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Catholics know when to hold íem

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(Dreamstime)

According to family legend, my father put himself through college with winnings from poker games and football pools -- although he now admits it probably just paid for his books and beer. That's also when he solidified his grade-school nickname "Swami" for his success in games of prediction and chance.

The nickname has stuck for 60 years, as has the penchant for a little social gambling. It runs in the family.

I remember my 90-something great-grandmother using a magnifying glass to play bingo with at least a dozen cards. My mom knows to plan Thanksgiving dinner around the day's football games, with my dad closely following his picks in the pool. Even friendly card games in our family involve scrounging my piggy bank for pennies to ante up.

Dad doesn't play the lottery. "The odds are too low," he says. Nor is he a fan of slot machines and other casino games. Except for poker. Poker is the game, the ultimate test of skill and courage. He has played it since college, has belonged to a monthly poker club of fellow teachers for decades, and now in retirement bets and bluffs regularly at local bars, casinos and fundraisers. He even watches poker on TV. A lot.

He's not the only one. Poker has become a pop culture phenomenon, having been rebranded from a pastime for cigar-smoking old fogies to a thinking man's (or woman's) game for the hip and young. Televised and online poker games have upped the odds for the card-playing craze. More than 2 million viewers tuned in for the grand finale of last year's World Series of Poker, which, not coincidentally, was televised on ESPN. Many now see poker as a "sport," rather than gambling, per se.

For the uninitiated, poker is a family of card games in which players bet on the value of their hands, forming a pool that the person with the highest hand, or the last to drop out, wins. Part of the appeal is that the game is relatively easy to learn, though mastering it requires a mathematician's familiarity with probability statistics and a psychologist's insight into human behavior.

The most popular version, Texas Hold 'Em, dates back to the 1900s but resurged after the turn of this century thanks to televised tournaments, especially the 2003 World Series of Poker in which an amateur (yes, there are pros) named Chris Moneymaker (I'm not making this up!) won \$2.5 million after qualifying in an online tournament.

After that, every Tom, Dick and college student was betting he could win the pot in what has been dubbed "the Moneymaker effect." Next came the requisite celebrities - including Phil Laak, also known as "the Unibomber" because he wears a hooded sweatshirt and sunglasses at the table - best-selling books and strategy guides, and related paraphernalia such as chip sets, table tops and T-shirts. ("Why work when you can play poker?")

Indeed, why work? Gambling's encouragement of idleness explains why some Protestant denominations frown on poker or any card-playing for that matter. Other religious folk see gambling as immoral because it's based on the losses of others. Certainly, pastors and churches are often among the first to protest casinos and lotteries because of their detrimental costs to society: gambling addictions, criminal activity and financial difficulties, especially to low-income families lured by the promise of easy money.

But what about bingo-playing, raffle ticket-selling, Las Vegas Night-hosting Catholics? We're certainly known as a little less uptight about things other religions see as vices. Ever try to get a beer at a Protestant church event? In fact, Catholic moral teaching says gambling is no less sinful than other bets against chance, like taking out insurance or investing in futures markets.

The morality, or immorality, of gambling also depends on whether you're betting the mortgage money, or just some disposable income, and whether the gambler is acting freely and the game is fraud-free. Finally, the two parties should be somewhat evenly matched.

"Games of chance (card games, etc.) or wagers are not in themselves contrary to justice," says the Catechism of the Catholic Church. "They become morally unacceptable when they deprive someone of what is necessary to provide for his needs and those of others."

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But, the catechism warns, passion for gambling can become enslaving, as those who suffer from gambling addiction and their friends and family can attest.

My dad never gambled away our food money, but I bet (no pun intended) if you add up the time he spends playing poker, watching poker on TV or reading about poker, it would be significant. However, if

you added up the time my mother spends knitting, reading about knitting and, yes, even watching knitting on TV, it too would be sizeable.

The poker chip doesn't fall far from the table. Although I'm not much of a gambler, my 17-year-old nephew is learning to keep his cards close to the vest in weekly poker games among his high school buddies. As his godmother, I give him my blessing.

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