PRIESTS AND ALCOHOL
Joseph H. Fichter

The most vocal leaders of the various temperance movements have been clergymen who were concerned about the moral behavior of their people and who fought public battles against "Demon Rum." It may seem indelicate then to investigate the drinking habits of the men of God, who are expected to be models of sobriety. To go a step further by inquiring about alcoholism among the clergy may appear to be disloyal, yet experts emphatically assure us that no occupation or profession is exempt from the ravages of this three-pronged illness of body, mind and soul.¹

The notion that partaking of alcoholic beverages is sinful in any form—often attributed to the Puritan and Calvinist ethic—was not always acceptable to Protestants. In their recent overview of colonial America, Conley and Sorensen recall that Baptist and Methodist preachers were not above operating whiskey stills and there was a certain amount of "tippling" among Protestant ministers of that period. "By the nineteenth century, many cases of drunkenness on the part of ministers began to be recorded—and this more frequent mention of intoxication among clergymen probably indicates that in fact it was becoming a greater problem."²

Early temperance groups in Ireland preached "moderation" in drinking, but when they began to make total abstinence their goal Catholics opposed it as a "heresy imported from abroad," an inspiration from American Protestants, especially in the form of Lyman Beecher's sermons on The Evils of Intemperance, circulated widely in Ulster.

¹ With the concept of alcoholism as a sickness there is also an insistence that only a small percentage of alcoholics are living on Skid Row.


Reverend Joseph H. Fichter, S.J., is a professor of sociology at Loyola University, New Orleans. He has been Stillman Professor at Harvard University and Fulbright Professor at universities in Chile and Germany. Father Fichter is the author of twenty-four books, mainly in the sociology of religion.

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