

# Chapter xxvii:

## *Wine*

### **The Offering of wine: some initial praise.**

**I**N OLD PAINTINGS OF THE CRUCIFIXION, you often see angels flitting about with silvergilt chalices, which they hold aloft to catch the Precious Blood as it sprays from the dying Man. Nowadays we're too squeamish for images as clear-headed as that, but the fault is ours, not the old paintings'. Christian faith means little if it doesn't involve that utter surrender of all hopes to this hope, the hope of arriving at the infinite happiness of being with God, despite what we are, through the consumption of the spilt Blood of His Son. And we drink His spilt Blood in the form of wine; and nothing else we do during life is as useful as such faithful drinking, since

*The dripping blood [is] our only drink,  
The bloody flesh our only food .<sup>1</sup>*

Because God the Son let Himself be torn for us, and because we taste that life-giving Death as wine, Christians are naturally inclined to be enthusiastic about wine, regarding it as one of God's best gifts to us. The bitterest enemies of the Catholic Faith – Puritans, Muslims, Mormons – mark themselves off from Catholic civilisation by their institutionalised hatred of wine. Every so often the pagan spirit erupts within Christendom in the form of morbid teetotalism, or asceticism which applies to the wine-glass and nothing else. St Timothy seemed to have something of this spirit, and St Paul had to chivy him: *Noli adhuc aquam bibere, sed modico vin utere, Stop drinking just water, dear boy, take some wine.*<sup>2</sup> The truer Christian spirit is to celebrate wine in all its aspects, including its power to cheer:

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| <i>Rigans montes de superioribus suis:</i> | <i>God watereth the hills from</i>              |
| <i>above:</i>                              |   |
| <i>de fructu operum tuorum</i>             | <i>the earth is filled</i>                      |
| <i>satiabitur terra.</i>                   | <i>with the fruit of Thy works.</i>             |
| <i>Producens soenum jumentis,</i>          | <i>He bringeth forth grass for the cattle :</i> |

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<sup>1</sup> T.S. Eliot, 'East Coker', IV, ll. 25-29, from *Four Quartets*.

<sup>2</sup> I Timothy i<sup>13</sup>.

*et herbam servituti hominum.  
of men;*

*Ut educas panem de terra,  
earth,*

*et vinum lætificet  
cor hominis.*

*and green herb for the service*

*That he may bring food out of the*

*and wine that maketh glad  
the heart of man.<sup>3</sup>*

St Clement of Alexandria writes beautifully about drinking wine at dinner; in his heart, the Christian will always remember the Mass as he lifts his wine-glass, but in any case wine is integral to human life: wine refreshes the body, but it is blood to the spirit.<sup>4</sup> Alas, Clement was a nativist about vintages – he mentions *the fragrant Thasian wine, and the pleasant-breathing Lesbian, and a sweet Cretan wine, and sweet Syracusan wine, and Mendusian, an Egyptian wine, and the insular Naxian, the “highly perfumed and flavoured,”* – only to condemn them: *why should not the wine of their own country satisfy men’s desires, unless they were to import water also...?*<sup>5</sup> I’m not sure what Clement would have made of a modern wine-shop, merrily stocked with wine from the earth’s four quarters, or of a modern supermarket, stocked with bottled water from Scotland and New Zealand and the French Jura: I imagine he’d laugh. He was not a fanatic.

It’s not just Mass that makes Christians keen on wine. There is a perfect rhyme between the jollity of Christian orthodoxy (the doctrines of creation and incarnation), and the jollity of wine. Of course beer is also good – even American beer is, I suppose, better than nothing, although you be a much merrier republic if you refused watery lager and drank ale like good Catholics – and above all stopped drinking lager, if you must drink it, frozen beyond the powers of the human tongue to detect its taste, if any. And whiskey are gin and glorious things, and there’s something to be said for tequila; but wine has a special rôle in civilisation, and most of all in Christian civilisation.

You will point out that Chesterton – I admit that Chesterton, my stalwart Chesterton – once wrote a heretical *Cider Song* beginning:

*The wine they drink in Paradise  
They make in Haute Lorraine;  
God brought it burning from the sod*

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<sup>3</sup> Psalm civ<sup>13-15</sup>. When I lived in Tuscany I was often asked to pray for a good wine harvest, and composed for the occasion a Mass (that is to say, a full set of Propers), called, as always, after the first word of the Introit: the Mass *Rigans montes*. You can read it over at [www.richardmajor.com](http://www.richardmajor.com).

<sup>4</sup> *The Instructor*, or *Padogogós ii*<sup>2</sup>; Henry Chadwick, *The Church in Ancient Society* (OUP 2001), p. 12, seems to cite the wrong passage.

<sup>5</sup> II, 245, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*.

*To be a sign and signal rod  
That they that drink the blood of God  
Shall never thirst again.*

*The wine they praise in Paradise  
They make in Ponterey,  
The purple wine of Paradise,  
But we have better at the price;  
It's wine they praise in Paradise,  
It's cider that they pray. . . .*<sup>6</sup>

But this cannot be right, and in calmer moods Chesterton himself knew that wine was at the core of our experience of life. We could live without margaritas or manhattans; we *ought* to live without Budweiser; but wine is the vehicle of a happy mortal life, as well as the means God uses to make us immortal.

### **The Offering of wine: some regulations.**

**T**HE 'DOCTORS' OR LEARNED MEN OF THE CHURCH have spent a lot of loving ingenuity over the the rules about wine offered on the altar. These rules are gloriously strict and lucid, as they ought to be.

It may be white or red, weak or strong, sweet or dry, but it must be what the canons call *vinum de vite*, wine of life, which means *the pure juice of the grape naturally and properly fermented*.<sup>7</sup> Any normal wine would thus in principle do, and I wanted to celebrate my first Mass with champagne (the Dean wouldn't let me).

But in practice there are a couple of factors which mean that a special industry produces altar wine just for sacramental purposes, and this special wine is what we use in this parish.

The first issue is [Human Wickedness](#). I have met a lot of winemakers, and they seem on the whole among the nicest people, but there are rotters in every line of work, and vintners exist who deliberately adulterate their own wine (and what can be worse than that, except lawyers who suborn the law, or politicians who pervert their polity, or bankers who corrupt banking? Such a sin savours of suicide, for it destroys the very thing a man *is*). To call yourself a winemaker and deliberately produce what is not wine is to offend against the nature of wine, that blessed and happy stuff, and to risk an even more appalling crime. For if what is used at Mass as

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.geocities.com/~spanoudi/poems/chester2.html>

<sup>7</sup> Collect. S. C. de Prop. Fide, n. 705.

wine is not pure wine, then the Holy Sacrifice is *invalid*, and the seraphim must groan and bite their wings at the horror and waste. The hardbitten *Catholic Encyclopædia* decrees *that since wines are frequently* [‘frequently’!]

so adulterated as to escape minute chemical analysis . . . the safest way of procuring pure wine is to buy it not at second hand, but directly from a manufacturer who understands and conscientiously respects the great responsibility involved in the celebration of the Holy Sacrifice.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, for many centuries there have therefore been vineyards devoted only to producing altar wine, often inspected by the fierce henchmen of bishops.<sup>9</sup>

Another issue with wine for Mass is the rugged way it is consumed. Since it has to be kept in a biggish container in the sacristy, and then dispensed in smallish amounts, there’s obviously a danger of its [going off](#). If it goes off it is still *valid* for Eucharistic use; but to employ putrid wine, halfway to being vinegar (or, indeed, to use half-rotten bread) in the Blessed Sacrament, is obviously a disgusting idea: as the canonists say, *a grievous offence*.<sup>10</sup> To avoid the Church’s wine spoiling, it is licit, and normal, to ‘fortify’ it – during fermentation (‘spiking’ it afterward would be crude, and illicit) – with a little grape brandy, which is to say spirits distilled from pure wine (*ex genimime vitis* is how the canon lawyers put it). This fortified wine, although the canons say that it cannot contain more than 18% alcohol, or 36° proof, tastes much stronger than normal table wine, which is usually around 7 or 8%.<sup>11</sup> Wine made for the altar is of the strength, then, and pretty much tastes like, madeira or sweet strong sherry; if you ever find yourself in possession of a bottle, drink it after dinner.

In Italy, so fond are they of Mass, a favourite dessert is *vino santo* with dry thick biscuits, dimly like hosts, called *biscotti*, to dunk.

In America the grim hard Inland Revenue Service decreed back in 1955: *Wine labels may not bear the phrases ‘Altar Style,’ ‘Altar Type,’ ‘Kosher Style,’ or ‘Kosher Type,’ since the use thereof is considered misleading*<sup>12</sup> – but this must be another Federal wheeze to get its hands on revenue by taxing altar wine as table wine, and thus oppressing us.

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<sup>8</sup> [www.newadvent.com](http://www.newadvent.com), under WINE, ALTAR.

<sup>9</sup> An international conference on altar wine meets every years: fortunate men who attend it! <http://www.bava.com/html/eng/casabrina/comstam.htm>

<sup>10</sup> *Missale Romanorum*, ‘De Defectibus’, tit. iv, 1, 2

<sup>11</sup> *S. Romana et Univ. Inquis.*, 5 August, 1896

<sup>12</sup> 1955-2 C.B. 734, Rev. Rul. 55-618.

In countries where wine is not available, conceded the ancient rules, raisins, or dried grapes, might be used. They were to be imported in crushed cakes, broken up and steeped in water. Only when there are clear signs of fermentation (slimy bubbling on the surface, I suppose) could this revolting liquid be drained. Thank God there are no countries now where wine cannot be obtained; or rather, let us thank God through the instrument of his monks, who over the last millenium have introduced the blessed vine to all manner of barbarous lands where it did not exist, including California and elsewhere in America

Ah, but what about America during Prohibition, you may ask, when wine was not available due to Tyranny and renewed Barbarism? What happened about Mass then?

During the bestial experiment called Prohibition, Mass continued in America through a cumbrous and silly system of “Withdrawal of Wine on Permit from Bonded Warehouses for Sacramental Purposes.” Withdrawals from these bonded warehouses leapt up by a third in the first few years of Prohibition. This was not, I imagine, because of massive increases in the consumption of wine at Mass (or at Protestant services, which were of course invalid, although at least they then used real wine). The huge increase must have been because priests were quite sensibly supplying their thirsty congregations with unopened bottles. In much the same way doctors cheerfully wrote prescriptions every year for forty million dollars’ worth of whiskey. Doctors help saved the tradition of bourbon, and more importantly – since after all American ‘whiskey’ is only a quaint colonial variation on scotch, which we shall drink in Paradise – sacramental or pseudo-sacramental demand was what kept some vineyards open through those dark years.<sup>13</sup>

It is sad that America, a brave but sometimes over-earnest republic, seems to be sliding towards another experiment with prohibition, this time on tobacco. Doctors will have to start prescribing cigars as a cure for indigestion. Shouldn’t we simply pause for a minute and meditate on the phrase *illegal substance*? Illegal *substance*: an entire substance, or species, created by God, but declared by state legislatures to be properly incapable of existence. Ah well.

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<sup>13</sup> <http://www.straightdope.com/mailbag/maltarwine.html>

**Catholic men that live upon wine.**

**T**he Freeze-Frame Mass has been dry work this week, so we end with a drinking song, by Belloc, which needs to be set to music:<sup>14</sup>

*Heretics all, whoever you may be,  
In Tarbes or Nîmes, or over the sea,  
You never shall have good words from me.  
Caritas non conturbat me.*<sup>15</sup>

*But Catholic men that live upon wine  
Are deep in the water, and frank, and fine;  
Wherever I travel I find it so,  
Benedicamus Domino.*<sup>16</sup>

*On childing women that are forelorn,  
And men that sweat in nothing but scorn:  
That is on all that ever were born,  
Miserere Domine.*<sup>17</sup>

*To my poor self on my deathbed,  
And all my dear companions dead,  
Because of the love that I bore them,  
Dona Eis Requiem.*<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> <http://www.angelfire.com/va/belloc/index.html>

<sup>15</sup> Love doesn't befuddle me, or The Christian obligation to charity doesn't stop me despising.

<sup>16</sup> Let us bless the Lord.

<sup>17</sup> Lord, have mercy!

<sup>18</sup> Grant them rest`