

Forgiveness and Healing in Recovery

[Return to Resources and Archives Index](#)

Father Carl Tenhundfeld, a priest of the Diocese of Houston, was ordained in 1955. He has worked more than 35 years with the recovering community. In November 2000, Father Carl did a seminar on the 12 steps of AA for persons involved in parish ministry with people in recovery, with emphasis on healing and forgiveness. The seminar was taped and in 2001 the video was a finalist for the Telly Award, among 12,000 entries. Now retired, Father has been a pastor, teacher, retreat master, counselor and trainer. He remains active as a counselor and in his priestly role.

I just popped into the library this afternoon. The San Antonio Express says, "Catholics applaud policy on abuse." It says, "San Antonio Catholics went to Mass on Sunday morning with the hope and expectation that a tough new policy on sexual abuse would shift the Church's focus back to its historical mission." Guess what it is? The ministry of healing and forgiveness. Folks, that's what we're all about: healing and forgiveness. Back in 1967, I was at the Passionist Retreat Center in Houston, Texas. I had come down there in 1965 after teaching nine years in the minor seminary. One weekend one of the fellows got sick, and they asked me to help on a retreat for St. Michael's Parish, one of the most affluent parishes in the diocese. There were 34 men there; 33 were Catholic and one agnostic. A Catholic brought the agnostic to this Catholic retreat. Those two guys had one thing in common that I didn't know about. They both belonged to AA, and they used to come on Sunday evenings and meet out on the little pagoda that we had there. I asked some of the guys, "What's going on out there Sunday?" They said, "Oh these guys get together and have a meeting. Don't bother them and they won't bother you." Okay.

Well, we had this retreat and we did our number, dressed up in cassocks, the whole nine yards. Afterward we stood out on the porch, and everybody who marched said, "Oh, good retreat. See you next year." These two guys were kind of holding back. I'm 37 years old. Got a degree. Smart. Know everything. They came up to me and said, "We've got a favor we want to ask of you." I said, "Sure, what?" They said, "Would you work with us in AA?"

You know what went through my mind when they said AA? American Automobile Association. That's how dumb I was. Degree, seminary education, not a single word about alcohol or drugs. It had to be inspired by the spirit. I said, "Sure, why not? Let's do it!"

That began an adventure for me. I've never forgotten folks — and this is important as far as I'm concerned — that of the two people who were instrumental in getting me to work with the program, one was a believing Catholic and the other was an agnostic. It remained that way, and I did his funeral. God can use whomever God wants to use, when God wants to use them, and the way God wants to use them: that's my belief. They took me to 12-step meetings, went out on 12-step calls with them. Boy, you talk about some horror stories. I remember at midnight going into somebody's house. He's walking around with a pistol and I'm saying, "What the hell am I doing here?" That was the way I got the beginning of my education in the program. The following year they said, "Let's have an evening, we'll come out and have a meal, and then you'll give us a talk on the spiritual steps, and after this, have a meeting." I said, "Fine, let's do it." So they came out and they had a meal, and I gave them my talk and they went and had their meeting. They said, "Let's do a whole weekend!" So we did a whole weekend.

Growth of the retreat

Typically we exposed to them to the retreat weekend that we did for every other Catholic male in the diocese. No understanding of the problem. No personalizing to that particular need. I remember old Howard. He thought he was Fulton Sheen. Boy, he would be dramatic. I was sitting in the sacristy waiting for him to come for the afternoon talk, and he was shaking like a leaf. I said, "Howard, what happened?" He said, "I've never had this happen. There was one guy over there, every time I'd make a point, he said, 'Amen, brother.'" It was old Tom, a good Baptist.

The next year we had one more retreat, and it looked like it was going down hill. I got the fellows together and said, "It doesn't look like it's going to work, the retreat's not going to be of value." They said, "Can we make

some suggestions?" I said, "Sure."

"Let's do this. Take all the activities out of the chapel except prayer and Mass."

"Fine, no problem."

"Have the meetings in the regular meeting room."

"No problem."

"And would you guys take off your cassocks, and, you know, just wear regular clothes. A lot of these folks are Baptists and Methodists and they don't belong to any religion at all and it kind of ..."

I said, "No problem."

We did that, and what do you know, it just took off. Today the retreat center stands as a testimony to the power of God. They contributed \$100,000 to build their own meeting room on the retreat center grounds. There are at least 15 meetings a week in this hall, and they have anywhere from 12 to 15 weekend retreats just for people in the program. Over the time that I was there from 1967 until I left in '84 to do the Renew Program in the diocese, I had given over 100 retreats and I've heard over 8,000 fifth steps.

I remember lovable Red, another agnostic. We were sitting in the lobby registering people as they came into the retreat. He said "Carl, how do you keep coming up with new ideas or new insights into the program? I've never heard you repeat anything twice." I said, "Red, I get it from my Catholic faith." That's where it comes from folks. It comes from faith in Jesus Christ, our tradition.

An incredible gift

Here's a story in the paper last Sunday, "Healing wounds: Psychologist frees himself to talk with his dying father." I hope you'll see here what is the one unique gift that you and I as believers in Jesus Christ have, that adds a dimension to this that no one else can have: the ministry of forgiveness and healing. If we really get in touch with what Jesus meant about forgiveness and all of the many opportunities that we as a Church have to express that forgiveness, its incredible the gift that we have at our disposal.

Everyone of us looks at life through certain lenses. They help us put things together. To understand where many people in the program are coming from it might be good to remember something that I read about two years ago. There was a discussion out in California on spirituality. As far as formal religion went, about 84% to 87% of the Jewish young people dropped out. Evangelical Protestants, 67%. Mainline Protestants, 64%. Catholics, right about the same thing. Where do most of these people go? Spirituality programs, especially 12-step programs.

So if you look out at your church on Sunday and you see some vacancies there, you can bet your bottom dollar that a lot of them are at 12-step meetings. These are the folks buying books on spirituality, whatever form it takes today; and there are thousands of them out there. They used to be in the churches. The point is, they're searching and seeking and they're looking. Our task is to see how we can relate to them, take them where they are. I believe that Jesus accepted people where they were. He didn't tell them, "When you get ready to do this, come back and see me." He dealt with people the way they were and He accepted them. A lot of people are into spirituality, and they're doing good. They're praying. They're helping their neighbor. They're doing good works, a lot of the same things that we would like to do. So if we're going to lead them and bring them a little bit farther, we have to know something about those spirituality programs.

The one significant difference between the popular spirituality programs and Church spirituality is the person and the presence of Jesus Christ. He is the one that makes the difference. Jesus gives the vision and the direction and the way to do things, and so we have to learn to continue to look to him.

There are marvelous things happening in our Church ever since the RCIA was introduced. The RCIA is the method of welcoming adults into the Church. We don't sit down with them and give them two or three lessons and say, "If you want to become a Catholic, go to confession and then start practicing." We realize that the conversion process has a number of characteristics. Number one, it is unique. Every person who is seeking and searching is on a journey, and their journey is unique. The RCIA tells us that people go through various stages of conversion. Another constant is that it's ongoing. Never ends. I don't know how many conversions I've had in my life; thank God I still have opportunity to do it. Another constant in conversion is that there is always some other person involved.

Two weeks ago I got a call. "Father Carl?" I said, "Yes?" "Father Carl, my name is so and so." I recognized the name. "So and so told me to get in touch with you." I hadn't talked to this person in years! Here we are, years

later, the Lord is doing something. So I sat down and talked with her. She had 15 years' sobriety. What was the problem? Still hadn't dealt with what? Forgiveness. Fifteen years later, she still hadn't dealt with forgiveness. We have an appointment for three more weeks. It's going to be taken care of. But that's the way God works, not according to our time.

Demythologize, demystify

When I was very active with the program back in the 70s and 80s I used to give talks at several of the treatment centers called "Demythologizing God." We all know what a myth is. Everybody's got their story about God. People whose lives have been affected by drugs or alcohol or any other abuse, you can bet your bottom dollar when it comes time to think about God, they're going to have some real screwed up ideas. It's understandable. Fear, what's the Big Book say about fear? How fear-ridden people are! One of the reasons why is good old Catholic fear. You're going to hell! Right? I can remember as a teenager, we used to trot off to confession every Saturday afternoon. We were afraid. We had the idea of a vengeful God. God's just waiting for the moment to get even, and that's why all this crap is happening in your life. You're getting paid back. There was no sense to seek forgiveness. You're not going to get it. We've got to get rid of those ideas about God. Demythologize God.

I've since then added another one. We must demystify the Church. I remember one gal coming to our first women's retreat. She said, "Do we have to go to church?" I said, "No, you don't have to go if you don't want to." Then, a couple years later when she'd been to two or three of them, and I was vesting for Mass. I walked by and we had a little side chapel where we kept the Blessed Sacrament, and we had the red light out there. She says, "I'm not going to genuflect." I said, "That's OK. You don't have to genuflect." All these things build up over the years and they bring them back with them. That's got to be taken care of.

I made my retreat back in March and a friend gave me this book, *The Holy Longing*, by Ronald Rolheiser. His approach is from the angle of the Paschal Mystery. What's the Paschal Mystery? It refers to the suffering, the dying and the rising of Jesus. Right? We all give lip service to the idea, and this is what he says, that as we go through life, there will be times when we will suffer, when we have pain. If it's the alcoholic or the drug abuser or the family, there's pain and there's suffering. But there also has to be the dying. And there will be a rising. All of a sudden I'm saying, "Gee, this sounds great in terms of modern Catholic theology." He talks about Mary Magdalene. Remember? At Easter time, she was at the tomb, and Jesus appeared to her. She didn't recognize him because Mary was looking for Jesus the way He was before He died. She wanted to go back to that, to what was, because that's what she knew and had experienced. She had to learn that that's not the way Jesus is. He's changed. She had to die to the way of looking at Jesus that she was comfortable with, that was meaningful to her, and come to a new understanding. Conversion, see? All over.

We can't go back; we have to look at new life. How is that accomplished? Just a couple things that I recommend, especially to people in the program. The first thing I ask them, "Do you ever read Scripture?" The 95% answer is no. I suggest, I invite them to read the Scriptures. I start them off with the Gospel of Luke, the Gospel of love, of mercy, compassion. You know all the beautiful stories: the Prodigal Son, the Lost Coin, Jesus forgiving. Then I say, "Now look around in AA, or whatever program you're in. Do you recognize some men or women who are very powerful in their program, but who are also practicing Catholics or practicing Christians?" I say, "Let them model for you what the Church and God are all about." Practicing Catholics, Christians and other denominations, the people who have their feet on the ground and who are in that church, who are attending Mass, receiving the sacraments, praying and doing all those churchy things — they really model what the Scripture is talking about. They have to have somebody they can see who is doing that.

Let's take a look at forgiveness. Anybody who's read the Big Book knows that forgiveness is all over the place, when it talks about the fifth step, particularly when it talks about sex. If we are sorry for what we have done and have the honest desire to let God take us to better things, we believe that we will be forgiven. So the idea of forgiveness is in there. On page 86, it talks about a constant effort to renew our good desires and look at our lives when we retire at night. We constructively review our day and we ask for God's forgiveness.

The problem for us Catholics is that frequently we want some outside source to tell us that we're forgiven. I'm just sharing with you my own personal experience. I'm sure your experience is just as rich, and you have all kinds of good ideas on this, too. All I'm sharing with you is what has come through my experience with dealing with this. I have a principle that I call "The Roots Principle." Remember Roots? It goes back and traces every-

thing back to its origin, the family tree and all kind of stuff like that. Anybody who has Christianity in their background cannot be satisfied until they deal with forgiveness on an ecclesial or Church level. They're okay at certain points and at certain levels; but deep down, there's something in them that says, "I've got to get in harmony with God on this ecclesial or Church level."

I'll never forget one retreat. I was hearing fifth steps all day Saturday. A Presbyterian came in and for two hours and a half did the whole rigamarole on the fifth step. Most of the time I just sit there and listen. He got up from his chair, looked me straight in the eyes and said, "Tell me I'm forgiven." Well, if you'd been a Catholic I'd say, "You want to make this a confession." I gave him forgiveness. I figure God got him there. That's what he was there for.

Now I never publicly admit this, but I have a non-Catholic, Jewish, agnostic form of forgiveness. You know why? People need a ritual. A ritual. People would come in for years with their fifth steps, five pages, 50 pages, 100 pages. I began to say to them when they finish, "Now give me that." They'd say, "What are you going to do with it?" There's a beautiful statement in Isaiah, that when we give our sins to God, He throws them behind his back. So to the agnostic or the non-Catholic, I say, "Now look it, this is what God is using me as an instrument to do for you — throw it behind me." Man, the eyes just pop open! It's the realization "I can't have that anymore." See? Now anybody can do that.

Everybody wants ritual

There hasn't been a single Catholic in all those years that I've heard these fifth steps, that when I said, "Do you want to make this your confession?" they said, "No, Father, no." Not one single one. Everyone says, "Yeah, I'm making my confession." They want that gift, and everybody wants some kind of ritual celebration. It can be done by placing your hands on their head and praying and then invoking a blessing. It's in our tradition, invoking blessings, invoking the mercy of God, for our people.

I had to ask myself once, why are all these Baptists, Methodists, Lutherans, agnostics, Jewish people coming to me to do their fifth step? I was getting hundreds of them. They all know me as Father Carl. They want a priest, there's no ifs, ands, buts about it. I read that correspondence between Bill Wilson and Jung, and the comment was made that to be human we need symbols. Look at all the symbols we have. Wedding bands. Bishops have their pectoral crosses that set them off from the regular priests. Symbols, we need symbols. Jung was saying that people in the program need symbols. When they hear about this forgiveness, they might not like the Catholic Church. They might have things against priests, but they have this idea that if you tell a priest something in that context, he can't repeat it. Oh, is that attractive. That is very very attractive. He can never, never repeat it. So, all the work is done, except the seventh step. You have to ask the Lord to remove the shortcomings. And you have to be willing to make amends.

There was story on ABC news called, "Who's sorry now?" Apologies can benefit both society and individuals. Some individuals say the failure to apologize frequently triggers an angry response from the injured party. By apologizing we can not only do the right thing, but often you can prevent a dispute from escalating. I think of that in terms of the eighth step when you go making amends and apologize. You nip it in the bud, and it makes it possible for people to restore harmony in their lives. Then it goes on the say, "All these things are quite healing." So the forgiveness will lead to healing.

There are some burdens that humans alone can't deal with. If you've ever dealt intimately with people in a counseling situation, you know they literally spill their guts and tell the secret. The secret is the one thing that has never been told to anyone else. They have to be sure of who they are going to tell the secret to.

I personally find it difficult to see how the fullness of forgiveness can be discovered outside a divine context. I'm absolutely convinced that the peace of mind that comes from forgiveness erases fear and anger and revenge. Part of the problem I have with the current controversy, as much as I am opposed to all kinds of abuse, is that if there is revenge in this, we're looking at the wrong, we're not doing like Jesus did. We have to not be vengeful people.

Three parts to forgiveness

Forgiveness is a triangle. There are three parts to it: God the higher power, the self and the other. For forgive-

ness to be integral and complete, it can't be just with God. It also has to be with the self and with the other. This is where it is so vitally important I think that we have our idea of God biblical and correct. The Bible says, "Judge not, and you will not be judged." "Condemn not, and you will not be condemned." "Forgive, and you will be forgiven." Now that's what I read. "Love one another as I have loved you." "If you have anything against your brother, and you're off to church, to the temple, to worship, and on the way you remember that your brother's got something against you, stop, don't go to the church. Be reconciled first before you come to offer your gift." I didn't make those up. Jesus did. That's what it tells us.

Part of the process that I take people through goes like this: In your understanding of God, is God's forgiveness total? Supposing you've committed adultery 100 times and had one abortion and have done this, that and the other thing. You say, "I think God can forgive me for everything, except the abortion." It doesn't wash. Everything. The abuse, too. There's nothing in Scripture that says that that is an unforgivable sin.

We need to think about this in this great state of Texas, about the death penalty. There is nothing in Scripture that says that people should be punished that way. Total. Absolute. When God forgives, God forgives. He doesn't come back tomorrow and say, "Well, now, wait a minute." They call up a week later and say, "Are you sure? Are you sure?" Absolute. No ifs, buts and ands. God's forgiveness is unconditional. "I will forgive you, if ..." God's love and forgiveness are unconditional.

We make God into our image and likeness. I've had terrible struggles in my life about forgiving somebody. I'll tell you a story. This is Good Friday. I was in the retreat house office. The Serra Club came on Good Friday for lunch. I'm sitting in the office. What in the world am I going to talk about? I'm looking through Scripture and I say, "I'll give a talk on forgiveness." I start writing out all these beautiful words on forgiveness. I'm coming along real well and the secretary buzzes me and says, "So and so wants to receive confession this morning. You got time?" I said, "Sure, send him on out." So he gets out and the guys are assembling in the lobby there, and my office is just off the lobby. I said, "Let's go down to room 12. We'll do the sacrament down there." We get two-thirds of the way down out of earshot of everybody, and he stopped me, and said, "Father, before I ask you to give me God's forgiveness, I've got to ask you to forgive me." I looked at him and I said, "What for." He said, "I'm the one that's been spreading the rumors about you." There were some juicy rumors going around about me and my conduct. My instinct was to haul off and hit. Here's the guy asking me to give him God's forgiveness. It was Good Friday and I'm going to give this beautiful talk on forgiveness and here's the Lord saying, "Practice what you preach." Thanks be to God I was able to forgive him. For the next three years, every time I saw him I said, "Oh, there's that ..." That's what came to mind.

Forgiveness without revenge

There is a difference between forgiving and forgetting, and there are times when it's not easy. I'm sure I don't know what it means for those folks that were abused, what they've gone through. I'm sure that it's traumatic and terrible. I think it's wrong and everything should be done that needs to be done to rectify it. But somewhere along the line they're going to have to confront the issue of forgiveness without revenge. I don't see Jesus up on the cross saying, "You s.o.b.'s, I hope you all go to hell." What I heard him say was, "Father forgive them. For they know not what they do." In the Scripture, we have our mandate for forgiveness.

I remember going to my doctor back in the early 70s. This guy was an Irishman brought up in England, and he's got a dry sense of humor. He said, "Father I don't understand something. When Jesus Christ walked the face of the earth, he didn't cure every evil, rectify every wrong. He reached out and did whatever He could and He got others to work with Him to improve and better the world, but not every evil was rectified or healed. Why in the world do you have to try and do better than Him?" Ever since then I do what I can do. I do as much as I can do, but I know that I am not going to empty the treatment houses of every drug addict. I am not going to empty every pub of drinkers. I am going to be ready to do everything I can to help those, when the Lord invites and calls me to do that.

Every clergy person that I've talked to that has come out of treatment, when they go back to their ministry, one of my suggestions is this: You now have a unique gift you didn't have before. Before it was a curse for you. Now it's a gift. There are many people out there who are in recovery in 12-step programs that are not going to be touched by the ordinary flow of the parish, but who will be touched by you because you are one who walks with them. Now you are a wounded healer. Folks, if we're not wounded in some way we can't become healers. When we are wounded, when we accept our wounds, when we let the Lord heal our wounds, then we can go

and become wounded healers. There are all kinds of ills and problems and difficulties out there that need God's healing.

You and I have been called and invited to be involved in a marvelous manifestation of the mercy and the compassion and the goodness of God. How many people have you touched? We can sit back and say, "The government doesn't spend enough money, or the diocese doesn't spend enough money, parishes don't do enough."

A couple months ago I had a supper with one of the general staff members from New York. I asked her, "As regards the churches, what's your general perception as you travel all over the United States and the world about the role of the churches?" She said, "Carl, the Catholic Church is the one that is the most open. The Catholic Church is more open to working with people with alcohol and drugs — that we find all over the world. Right after that are some of the Protestant churches."

I have never met more loving, caring, wonderful people in all my life, than in the years that I have dealt with people in recovery. I have met so many marvelous people. To look back and see that you have been an instrument of God's love, forgiveness, and healing, it's incredible. When I became a priest, the farthest thing in my mind was that I would ever work with alcoholics or drug abusers. Yet the Lord brought that about, and here I stand, 47 years of being a priest, and He's still doing it, because if we're willing and if we remember that it's God's work ... My favorite Sunday in the liturgical year, on a personal level, is Palm Sunday. On Palm Sunday Jesus rode a jackass into Jerusalem. I have never forgotten who the Lord is and who the jackass is.

I hope that some of these thoughts will encourage you to continue to be kind, compassionate people, who have a tremendous gift in your lives, the gift of forgiveness. The people out there are looking for it, searching for it, seeking for it; and by opening up our lives to the possibility, God can bring the two together. You can be channels of peace, love, forgiveness, and healing. That's what happens when you work this program; forgiveness and healing will take place. Thank you.

[Back to Top](#)

[Return to Resources and Archives Index](#)

© Copyright 2003 National Catholic Council on Alcoholism and Related Drug Problems, Inc.