

## ***Historical Perspective of Father Ralph Pfau and the NCCA***

*Adapted from a talk by Monsignor William J. Clausen at the 50th anniversary celebration of the NCCA in 1999. Monsignor Clausen is pastor of Saint Mary Church, Maple Park, Illinois, a former board member and past president of the NCCA.*

The first diocesan policy addressing alcoholism among priests and men and women religious was promulgated in Chicago in 1966. Father Ralph Pfau, the founder of the National Catholic Council on Alcoholism, died in 1967. Thank God Father Pfau lived to see the first large diocese in the United States bring this problem out into the open and devise a plan to deal with it.

On August 23-25, 1949, the first gathering of NCCA took place at Saint Joseph's College in Rensselaer, Indiana. It was hosted by Bishop John G. Bennett of Lafayette, Indiana, with Archbishop Paul Schulte of Indianapolis in attendance. Bishop John Cody also attended representing Archbishop Joseph Ritter of St. Louis. Bishop Cody later would become the Archbishop of Chicago. Is it surprising that one of few bishops to be at the first NCCA Conference was the first Bishop to have a promulgated policy?

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Father Pfau became the first priest to sober up through Alcoholics Anonymous. "By Divine Providence, I became the first priest-member of Alcoholics Anonymous back in 1943. And those of you who know my story know I wasn't too willing at the time . . . and 14 years later, by the grace of God and the help of AA, I can say, 'I am sober today,'" (Alcoholism: A Source Book for the Priest, 1960).

In this talk given in 1957, he describes how NCCA began. He met Father Edward Dowling, SJ, who was the first priest to approach the problem of the alcoholic through AA. He made a trip to New York City to meet Bill Wilson. In talking to Father Dowling in St. Louis in 1948, Father Pfau said: "You know . . . it would be a nice thing if we could find out who else among the clergy are in AA, because I think that priests in AA feel the need to know if there are other priests in AA," Father Dowling suggested, "Why don't you have a retreat of some kind?"

In 1949 Father Pfau approached Archbishop Schulte and Bishop Bennett not only about a gathering of priests members of AA, but also of all priests who might be interested in solving the problem of the priest alcoholic. A letter went out to all the ordinaries asking if they had any priest alcoholics. Forty-seven attended that first conference in Rensselaer, made possible through the good graces of the Fathers of the Precious Blood who today still own and staff the college. A psychiatrist, a medical doctor, and both alcoholic and non-alcoholic priests came to the conference.

### **Nothing but faith**

Father Pfau recalled the event: "We had no idea of making it an annual affair. We did not know what was going to happen. We started on nothing but faith in Providence and a hope that something would come of it."

From the start Father wanted laymen there. Even though the first conference was not open to the laity, laity always have attended: those interested in the priest alcoholic such as psychiatrists, doctors and AA members. Father Pfau wanted the lay attitude toward the priest alcoholic problem to be shared.

For four years the conference was held at Rensselaer. Then the board decided it would be better to move the conference each year to give local clergy a chance to participate in the discussions. It also would give NCCA a chance to disseminate what was learned about alcoholism. So once they "got their act together" at Rensselaer, they took the show to the big city — Jamaica, New York; then Boston, Kansas City, Missouri; and so on . . .

For the first 10 years of the NCCA the focus was on coming to grips with alcoholism as more than a moral problem. Alcoholism is described in detail as a disease that responds to treatment and the power of AA. The unique and delicate position of the alcoholic priest is emphasized. The need for bishops and priests to understand the nature of this disease and for seminarians to be well educated about the malady is stressed.

Many people did not understand alcoholism as a disease. Father Pfau was not alone in his misunderstanding.

The record of NCCA proceedings from the gathering at the Statler Hilton in Buffalo, New York, April 27-28, 1965, has Father Pfau sharing this insight: "I personally had convinced myself that one could not become an alcoholic unless one drank in the morning. So I would take barbitals, bromides, ASA, what-have-you until noon — then I could drink to my heart's content and not be an alcoholic. Many times I poured the drink in the kitchen at eight o'clock in the morning after Mass, and hour after hour I would paddle out and look at it until noon, and then 'down the hatch.' I wasn't an alcoholic because I didn't drink in the morning!" Many people did not understand alcoholism as a disease. Father Pfau was not alone in his misunderstanding.

Father Pfau believed that priests in AA felt the need to know if there were other priests in AA. He knew from personal experience the stigma attached to alcoholism, which made it hard for priests to get help. For a number of years at NCCA gatherings, there was a Pastoral Institute on Alcoholism and also a Clergy Conference. Volume XIX of The Blue Book, -- NCCA's record of its annual symposia -- contained the proceedings of the XIXth National Clergy Council on Alcoholism, but also the Ninth Annual Pastoral Institute. They are described as follows:

"The National Clergy Council on Alcoholism meets annually to conduct two separate and distinct projects: the first is The Pastoral Institute on Alcohol Problems; the second is The Conference itself.

"The Pastoral Institute does not discuss or deal with personal problems of priests. It treats only of their professional problems. All priests who are engaged in the care of souls frequently encounter cases of alcoholism and of excessive drinking. The Pastoral Institute is presented to help priests deal with the problems intelligently and successfully. Its sessions are publicized and open to all priests and students of theology in major seminaries.

"The Conference deals primarily with priests' personal problems. Consequently its sessions are not to be publicized, although they are open to all priests who take an interest in these special problems. Laymen may attend only by special invitation from the Board of Directors."

The last time the annual NCCA meeting was divided in this manner was in 1968.

In 1969 laymen Richard Caron and Gerard Weidman are listed as board members. In 1972, Mrs. Marge Klemm and Mrs. David Worrell were named as committee members, and in 1974, Sister Therese Golden, OP, became a member of the board. Father Pfau always was concerned that alcoholic nuns were in a delicate position.

## **National Catholic Council**

In 1971, the "Twenty-third National Clergy Conference on Alcoholism" was held. However, in that same year, the members of Board of Directors were listed under the title "National Clergy Council on Alcoholism." In 1985, a resolution was introduced to change the name of the organization to the National Catholic Council on Alcoholism to show that membership included laity among its leadership as well as men and women religious. The resolution passed at the 1988 NCCA gathering at St. Louis. Today the NCCA is the National Catholic Council on Alcoholism and Related Drug Problems, Inc. (The "Related Drug Problems" was added to the title in 1974.)

In 1974 a special outreach to men and women religious was under way. Also, the format had changed from a lecture style symposium to a workshop approach. A few years earlier at the insistence of Father John Ford, other family victims of alcoholism were included in the symposium.

The NCCA is a work in progress. Conferences over the years have had attendance of more than 200 or fewer than 50. The council has been both ignored and consulted. Bishop Bennett in the 1950s encouraged and supported an organization that many viewed as unnecessary and unwanted. Cardinal Anthony Bevilacqua in the 1990s has encouraged and supported an organization many say variously has done its work or is past its

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prime. The Cardinal said in 1999: "May God continue to bless you and your important mission!" Struggle and conflict have been mixed with hope and healing, and a commitment to carry the message today to a Church greatly in need of hearing it. The NCCA has never sought for recognition and indeed has never had it. It has, however,

endured.

An important part of NCCA history has been the Society of Matt Talbot Guild — publishing the books and supporting the NCCA through the work of Marge Klemm, Pat Worrell, Josephine Pfau, Mary Pfau and her husband Ralph, and their dear friend Marge McMahon. They went to close things up at the SMT Guild in 1968 when Father Pfau died, yet they were still going 30 years later in 1998 when they turned over the publishing to the Hazelden Foundation. Father Pfau's retreat work was his major activity until his death. The SMT publications grew out of that as well as the records and tapes.

In the modern era, Monsignor Kieran Martin took over as Secretary/Treasurer at the NCCA Office in Brooklyn and brought fiscal discipline to the organization. The board has reviewed its duties and made revisions to the constitution. The Knights of Columbus have been a mainstay of needed support over the years. A trust from the estate of the Mr. and Mrs. Theo Vanneman has been a Godsend.

The NCCA is especially indebted to Father Ralph Pfau for his faith and courage. "We did not know what was going to happen," he said. "We started on nothing but faith in Providence and a hope that something would come of it."

### **A testimonial to God's grace**

All of Father Pfau's work was a testimonial to God's grace. He knew when he got sober in AA that a miracle took place. He was still an alcoholic and a neurotic, but he could live in sobriety and he could live fairly well adjusted. He did live a full and productive life. When he died sober of viral hepatitis early Sunday morning, February 19, 1967, at Our Lady of Mercy Hospital in Owensboro, Kentucky, he was at peace.

He had just learned that his last book, *The Golden Book of Sanctity*, had been approved for publication. The book notes three levels of sanctity:

"Heroic sanctity — in which classification we find such stalwart men and women of history as St. Paul, the apostles, the martyrs, and the like: all of whom accomplished great deeds perfectly both in view of God and man."

"Solemn sanctity — in this class we find the long list of canonized saints." ". . . all the saints did whatever they had to do — perfectly." He cites St. Therese of Lisieux as an example of "perfection in simple daily life [which] also takes heroism."

"Simple sanctity — Here we should find the rest of the vast human race — you and you and you and me! It is not a special vocation, it is a universal vocation to all mankind — to be saints, to be perfect."

Father Pfau described this simple sanctity: "It means first and foremost that we must accept ourselves as we are — today: good or bad, sinner or saint, ignorant or educated, screwball or alcoholic (or both), rich or poor, Catholic, Protestant, Jew, agnostic, single, married . . . exactly whatever we are now." The perfection God expects is in our being willing to let God approve of me, sanction me today. "We must admit and accept ourselves as we are and God will do the rest in His time and His way."