to include casino revenue in their future plans is increasing significantly.
3. For several parishes, casino revenue appears to be critical to their future financial stability if other sources of revenue are not pursued.

In other words, a significant number of Ukrainian Catholic parishes in Alberta – and these being the larger of the parishes – are addicted to gambling and rely heavily upon casino revenue for their survival.

A move to ban casino revenues immediately from the extraordinary means of financial support of these parishes would spell disaster for the life of the parish and the Ukrainian Catholic Church in Alberta.

But what to do?

The status quo is not acceptable. Most would agree that gambling revenues from its various sources is not an acceptable means of ordinary parish revenues and is incompatible with Christian values.

A solution? Stewardship – A Way of Life.

Christian Stewardship

What is Christian Stewardship?

Have you ever thought about how much God has gifted us? Most of us do not have to worry too much about having a roof over our heads, about putting food on the table, or about clothes on our back. Instead, we live in a time of abundance.

Others are less fortunate. They do not have the basic necessities of life that we so often take for granted.

Here is where we can make a difference in their lives.

God wants us who have plenty to share with others who are in need. The Kingdom of God in action.

This is what “stewardship” is all about. Being good “caretakers” of the gifts God has given us so that, when the time comes, he can use them to take care of others.

The possessions we have are not really ours to keep for an eternity. Anyone who has had a fire in their home knows how true this is. Or when we have lost a loved one in a fatal car accident. The same thing goes for anyone whose spouse or child is healthy one minute, sick the next.

Rather, God wants us to be stewards of our time, talent and treasure.

God has blessed us so that we can bless others in turn. And then when it is our turn, when we are in need, others can help us. This is the mission Christ entrusts to us.

An Example on Stewardship from Saint John Chrysostom

So what does stewardship have to do with the Church’s growing dependency on gambling revenues to finance its charitable work?

Well, let us take an example on stewardship from Saint John Chrysostom, one of the greatest preachers of the Early Church.

In his homily on the Gospel of Matthew, Saint John Chrysostom asks us the question at the root of our faith, we who profess ourselves to be followers of Christ: “Do you wish to honour the body of Christ?” The Saint’s response? Following Christ means using the gifts God has given us first to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, welcome a stranger, and visit the sick, then to use what is left over for our own wants and desires.

Saint John Chrysostom: “Do you wish to honour the body of Christ? Do not ignore him when he is naked. Do not pay him homage in the temple clad in silk, only then to neglect him outside where he is cold and ill-clad. He who said ‘This is my body’ is the same who said: ‘You saw me hungry and you gave me no food’, and ‘Whatever you did to the least of my brothers you did also to me’ ... What good is it if the Eucharistic table is overloaded with golden chalices when your brother is dying of hunger. Start by satisfying his hunger and then with what is left you may adorn the altar as well.

He adds: “Well, again, I am not condemning munificence in these matters. Make your house beautiful by all means but also look after the poor, or rather look after the poor first. No one was ever condemned for not adorning his house, but those who neglect the poor were threatened with hellfire for all eternity and a life of torment with devils. Adorn your house if you will, but do not forget your brother in dress. He is a temple of infinitely greater value” (*Homily on the Gospel of Matthew*).

In other words, honouring the body of Christ means using our own gifts – our time, talent and treasure – to honour Christ and the mission of the Church, and relying less on other extraordinary means of supporting our parishes such as gambling revenues.

Conclusions

The dependency of the Ukrainian Catholic Church upon gambling revenues as an ordinary means of parish income did not happen overnight. It has a long history, influenced by society, government decisions, and other factors.

But to continue to depend upon a questionable source which one day may itself dry up does not seem to be a prudent way of proceeding in the long term.

And to find fault solely with gambling revenues as a source incompatible with Christian morals – without taking into consideration funding received from oil, gas, cigarette, etc., taxes in light of respect for creation, the environment, and health and social concerns – also does not seem to be a balanced approach.

Still, for parishes and parish organizations to rely more and more on extraordinary financial sources to fund their charitable activities is not acceptable. In this light, for parishes who are considering casino applications for the first time, no new applications will be supported by the Chancery Office.

The way forward is to re-embrace the Church's long-standing practice of stewardship as a way of life.

A move away from gambling revenues and a move toward practicing stewardship will take time.

The Eparchy of Edmonton is committed to stewardship. Together, we can find ways of using the gifts God has given us – our time, talent and treasure – to move forward. Where our heart is, there is our treasure.

Let us be good stewards. It takes practice to be good at something. It is not something we can do once and be satisfied. It is a way of life.

Together we can make this earth a better place.

Together we can build the Kingdom of God!

Yours in Christ,
Bishop David Motiuk