

National Clergy Conference On Alcoholism

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Alcoholics Anonymous

Bill W.

Co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous

Reverend Raymond J.H. Kennedy, S.J., Chairman

FATHER KENNEDY: Your Excellency, Right Reverend and Very Reverend Fathers, Members and Guests of the Conference: We come now to what, for most of us, is undoubtedly the high point of this Conference.

Some six or seven years ago I attended the Yale School of Alcohol Studies and, when we were leaving, our class was urged, as is every class, that, when we returned to our home cities, we should try to do something practical with the knowledge and training we had received at Yale. So I devised the idea of conducting in Syracuse a lecture series for the general public on Problems of Alcohol in general and on alcoholism in particular. I was fortunate enough to be able to bring to our city a number of lecturers of national renown including Doctor Bacon of Yale, Father Ford, and Mrs. Marty Mann. But from the very outset I had one great hope, namely, that I would be able to have the one surviving Co-Founder of Alcoholics Anonymous as the final lecturer of our series. Our local A.A. people were, of course, thrilled with the idea. They warned me that it would be practically impossible because they happened to know that, at that time, the gentleman who I am about to introduce to you, had been quite unwell and that also that he had very recently the great sorrow of burying his father. I was, of course, dismayed to hear this but I wrote to him anyway and asked if it would be possible for him to come. In reply I had a very delightful phone call in which he assured me he would be very happy to give the lecture. The result was startling. Our local A.A. people spread the word and what a response we had! Whereas the other lectures had addressed groups of fifty to seventy-five people, seven hundred appeared for the closing lecture. They came by the busload: they came from Albany, from Rochester, from Buffalo. They even came from Ottawa and Toronto. On that memorable evening and throughout the following day, when he remained as my guest in our city, I personally became very much attached to this man and, since then, he has favored me with his personal friendship in many ways and on many occasions.

We of this conference have tried two or three times in the past to have him come to address us but each time that we invited him something seemed to come up to prevent him from appearing on the program. Each time, I sincerely believed him, because I never forgot that when he was free to accept an invitation he did come, in spite of illness and even of personal sorrow in his own family. I consider it a deep personal honor and privilege to be permitted to present to this Conference Bill W.

Bill W.

Excellencies and Friends: My thanks to Father Ray for his introduction. He has us off to an appropriate start. This hour with you is most meaningful to me and I trust it will be to you and to A.A. as a whole. Every thoughtful A.A. realizes that the divine grace, which has always flowed through the Church, is the ultimate foundation on which A.A. rests. Our spiritual origins are Christian.

Therefore the transforming grace that expels our alcohol obsession has come down across the centuries through you. In this connection 'd like to tell you the story of my long connection with Father Edward Dowling, whose funeral I have just attended.

Never shall I have a finer friend, a wiser adviser, nor in all probability such a channel of grace as he personally afforded me over the years.

Father Ed., as we affectionately call him, was the first clergyman of the Catholic faith ever to take notice of us AA5. It happened in this way. Our textbook, Alcoholics Anonymous was published in the spring of 1939. A few months later Father Ed read the book and very evidently liked what he saw there.

In The Queen's Work, the magazine of the Sodality, he wrote a piece about us, which in effect said to all people of the Catholic faith, "Folks, AA is good; come and get it." Because we could have had no idea of how the AA book would be received by the clergy, this forthright recommendation brought us great excitement, rejoicing, and gratitude.

Shortly thereafter my wife Lois and I had moved to AA's first clubhouse on 24th Street here in New York. Our own house had been lost and the future for our society was uncertain indeed. Though a formula for recovery from alcoholism was in sight, we were just beginning the great test to see whether we rather erratic people could live and work together. The problems of that club and its people were terrific; only God knew if we could survive.

Enter Father Ed

My first unforgettable contact with Father Ed came about in this way.

It was early in 1940, though late in the winter. Save for old Tom, the fireman we had lately rescued from Rockland Asylum, the club was empty. My wife Lois was out somewhere. It had been a hectic day, full of disappointments. I lay upstairs in our room, consumed with self-pity. This had brought on one of my characteristic imaginary ulcer attacks. It was a bitter night, frightfully windy. Hail and sleet beat on the tin roof over my head.

Then the front doorbell rang and I heard old Tom toddle off to answer it. A minute later he looked into the doorway of my room, obviously much annoyed. Then he said, "Bill, there is some old damn bum down there from St. Louis, and he wants to see you." Great heavens, I thought, this can't be still another one!" Warily, and even resentfully, I said to Tom, "Oh well, bring him up, bring him up." Then a strange figure appeared in my bedroom door. He wore a shapeless black hat that somehow reminded me of a cabbage leaf. His coat collar was drawn around his neck, and he leaned heavily on a cane. He was plastered with sleet. Thinking him to be just another drunk, I didn't even get off the bed. Then he unbuttoned his coat and I saw that he was a clergyman.

A moment later I realized with great joy that he was the clergyman who had put that wonderful plug for AA into The Queen's Work. My weariness and annoyance instantly evaporated.

We talked of many things, not always about serious matters either. Then I began to be aware of one of the most remarkable pair of eyes I had ever seen. And, as we talked on, the room increasingly filled with what seemed to me to be the presence of God, which flowed through my new friend. It was one of the most extraordinary experiences that I have ever had. Such was his rare ability to transmit grace. Nor was my experience at all unique. Hundreds of AA's have reported having exactly this experience when in his presence.

This was the beginning of one of the deepest and most inspiring friendships that I shall ever know. This was the first meaningful contact that I had ever had with the clergymen of your faith.

Some months later I visited St. Louis and Father Ed met me at the airfield. By contrast this was a blistering day, and Father Ed had come to bring me to the Sodality Headquarters in St. Louis. I was struck by the delightful informality. Of course I had never been in such a place before. I had been raised in a small Vermont village, Yankee-style. Happily there was no bigotry in my grandfather who raised me. But neither was there much religious contact or understanding. So here I was in some kind of a monastery. Even then, believe it or not, I still toyed with the notion that Catholicism was somehow a superstition of the Irish!

Then Father Ed and his Jesuit partners commenced to ask me questions. They wanted to know about the recently published AA book and especially about M's Twelve Steps. To my surprise they had supposed that I must have had a Catholic education. They seemed doubly surprised when I informed them that at the age

of eleven I had quit the Congregational Sunday school because my teacher had asked me to sign a temperance pledge. This had been the extent of my religious education.

More questions were asked about M's Twelve Steps. I explained how a few years earlier some of us had been associated with the Oxford Groups; that we had picked up from these good people the ideas of self-survey, confession, restitution, helpfulness to others and prayer, ideas that we might have got in many other quarters as well. After our withdrawal from the Oxford Groups, these principles and attitudes had been formed into a word-of-mouth program, to which we had added a step of our own to the effect "that we were powerless over alcohol." Our Twelve Steps were the result of my effort to define more sharply and elaborate upon these word-of-mouth principles so that alcoholic readers would have a more specific program: that there could be no escape from what we deemed to be essential principles and attitudes. This had been my sole idea in their composition. This enlarged version of our program had been set down rather quickly - perhaps in twenty or thirty minutes - on a night when I had been very badly out of sorts. Why the Steps were written down in the order in which they appear today and just why they were worded as they are, I had no idea whatever.

Following this explanation of mine my new Jesuit friends pointed to a chart that hung on the wall. They explained that this was a comparison between the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius and the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous, that, in principle, this correspondence was amazingly exact. I believe they also made the somewhat startling statement that spiritual principles set forth in our Twelve Steps appeared in the identical order that they do in the Ignatian Exercises.

In my abysmal ignorance, I actually inquired, "Please tell me - who is this fellow Ignatius?"

While of course the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous contain nothing new, there seems no doubt that this singular and exact identification with the Ignatian Exercises has done much to make the close and fruitful relation that we now enjoy with the Church.

Early Origins of A.A.

It now occurs to me that it may be profitable if we were to review the origins of AA; to take a look at some of its underlying mechanisms - an interior look as it were. Of course I am here reflecting my own views, and some of these are bound to be speculative. At any rate, here they are.

Though M roots are in the centuries-old Christian community, there seems little doubt that in an immediate sense our fellowship began in the office of the much-respected Dr. Carl Jung of Zurich.

As you know, Dr. Jung is one of the pioneers of the psychiatric art who believes that man has a conscience and a soul. In 1930 he had under treatment a prominent American businessman who had exhausted all other sources of recovery. He remained with Carl Jung a whole year. And when he left that great doctor he felt very confident that he had made a complete comeback. He felt that the inner springs of his motivations to drink had been revealed; that through this immensely improved understanding he could now manage his own life. Yet, quite unaccountably, he was soon seized with the old malignant compulsion; he was drunk again. In utter despair, he returned to Dr. Jung. In effect, this is what he had to say. "Doctor, you have been my court of last resort. Tell me frankly; is this the end of the line? You know how badly I want to stop. Is there no hope?"

To this plea, Dr. Jung made a rejoinder of great candor, humility and perception, a statement that laid the foundation for Step One of the AA program.

He said to his patient, "I thought that you might be one of the few who might be re-educated. But I'm obliged to conclude that you are like nearly all the rest of the alcoholics I've treated. There is nothing whatever in my art that can do anything for " "But," persisted the patient, "is there no other way, is there no other chance?"

"Yes," said Dr. Jung, "there is a chance — a very small one. Your bare chance is that somehow, somewhere you will find a transforming spiritual experience that will expel your obsession."

"But," remonstrated his client, "I'm a man of faith. In fact I used to be an Episcopal vestryman. I still have a faith of sorts. But perhaps God hasn't much faith in me?" Then Dr. Jung further explained as follows: "Faith is indispensable, but in cases such as yours, it isn't enough. I am talking of a transforming experience, a conversion, if you like. I'm talking about conversion at depth, something that will expel your obsession, render you sane, and remotivate you. All through the centuries this sort of thing has happened, but only occasionally, sometimes under religious auspices, sometimes quite spontaneously, and always inexplicably. I can only suggest that you expose yourself to some sort of religious influence and hope for the best, admitting that you can do nothing of your own resources."

The Oxford Groups

Shortly thereafter Dr. Jung's patient - one I shall call Roland - joined up with the Oxford Groups, a society which in more recent years has been called Moral Re—Armament. As we shall see, AA owes this fellowship a great deal on two counts. From them we learned what, and whatnot to do. At any rate, our friend Roland did there find a truly transforming experience, an experience that kept him in sobriety for a number of years.

As one of those unusual Oxford Groupers interested in alcoholism, Roland went out of his way to help a former schoolmate of mine. A serious alcoholic, my old school chum "Ebby" was about to be committed for alcoholic insanity just as Roland reached him.

Now when Roland contacted my friend "Ebby," another element was cast into the synthesis that was to become AA. Here was one alcoholic talking to another. Roland could not only identify with "Ebby" as an alcoholic, he could also bring "Ebby" Dr. Jung's verdict of the medical hopelessness of the malady. Just as importantly, he could bring "Ebby" hope of release through a spiritual experience. He could also tell "Ebby" what conditions needed to be met in order to become worthy of such a gift of grace - namely, self-survey, an examination of conscience (as you would call it), restitution for harms done, helpfulness to others without demands of prestige or money reward, prayer to God as we understand Him. These were the essential attitudes and principles that Roland transmitted to "Ebby," who was to become my own sponsor.

The moment "Ebby" accepted these principles and conditions, he was released from his desire to drink, and this release lasted for a couple of years, during which he contacted me.

Bill Meets John Barleycorn

Perhaps at this point I should acquaint you with my own experience as an alcoholic. There have been, of course, childhood maladjustments. As a kid, I was over-sized, but not strong. I couldn't win in fights and contests. My mother and father were divorced. This resulted in great inferiority and much depression. To compensate for this condition, I developed a fierce desire to excel - the well-know power drive. By the time I reached boarding school, I was possessed by a consuming desire to be first in everything. This was more than legitimate ambition - this was a veritable obsession.

My first drink came during World War I, just before going to service abroad. It was a tremendous experience, tinder alcohol all my remaining inferiority's disappeared. I could draw near to people and they seemed to draw near to me. I was part of life at last. And alcohol was my elixir. Alcohol could not only banish shyness and inferiority, it could kill depression. Even better, it could elate me beyond description. I could dream vast dreams of power and accomplishment. Therefore alcohol meant far more to me than to the average person - I had begun to use it as a cure for my neurotic difficulties.

Following the World War, this habit of finding surcease in the bottle became truly obsessive, and uncontrollable. But it was a long time before my wife and I realized how grim that alcohol obsession could be. I entered Wall Street and became successful for a time, making more money than was good for some so young. In this period there were no depressions, only the mad and elated pursuit of fame and money. By 1929 the hangovers were terrific. But I had a good constitution, and I always dreamed of controlling my drinking the next time I tried it.

Then came the 1929 crash. I was wiped out and plunged into debt. Times were very bad and my drinking was well known. Therefore there was no financial comeback. Again I began to drink to cover up frustration and depression. Presently I began the weary round of hospitals.

Finally, Dr. William D. Silkworth of Towns Hospital at New York, a medical saint if there ever was one, took an interest in my case. Knowing my desperate desire to stop, he thought I might be one of the rare ones who could recover. But in the end he had to give up. Gently, but very definitely, he had to tell my wife: "Your husband has an obsession that condemns him to drink; nothing that I know, no treatment at all can put an end to it. He also has some sort of physical defect -maybe an allergy — that guarantees he will damage his brain if he keeps on. Indeed, there is a little damage already." Such was the verdict of a doctor in whom Lois and I had every confidence. Strangely this verdict of medical hopelessness, this exact and awful statement of the nature of the alcohol malady, was to become a vital part of the AA program a little later on. By then it was the summer of 1934. It looked as though I would have to be locked up for good, or else go mad and die.

Nevertheless I left the hospital, still in freedom, and by dint of great vigilance and discipline, I kept away from liquor until Armistice Day of 1934. Then the strange obsession was upon me, and I was drunk again.

Ebby Visits Bill

One day, while on that bout, the telephone rang as I sat drinking alone - my wife was working in a department store, supporting me- and here was my old friend Ebby. I had heard that he was about to be committed for alcoholic insanity; indeed, I had never seen him sober in New York before. I could instantly sense something about him - something different. It was a sort of a psychic hunch. He sat down at my kitchen table. I pushed a crock of gin towards him. But he said, "No thanks." So I inquired, "Well Ebby, are you on the water wagon?" "No," he replied, "I wouldn't say I'm on the water wagon. I'm just not drinking now."

Of course I was mystified. What was all this about? I had looked forward to a drinking bout with my friend. We would talk about the good old days. That would be a relief because the present was intolerable and I knew there was to be no future for either of us. But he would have none of my gin. What on earth had got into him? When I put this question, he replied, simply and smilingly, "I've got religion."

This was a poser, indeed it was a shocker. At college I had had a scientific training from which I'd inferred that man was the spearhead of evolution, was just about all the God there was. However, I felt I ought to be polite. So I said, "So you've got religion, Ebby? Well, tell me what brand it is." He replied that it wasn't exactly a brand - he wouldn't exactly call it a religion. Then he explained how he had run into those Oxford Groups. He also added that they were pretty evangelical for him. Nevertheless he had met a drunk or two there, notably one Roland, who had been a patient of Dr. Jung's. And then he outlined the simple program that I have just described. He told me just how it worked for him, how quite unaccountably he had been released the moment that he became willing to accept it; indeed he had been released before he had done much about applying those principles and attitudes. He emphasized the fact that he had been "released." I could deeply sense that this was true. Ebby's sobriety was certainly much more than the "water wagon" variety.

Ebby then dwelt on Roland's experience with Dr. Jung, how hopeless this man of science said alcoholism was. Of course this corresponded exactly with what Dr. Silkworth had already told Lois and me. Though his new belief in God jarred me not a little, I nevertheless listened with rapt attention. In a way he was telling me nothing new at all, yet what he had to say carried an immense impact. Here was one alcoholic talking to another - at very great depth, no question.

My deflation, which had begun with Dr. Silkworth's grim verdict, was nearing completion. I was powerless on my own resources. Yet here was hope. In Ebby's person, in his very evident state of release, Ebby carried immense conviction. Though I went on drinking for a while longer, in no waking moment could I forget his face and words as he sat and talked to me across the kitchen table. He had bound me to him with cords of verity and understanding - and a common suffering. From these benign ties I was not to escape.

But it must be confessed that I still gagged on a belief in God. I could and would try anything else - but not this. But I always had to come back to the thought that Ebby was released. He was sober, and I was hopelessly drunk. Who was I to say there is no God? Maybe I had better go to the hospital and get Dr. Silkworth to sober me up. Of course there mustn't be any emotional conversion -that wouldn't do for a Vermont Yankee! Anyway, I'd have a good clear look.

So I started for the hospital, very drunk. Dr. Silkworth shook his head. I brandished a bottle and shouted, "I've got something new, Doc." He could only reply, "Maybe you had better go to bed." And this I did. But I wasn't in too awful shape. In three days time, I was perfectly sober. One morning my friend Ebby appeared in the doorway and he found me in a terrible depression. I was still in rebellion — against God.

But my old friend didn't try to evangelize me. Instead he put me in the position of asking, "Ebby, what is that neat little formula of yours for getting sober?" He quickly repeated it. I reflected, too, that he was definitely practicing what he preached. Why was he at my hospital so early in the morning, when he himself should have been looking for a job? He had simply retold his own story. There was no evangelizing. Presently he was gone and I was left to think.

Then I fell into a prodigious depression, one of the most frightful experiences I have ever known. Momentarily, I suppose, this completely deflated me; at great depth the conviction was carried to me that by myself I was nothing at all. I was helpless and hopeless. Since this inner collapse was so sweeping, so complete, I suppose this may explain the tremendous experience that immediately followed.

Bill's Spiritual Experience

Out of my black depression I found myself crying, just like a child in the dark, "If there is a God, will He show Himself? Now I am ready, ready to do anything, even to believe." Then came the great experience.

The room filled with a blinding white light. I was caught into an ecstasy for which there is no description. In my mind's eye I seemed to be on a mountaintop; a great wind was blowing. Then I thought, "This is not air, this is spirit. This is the God of the preachers." How long this state lasted I have no idea. But at length I found myself still, of course on the bed. Now however I seemed to be in a new dimension. All around and through me I felt a sense of Presence.

A great peace settled over me. With this came the mighty assurance that no matter how wrong things were with the world, all things were right with God. I had a tremendous sense of belonging. Here was purpose and destiny. Here was God. Such, in substance, was my transforming experience. I later found that my obsession to drink was snapped off instantly - never to return again in any dangerous form. Almost immediately a vision of a chain reaction among alcoholics, one carrying the good news to the other, began to possess me.

It might be well to here observe that every M does have a transforming spiritual experience, though it seldom has the suddenness or dramatic content that mine did. What happened to me in perhaps six minutes may in most cases require six months or even a year or more. But the fruits are the same. There must always be that same ego collapse at depth, at least, so far as alcohol is concerned. There must also be a turning to a higher Power for God's gift of grace, without which the obsession can practically never be expelled.

Though my sudden experience did give me a wonderful rebirth and an enormous stimulation to work with alcoholics, it did nevertheless have its liabilities. For a time I really thought I had been appointed by God to fix up all the drunks in the world! Along with the positive experience, some of my old paranoia had returned. Anyhow, the main outlines of today's M program were already in sight, save only a lacking element or so.

Sickness Concept Versus Responsibility

Early in A.A.'s history, very natural questions arose among theologians. There was a Mr. Link who had written a popular treatise called "The Return to Religion." One day I received a call from him. He strongly objected to the A.A. position that alcoholism was an illness. This concept, he felt, removed moral responsibility from alcoholics. He had been voicing this complaint about psychiatrists in the American Mercury. And now, he said, he was going to lambaste A.A. too.

Of course I made haste to point out that we Ms did not use the concept of sickness to absolve our members from moral responsibility. On the contrary, we used the fact of fatal illness to clamp the heaviest kind of moral responsibility on to the sufferer. The further point was made that in his early days of drinking the alcoholic often was no doubt guilty of irresponsibility and gluttony. But once the time of compulsive drinking,

veritable lunacy, had arrived, he couldn't very well be held accountable for his conduct. He then had a lunacy, which condemned him to drink in spite of all he could do; he had developed a bodily sensitivity to alcohol that guaranteed his final madness and death. When this state of affairs was pointed out to him, he was placed immediately under the heaviest kind of pressure to accept M's moral and spiritual program of regeneration - namely, our Twelve Steps. Fortunately, Mr. Link was satisfied with this view of the use that we were making of the alcoholic's illness. I am glad to report that nearly all theologians who have since thought about this matter have also agreed with that early position.

While it is most obvious that free choice in the matter of alcohol has virtually disappeared in most cases, we *Ms* do point out that plenty of free will is left in other areas. It certainly takes a large amount of willingness, and a great exertion of the will to accept and practice the M program. It is by this very exertion of the will that the alcoholic corresponds with the grace by which his drinking obsession can be expelled.

Now what about the alcoholic who says that he cannot possibly believe in God? A great many of these come to AA and they complain that they are trapped. By this they mean that we have convinced them that they are fatally ill, yet they cannot accept a belief in God and His grace as a means of recovery. Happily this does not prove to be an impossible dilemma at all. We simply suggest that the newcomer take an easy stance and an open mind; that he proceed to practice those parts of the Twelve Steps which anyone's common sense would readily recommend. He can certainly admit that he is an alcoholic; that he ought to make a moral inventory; that he ought to discuss his defects with another person; that he should make restitution for harms done; and that he can be helpful to other alcoholics. We emphasize the "open mind," that at least he should admit that there might be a "Higher Power." He can certainly admit that he is not God, nor is mankind in general. If he wishes he can for a time place his dependence upon his own M group. That group is certainly a "Higher Power," so far as recovery from alcoholism is concerned. If these reasonable conditions are met, he then finds himself released from the compulsion to drink; he discovers that his motivations have been changed far out of proportion to anything that could have been achieved by a simple association with us or by the practice of a little more honesty, humility, tolerance, and helpfulness. Little by little he becomes aware that a higher Power is indeed at work. In a matter of months, or at least in a year or two, he is talking freely about God as he understands Him. He has received the gift of God's grace - and he knows it.

The Lunacy of Alcoholism

Perhaps a little more should be said about the obsessional character of alcoholism. When our fellowship was about three years old some of us called on Dr. Lawrence Kolb, then assistant surgeon general of the United States. He said that our report of progress had given him his first hope for alcoholics in general. Not long before, the U.S. Public Health Department had thought of trying to do something about the alcoholic situation. But after a careful survey of the obsessional character of our malady, this had been given up. Indeed, Dr. Kolb felt that dope addicts had a better chance. Accordingly the government had built a hospital for their treatment at Lexington, Kentucky. But for alcoholics - well, there simply wasn't any use at all, so he thought.

Nevertheless, many people still go on insisting that the alcoholic is not a sick man — he is simply weak or willful, and sinful. Even today we often hear the remark "That drunk could get well if he wanted to."

There is no doubt, too, that the deeply obsessional character of the alcoholic's drinking is obscured by the fact that drinking is a socially acceptable custom. By contrast, stealing, or let us say shoplifting, is not. Practically everybody has heard of that form of lunacy known as kleptomania. Oftentimes kleptomaniacs are splendid people in all other respects. Yet they are under an absolute compulsion to steal - just for the kick. A kleptomaniac enters a store and pockets a piece of merchandise. He is arrested and lands in the police station. The judge gives him a jail term. He is stigmatized and humiliated. Just like the alcoholic, he swears that never, never will he do this again.

But on his release from the jail, he wanders down the street past a department store. Unaccountably he is drawn inside. He sees, for example, a red tin fire engine, a child's toy. He instantly forgets all about his misery in the jail. He begins to rationalize. He says, "Well, this little tin fire engine is of no real value. The store wouldn't miss it." So he pockets the toy, the store detective collars him, and he is eight back in the clink. Everybody recognizes this type of stealing as sheer lunacy.

Now let's compare this behavior with that of an alcoholic. He, too, has landed in jail. He has already lost family and friends. He suffers heavy stigma and guilt. He has been physically tortured by his hangover. Like the kleptomaniac he swears that he will never get into this fix again. Perhaps he actually knows that he is an alcoholic. He may understand just what that means. He may be fully aware of what the fearful risk of that first drink is.

But on his release the alcoholic behaves just like the kleptomaniac. He passes a bar. At the first temptation he may say, "No I mustn't go in there; liquor is not for me." But when he arrives at the next drinking place, he is gripped by a rationalization. Perhaps he says, "Well, one beer won't hurt me. After all, beer isn't liquor." Completely unmindful of his recent miseries, he steps inside. He takes that fatal first drink. The following day, the police have him again. Yet his fellow citizens continue to say he is only weak or willful. Actually, his is just as crazy as the kleptomaniac ever was. At this stage, his free will in regard to alcoholism has evaporated. He cannot very well be held accountable for his behavior.

Now a final thought. Many a non-alcoholic clergyman asks these questions about Alcoholics Anonymous: "Why do clergymen so often fail with alcoholics, when AA so often succeeds? Is it possible that the grace of M is superior to that of the Church? Is Alcoholics Anonymous a new religion, a competitor of the Church?"

If these misgivings had real substance, they would be serious indeed. But, as I have already indicated, Alcoholics Anonymous cannot in the least be regarded as a new religion. Our Twelve Steps have no theological content, except that which speaks of "God as we understand Him." This means that each individual M member may define God according to whatever faith or creed he may have. Therefore there isn't the slightest interference with the religious views of any of our membership. The rest of the Twelve Steps define moral attitudes and helpful practices, all of the precisely Christian in character. Therefore, as far as they go, the Steps are good Christianity; indeed they are good Catholicism, something which Catholic writers have affirmed more than once.

Neither does M exert the slightest religious authority over its members: No one is compelled to believe anything. No one is compelled to meet membership conditions. No one is obliged to pay anything. Therefore we have no system of authority, spiritual or temporal, that is comparable to or in the least competitive with the Church. At the center of our society we have a Board of Trustees. This body is accountable yearly to a Conference of elected Delegates. These Delegates represent the conscience and desire of AA as regards functional or service matters. Our Tradition contains an emphatic injunction that these Trustees may never constitute themselves as a government - they are to merely provide certain services that enable M as a whole to function. The same principles apply at our group and area level.

Dr. Bob, my co-partner, had his own religious views. For whatever they may be worth, I have my own. But both of us have gone heavily on record to the effect that these personal views and preferences can never under any conditions be injected into the M program as a working part of it. AA is a sort of spiritual kindergarten, but that is all. Never could it be called a religion.

Nor should any clergyman, because he does not happen to be a channel of grace to alcoholics, feel that he or his Church is lacking in grace. No real question of grace is involved at all — it is just a question of who can best transmit God's abundance. It so happens that we who have suffered alcoholism, we who can identify so deeply with other sufferers, are the ones usually best suited for this particular work. Certainly no clergyman ought to feel any inferiority just because he himself is not an alcoholic! Then, as I have already emphasized, AA has actually derived all of its principles, directly or indirectly, from the Church.

Ours, gentlemen, is a debt of gratitude far beyond any ability of mine to express. On behalf of M members everywhere, I give you our deepest thanks for the warm understanding and the wonderful co-operation that you have everywhere afforded us. Please also have my gratitude for the privilege of being with you this morning. This is an hour that I shall remember always.

Question Period: A Synopsis

FATHER N.: I 'd like to ask this question. After a prolonged period of drinking, I think the nerves of the body are deadened, that is, the optical nerve. As the alcohol wears off there is sometimes an impression of blinding light. I merely want to know what you think about that.

Bill W.: Actually that was never my own experience. At the time of my sudden spiritual awakening I was perfectly sober. Perhaps you raise the question of hallucination versus the Divine imagery of a genuine spiritual experience. Perhaps nobody has ever defined what a hallucination truly is. But we who have been the fortunate recipients of great spiritual experiences are able to declare for their reality. We think that the best evidence of the reality of religious experiences are in their subsequent fruits. Those who receive these genuine gifts of grace are much-altered people, almost invariably for the better. This can scarcely be said of those who hallucinate — Witness Hitler!

Perhaps it is presumptuous of me to say whether my own spiritual experience was real or unreal. But whether God made use of an alcoholic haze before my eyes, or whether I actually glimpsed His face, I can surely report that in my own life and in the lives of many others there has been a very considerable pay-off. Whichever way it may have happened, I am unutterably grateful for His unbelievable gift to me.

FATHER W.: Bill, could you explain what you mean by "mental obsession?" What is this?

Bill W.: Well, as I understand it, we are all born with a freedom of choice. The degree of this varies from person to person, and from area to area in our lives. In the case of neurotic people, our instincts take on certain patterns and directions; sometimes so compulsive they cannot be broken by any ordinary effort of the will. The alcoholic's compulsion to drink is like that. As a smoker, for example, I have a deeply ingrained habit — I'm almost an addict. But I do not think this habit is an actual obsession. Doubtless it could be broken by an act of my own will. If badly enough hurt, I could in all probability give up tobacco. Should smoking repeatedly land me in Bellevue Hospital, I doubt if I would make the trip many times before quitting. But with my alcoholism well that was something else again. No amount of desire to stop, no amount of punishment, could enable me to quit. What was once a habit of drinking became an obsession of drinking - a genuine lunacy.

Father X.: Bill, I noticed that in your talk you did not use the word 'disease.' Did you intend to make any kind of distinction between disease and sickness?

Bill W.: We Ms have never called alcoholism a disease because, technically speaking, it is not a disease entity. For example, there is no such thing as heart disease. Instead there are many separate heart ailments or combinations of them. It is something like that with alcoholism. Therefore we did not wish to get in wrong with the medical profession by pronouncing alcoholism a disease entity. Hence we have always called it an illness or a malady - a far safer term for us to use.

Father Y.: Bill, you are, as it were, co—author of the Twelve Steps. We all realize that these steps are suggestions. Would you think it possible for any alcoholic to neglect any one of these Twelve Steps and still hope to maintain his sobriety?

Bill W.: Well, where the break—even or safety is varies a great deal. But it is hardly prudent for any of us to take many chances with this sort of neglect. Nevertheless, it is truly amazing on what little practice of the Steps of AA some people stay sober. On the contrary, it is astonishing how difficult for certain others to remain dry even though they work diligently at the steps.

In this connection, there is an observation to be made about the several motivations we have respecting the practice of M's Twelve Steps. At first we try the Steps, or at least some of them, because we absolutely must. It is a question of do or die. Then we observe AA principles because we begin to feel they ought to be observed because this is the right thing to do. We may still rebel, but we do try. Then there is a higher plateau, which we sometimes touch. In a state of no resistance at all we practice M's principles because we like to practice them, because we actually want to live by them all.

Of course, there is some virtue in following the M program because we must. There is a lot more when, though in rebellion, we practice spiritual principles because they are right. When we are finally released from rebellion and when we live by M principles because we actually and continuously want to live that way, then I think we are the recipients of a great amount of grace indeed.

Father E.: I'd like to ask about Recovery Inc., that society which deals with mental and emotional ailments. To what extent might Recovery Inc. help along the person who just has a problem of drinking before it gets

too bad? And also, after one is a member of AA might not Recovery Inc. help him? Would this interfere with one's loyalty to Alcoholics Anonymous? Are you acquainted with how Recovery Inc. operates?

Bill W.: I have always looked with great sympathy upon Recovery Inc. The founder of that movement was a psychiatrist. In actuality, Recovery Inc. is very much of a heresy to M. But it's the kind of heresy that often seems to work. Those good people operate on the basis that through a program of discipline and constant exertion of the will, their several compulsions and hexes can be directly attacked and eliminated. When this is tried in a group such as theirs, they also get the benefit of group inter—communication and power. In many cases their results have been extraordinary. Perhaps some of you know that Father Edward Dowling took a great interest in this enterprise. Some time ago he told me that one of his Jesuit friends had benefited immensely from this group and had contributed much to it. I believe that Recovery Inc. is undergoing considerable modification nowadays, since the death of its founder. They are broadening their scope. Altogether I have the highest opinion of that outfit.

Father W.: I 'd like to make Bill feel more comfortable. He has brought out something that has impressed me very much when he said I'm called the author of the Twelve Steps. In them we have tried not to offend the medical profession or the clergy. I've just been trying to help drunks get sober and stay sober. He takes the stance that he is just the oldest living member of AP, an originator, only in that sense. He doesn't want to pontificate. Does that state your position correctly, Bill?

Bill W.: You are entirely right. Being such an early member and having been prominent in the production of our literature and the management of our service affairs, it is natural that my part in the founding of M gets much overstated. As you know we have a history book called M Comes of Age. This volume clearly reveals that grace flowed through a great many people to bring into being what is M today. It took a whole lot of forces and influences, way beyond my own comprehension to bring our fellowship into being.

At one time I felt pretty important to the M venture. But the more I reflect on the past, the more I find nowadays that my own part diminishes in significance.

Father A.J.: Bill, I would like you an experience I had a few years ago, and have your comment. In Cleveland, on this occasion, I met one of the first fifty members of M. I forget what his name was. We were talking about the similarity of the Twelve Steps and the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius. This old time AA made remarks which ran as follows: I don't know if everybody realizes it, but the Twelve Steps were not concurrent with the beginning of AA. They came into existence three or four years later. There were two men who were trying to be sober, but they couldn't. Some AA members at that time insisted that you and Dr. Bob write down the method by which they obtained sobriety. Either Dr. Bob or you said to a certain young man: "You heard us talk, you had an education. Now why don't you write down something in black and white, so that we can give it to everybody."

Then this nameless young fellow wrote down five or six paragraphs, which were the sum total of the philosophy of M at that time. The story is that you and Dr. Bob developed the Twelve Steps from these writings. So I would like you to say, Bill whether this is fiction. Also I wish you would tell us more about Sister Ignatia - who she is, and what part she played.

Bill W.: The story of the writing of the Twelve Steps and what preceded this event has been told in our history book, M Comes of Age. This account reflects not only my own recollection of the matter; it has been carefully checked with other Ms who were living at the time. I believe it to be substantially true. This account shows that M's First Step was derived largely from my own physician, Dr. Silkworth, and my sponsor Ebby and his friend, from Dr. Jung of Zurich. I refer to the medical hopelessness of alcoholism — our 'powerlessness' over alcohol.

The rest of the Twelve Steps stem directly from those Oxford Group teachings that applied specifically to us. Of course these teachings were nothing new; we might have obtained them from your own Church. They were in effect an examination of conscience, confession, restitution, helpfulness to others, and prayer.

Before the Twelve Steps were written, these ideas were circulated in some six "word of mouth" steps. I don't remember that anybody in particular formulated these. If this formulation was the work of some one person, he merely stated in our language what we had already learned from the Oxford Groups. When the Twelve

Steps were written, it was thought wise to further define and amplify these basic ideas. That is the substance of it, as well as I can recollect. I have no recollection of the person you have described.

In passing, I should our great debt to the Oxford Group people. It was fortunate that they laid particular emphasis on spiritual principles that we needed. But in fairness it should also be said that many of their attitudes and practices did not work well at all for us alcoholics. These were rejected one by one and they caused our later withdrawal from this society to a fellowship of our own - today's Alcoholics Anonymous.

Sister Ignatia was the marvelous associate of my partner, Dr. Bob, in M's early time. Though not a Catholic, Dr. Bob was admitted to the Staff of St. Thomas Hospital in Akron. Sometime prior to this, he had hospitalized alcoholics there and Sister Ignatia ministered to both their physical and spiritual needs. Dr. Bob as a physician tended them medically at no cost whatever. From about 1940 until Dr. Bob's death in 1950, these two great people gave hospital care and took the M message to some 5,000 sick alcoholics. Since that time, at St. Vincent's Charity Hospital in Cleveland, Sister Ignatia has been provided with a special ward, largely through the aid of local Ms who helped to construct it. And there she has since treated and ministered to some 7,000 cases more. What all these thousands of alcoholics owe to her, what A.A. as a whole owes to this dear lady is a total, which only God Himself could reckon.

Before leaving the subject of the Oxford Groups, perhaps I should specifically outline why we felt it necessary to part company with them. To begin with, the climate of their undertaking was not well suited to us alcoholics. They were aggressively evangelical; they sought to re—vitalize the Christian message in such a way as to "change the world." Most of us alcoholics had been subjected to pressure of evangelism and we had never liked it. The object of saving the world -when it was still much in doubt if we could save ourselves - seemed better left to other people. By reason of some of its terminology and by the exertion of huge pressure, the Oxford Group set a moral stride that was too fast, particularly for our newer alcoholics. They constantly talked of Absolute Purity, Absolute Unselfishness, Absolute Honesty, and Absolute Love. While sound theology must always have its absolute values, the Oxford Groups created the feeling that one should arrive at these destinations in short order, maybe by next Thursday! Perhaps they didn't mean to create such an impression but that was the effect. Sometimes their public "witnessing" was of such a character as to cause us to be shy. They also believe that by "converting" prominent people to their beliefs, they would hasten the salvation of the many who were less prominent. This attitude could scarcely appeal to the average drunk since he was anything but distinguished.

The Oxford Group also had attitudes and practices, which added up to a highly coercive authority. This was exercised by "teams" of older members. They would gather in meditation and receive specific guidance for the life conduct of newcomers. This guidance could cover all possible situations from the most trivial to the most serious. If the directions so obtained were not followed the enforcement machinery began to operate. It consisted of a sort of coldness and aloofness, which made recalcitrants feel they weren't wanted. At one time, for example, a "team" got guidance for me to the effect that I was no longer to work with alcoholics. This I couldn't accept.

Another example: When I first contacted the Oxford Groups, Catholics were permitted to attend their meetings because they were strictly non-denominational. But after a time the Catholic Church forbade its members to attend and the reason for this seemed a good one. Through the Oxford Group teams Catholic Church members were actually receiving very specific guidance for their lives; they were often infused with the idea that their own Church had become rather horse-and-buggy, and needed to be "changed." Guidance was frequently given that contributions should be made to the Oxford Groups. In a way this amounted to putting Catholics under a separate ecclesiastical jurisdiction. At this time there were few Catholics in our own alcoholic groups. Obviously we could not approach any more Catholics under Oxford Group auspices. Therefore this was another and the basic reason for the withdrawal of our alcoholic crowd from the Oxford Groups notwithstanding our great indebtedness to them.

Writing Down The Twelve Steps

Perhaps you would be interested in a further account of the writing down of the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous.

In the spring of 1938 we had commenced to prepare a book showing the methods of our then nameless fellowship. We thought there should be a text for this, which could be supported by stories, or case histories, written by some of our recovered people.

The work proceeded very slowly until some four chapters were done. The content of these chapters had been the subject of endless discussion and even hot argument.

The preliminary chapters consisted of my own story, a rationalization of AA for the benefit of the agnostic, plus descriptions of the alcoholic illness. Even over this much material the haggling had been so great that I had begun to feel much more like an umpire than an author.

Arrived then at what is now Chapter Five, it was realized that a specific program for recovery had to be laid down as a basis for any further progress. By then I felt pretty frazzled and discouraged.

One night, in a bad mood I must confess, I lay in bed at home considering our next move. After a time, the idea hit me that we might take our "word of mouth" program, the one I've already described, and amplify it into several more steps. This would make our program perfectly explicit. The necessary ground could be covered so thoroughly that no rationalizing alcoholic could misunderstand or wiggle away by that familiar process. We might also be able to hit readers at a distance; people to whom we could offer no personal help at the moment. Therefore a more thorough job of codification had to be done.

With only this in mind I began to sketch the new steps on a yellow pad. To my astonishment they seemed to come very easily, and with incredible rapidity. Perhaps the writing required no more than twenty or thirty minutes. Seemingly I had to think little at all. It was only when I came to the end of the writing that I re-read and counted them. Curiously enough, they numbered twelve and required almost no editing. They looked surprisingly good - at least to me. Of course I felt vastly encouraged.

In the course of this writing, I had considerably changed the order of the presentation. In our word-of-mouth program, we had reversed mention of God to the very end. For some reason, unknown to me, I had transposed this to almost the very beginning. In my original draft of the Twelve Steps, God was mentioned several times and only as God. It never occurred to me to qualify this to "God as we understand Him" as we did later on. Otherwise the Twelve Steps stand today almost exactly as they were first written.

When these Steps were shown to my friends, their reactions were quite mixed indeed. Some argued that six steps had worked fine, so why twelve? From our agnostic contingent there were loud cries of too much "God." Others objected to an expression, which I had included which suggested getting on one's knees while in prayer. I heavily resisted these objections for months. But finally did take out my statement about a suitable prayerful posture and I finally went along with that now tremendously important expression, "God as we understand Him" — this expression having been coined, I think, by one of our former atheist members. This was indeed a ten-strike. That one has since enabled thousands to join M who would have otherwise gone away. It enabled people of fine religious training and those of none at all to associate freely and to work together. It made one's religion the business of the A.A. member himself and not that of his society.

That M's Twelve Steps have since been in such high esteem by the Church, that members of the Jesuit Order have repeatedly drawn attention to the similarity between them and the Ignatian Exercises, is a matter for our great wonder and gratitude indeed.

Father Z.: You mentioned Dr. Shoemaker, the Episcopal Rector and one time Oxford Grouper, who helped you so much. Somewhere I have seen him quoted to the effect that three men started it all. So do you mind telling us what happened to your own sponsor, your friend Ebby?

Bill W.: I think I have already traced the connection between Dr. Jung, his alcoholic patient Roland and my friend Ebby. They were of course associated in the Oxford Groups when Ebby came to me that November day in 1934 at my home in Brooklyn. It was Ebby who brought me the message that saved my life and uncounted thousands of others.

Because of gratitude and old friendship, my wife Lois and I invited Ebby to live at our home shortly after I sobered up. The son of a well—to—do family in Albany, he had never learned any profession so he was

broke and had to begin all over. These were difficult circumstances, naturally. Ebby stayed with us something like a year and a half. Being intent on getting reestablished in life, he took little interest in helping other alcoholics. Little by little, he commenced the rationalization we have seen so often. He began to say that if only he had the right romance and the right job then things would be okay. At length, he fell by the wayside. He would not mind if I tell this — it is a part of his story today.

For many years, my friend Ebby was on the wagon and then off. Sometimes he could stay sober for a year or more. He tried living with Lois and me for another considerable period. But apparently this was of no help. Maybe we actually hindered him. As M began to grow his position became difficult. For a long time things went from bad to worse.

About six years ago the groups down in Texas decided to try their hand. Ebby was shipped non-stop to Dallas and placed in an M drying out place. In these new surroundings in Texas, far from his old failures, he has made a splendid recovery. Excepting for one slip, which occurred about a year after his arrival down there, he has been bone dry ever since. This is one of the deepest satisfactions that has ever come to me since A.A. started and many another A.A. can say the same.

Father Ab: Bill, you have undoubtedly through the years had much experience with people who slip. Doubtless you know how difficult it is for some priests to make the program. Have you anything to say about this?

Bill W.: Well, I must confess that in recent years I have been greatly pre—occupied with our World Service structure, and all that sort of thing. Nevertheless some of my closest friends are priests who have recovered through M. From time to time I hear about their especially difficult situation.

Though priests enjoy very special advantages, they are, at the same time, severely handicapped. Like medical men, they are experts in treating people — the MD treats the body, the priest, under God's grace, treats the soul. The priest, especially, must feel a huge burden of guilt. On the other side of the coin marked "guilt" is often inscribed the words "false pride." As a professional teacher it is pretty hard for a priest to take M lessons from plumbers and bankers, many of whom never had any religious training or instruction whatever. It's the same way with the doctors, particularly with the psychiatrists.

Therefore we are extremely glad that the Church through the agency of this Conference is taking great notice and a new understanding of the plight of these clergymen who are in alcohol difficulties.

I know that many experiments of a special nature are being tried for their rehabilitation. These range all the way from straight attendance at M meetings to private groups and to specially constructed institutional care. I am sure that all of these resources will find applications according to the several necessities of those needing such care, understanding, and treatment.

Father Ab: What about slips in general? You must have witnessed a lot of them.

Bill W.: The subject of slips is a very large one. It takes on a lot of territory. Slips can often be charged to rebellion and some of us surely are more rebellious than others. Slips can be charged to carelessness, to complacency. Many of us fail to ride out such periods sober. Slips are due to the illusion that one can be "cured" of alcoholism. Things go fine for two or three years then the member is seen no more. He gets busy putting two cars in the garage and again returns to keeping up with the Jones's. That almost surely spells trouble. Some of us suffer extreme guilt because of vices or practices that we can't or won't let go of. Too much guilt, too little exertion, too little prayer — well, this combination certainly adds up to slips. Then some of us are far more alcohol—damaged than others. Still others encounter a series of calamities and cannot seem to find the spiritual resources with which to meet them, or else in frustration they simply won't try as hard as they can. There are those who are physically ill. Others are subject to more or less continuous exhaustion, anxiety, and depression. These conditions often play a part in slips. Sometimes they seem utterly controlling.

Then there is the sort of acute physical tension which greatly aggravates our emotional' reactions. There seems little doubt that the glandular system in many alcoholics is much out of whack, that this condition is responsible for a high degree of physical tension. This tension and its emotional consequences finally become so terrific that some of us are literally driven back into alcohol, or worse still, into sleeping pill

addictive. Therefore we sometimes slip because there is a limit to their endurance. While sleeping pills are an addictive menace, a relief we cannot use at all, it may be that the actual physical causes of these tensions will one day be located. If this happens, it may be that these defects can be medically corrected without resort to addictive materials. Let us prayerfully hope so.

This condition of physical tensions explains the behavior of many people who try ever so hard to get the M program, the ones who mystify us because they cannot make the grade. They may well be the subject of unbearable emotional pain. Of course this does not absolve them from all responsibility. It was their former behavior that doubtless deranged them physically as well as emotionally. But as I have said, this matter of slips is a very big subject. We can know ourselves only a little, and other people not much at all. Therefore these observations of mine are largely speculations, speculations in which I trust there is at least a degree of truth.

Father Kennedy: Bill, I want to tell you in the name of this entire Conference that we are deeply grateful to you for coming down here.

Bill W.: With all the earnestness and feeling that I can command, I wish to thank you for this hour and for what each and all of you have contributed to it. Most gratefully I acknowledge what the Church has meant to me, and to so very many of us.

The meeting and the Clergy Conference concluded with prayer.