

THE PAST AND FUTURE OF THE NCCA

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The Keynote Address at the 35th anniversary symposium of the NCCA.

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I have, I must confess, some slightly mixed emotions about being identified in the program as a “Link with the past.” It’s wide open for a crack about the elusive “missing link.” I even checked at the door to see if anyone was charging a special admission to get a look at the link. (NCCA can always use a little extra coin.) But I do have a claim on the title, since I did serve on the NCCA Board of Directors from 1967 to 1970. In that capacity, I hold precious the memory of attending here, in this city, the funeral of Father Ralph Pfau back in 1967.

Tonight I pay another installment on my debt to him and to his NCCA. There was a day when I might have been a “missing link” — off debating metaphysical profundities with some of you, as a philosopher□bartender served as debate judge.

Instead — here I am: hoping to be tonight what a link is supposed to be — doing what a link is supposed to do.

As a youngster of six years or so on the streets of Brooklyn, a new kid on the block (a foreigner, from out west — over in New “Joisey” someplace) was trying to learn that strange language, Brooklynese. He asked me two deep questions one afternoon: Just what is the difference between a guy and a gink? Which are you — a guy or a gink?

Until tonight I never knew the answers. But tonight I think I found out. I am a gink — a link and a gink.

Tonight I am:

A link with the past (I hope)

and tonight I know:

A guy is a gink with a future (I hope)

So I hope to look at the past of NCCA and to address the future of NCCA.

Back in 1949 at the first of these annual NCCA events the opening speaker began:

Your Excellency (apparently only one Excellency was on hand)

Reverend Fathers (about 100 were before him)

Gentlemen (mostly anonymous and few in number)

Such a brief salute is apparently grossly inadequate tonight. Our categories have marvelously multiplied and you will understand if I do not ramble through a rendition of the roster but merely greet you all together with the now ancient and hallowed formula: “Hello — my name is Joe Kerins, and I am an alcoholic.”

I was naturally flattered that my contribution was given the billing “keynote address” — flattered, but also a bit flustered. I had to find out just what a “keynote address” was supposed to address. When politicians give them it is apparently a license to rave and rant in any possible direction. I reflected that my solemn task had to be thus described and defined: to present issues of primary interest to an assembly; to arouse unity and enthusiasm. But the word “key” in “keynote” kept unduly intruding as I tried to put some thoughts together. My scrawling on long yellow foolscap came to an abrupt halt. The tapping of my typewriter stopped. I could go no further until I asked myself — and all of you — a blunt question or three. Is the “key” in keynote an omen? Is it now time to empty the NCCA hall, turn the key in the lock, and throw it away? Has NCCA reached the goals for which it was founded so that now is the right time to walk proudly off the stage? Hear me, I pray, before you vote.

We are celebrating in this year, 1983, the 35th annual get□together of NCCA — celebrating 35 years of the crucial campaign waged for those 35 years, a campaign whose strategies and tactics were designed by Father Ralph Pfau and his stalwart cohorts, personally directed by him for about half of those 35 years, until his death in 1967. To him, this 1983 symposium is dedicated.

The goals of NCCA were set during the first seminar held in 1949, not far from where we are tonight. The thin little book of 170 pages which summarizes the presentations and discussions of August 23-25, 1949 provides a vivid portrayal of what NCCA was all about in those early years. From those pages you can sense the yearning, the hope, the enthusiasm, yes, and the great frustrations that surged back and forth through the assembly. Ralph rallied the forces, as he always did, responded pointedly — often by name and at times in thin anonymity — to those who would blur the vision of the tasks ahead. As I read that now a bit musty record, I had a tremendous sense indeed that looking back from here in 1983 we can cry out: “The battle Ralph and his cohorts fought has long been won!” The sound of a victory parade has now long faded. Are we here tonight merely for a memorial service in celebration of the victories?

Let me dip into those pages to see if I can give you a share in the sense of victory that came through to me as I read:

1. Perhaps the most poignant pages in that booklet were these: from Austin Ripley making his plea that the Guest House facility be born. He speaks of the alcoholic priests as yet unreached at the time as “the abandoned of the abandoned,” refers to “one of the most tragic figures on earth — the alcoholic priest.” Perhaps it is difficult for us today to understand that he felt impelled to say publicly things like this:

“In the Church’s sometimes violent, but always futile attempts at reform of the alcoholic clergy, we see that in the grim and dreadful tradition of the past, lie the fearful, frightful facts of the present.”

“The Church has failed, has tragically failed in handling the problem.”

“There you have it . . . their case . . . The case of the alcoholic priest . . . has special unique aspects . . . Their plight is pitiable, their problem extreme. Well, neither their plight nor their problem are being met today.”

“When . . . when will the Church recognize and have the humility to admit that they are mistaken . . . When will they provide proper treatment and rehabilitation facilities?”

Ripley goes on, to quote reports from priests in touch with him from places of incarceration for alcoholic priests, from places called the “Siberias of the spirit,” “Black Holes of Calcutta,” “ninth circle of Dante’s Hell.”

Due in some significant measure to the pressure from Ralph Pfau and those early associates in NCCA, here in the USA and, indeed, to some extent in the universal Church, the keys have been turned in the doors of such places and they have been emptied. We have now an admirable range of respectable, successful facilities for priests and religious alcoholics. Soon after 1949 the victories began to be won, the castles of iniquity of which they spoke in 1949 defeated and destroyed.

2. No longer do we hear (or is this today more hope than fact?) an ecclesiastical leader speak, as was said at the 1949 sessions kindly but blindly of alcoholism “that bad habit, that temptation, that weakness.”

3. From that same little book of 1949 we can pick up ample evidence of how far we have come through the guidance of NCCA in the topics to be discussed at a national convention. No longer do we have to have prolonged presentations and discussions supporting the thesis that alcoholism is an illness, a sickness, a disease. We no longer need page after page exploring the “moral issue” argument. Those battles, too, are long since won. We no longer need any profound assurances that participation of priests and religious in AA will not really cause a tidal wave of scandal to sweep across the land. Do we then need an army in the field marching under the banner of NCCA to fight long-vanquished enemies?

4. Surely in this year of 1983, when alcoholism is so openly and so often dealt with in the public media, is the subject of public policy statements in almost every diocese and religious order in the country, we can only be a bit awed, indeed amazed, that back in 1949 when the proceedings of the first national gathering of NCCA were circulated, this was done with surroundings of such secrecy and sensitivity as to suggest a meeting of a subversive group, intent on revolution!

The Forward to the book felt impelled to say:

“These published proceedings are offered to a selective (sic) audience (and) . . . recipients are asked to remember that this book is intended for a very restricted audience and information contained in it is not intended for public dissemination.” “Names of most of those who took part have been omitted. These have

been identified by number and can be checked.”

Perhaps at this point, in view of the ancient-sounding rituals, and especially the topics of discussion, that engaged the attention of NCCA at the outset, we can use a reminder that all this was not going on back in 1818 when Indiana was admitted to the Union, but in 1949 — when Harry Truman still had years of presidency ahead of him and Pope Pius XII still had years of papacy ahead. Some of us here tonight had even by then already learned the difference between a manhattan and a martini! But I trust I have given you enough of the flavor of that 1949 NCCA event to let you understand why the contrast between then and now gave rise to the impulse I felt that at the “keynote address” we ought to ask honestly whether it is time now to empty the hall, lock the door, and throw the key away. While we meet here tonight, the Pope is meeting bishops, priests, religious, laity in a tense and troubled Poland. The contrast might embarrass us in the concerns that bring us together. Maybe NCCA should say “We never had it so good.” but immediately add “That’s no reason for not making it better.”

I venture to say that if the voice of Ralph Pfau could be heard here tonight he would agree that many of the major goals for NCCA that he presented in his 1958 autobiography have been almost 100% achieved. This is how he presented NCCA in “Prodigal Shepherd:”

“In 1949 even professional people had little understanding of alcoholism. Although the Yale School of Alcohol Studies and Johns Hopkins University had contributed valuable information in educating the public, we still felt that it was necessary to institute similar studies within the framework of our Church. We founded the National Clergy Conference on Alcoholism to fill this need. An annual meeting of bishops, priests, and laymen is sponsored by the NCCA for the purpose of studying the alcohol problem in relation to Catholic theology.”

I ask you tonight: can we not say that those books have now been written, those articles published, those speeches given? Above all, can we not say that the old questions pitting theology against alcoholism are no longer even asked? Can we say that NCCA has turned the key, opened the closed Church and let in the light of wisdom?

In 1967, right after Ralph Pfau died, a posthumous re-edition of “Prodigal Shepherd” was published and it contained a brief epilogue by Father John Ford, S.J. paying a well-deserved tribute to Ralph for the faith, fortitude, zeal that dominated his priestly life and bore special fruit in the founding and fostering of NCCA. Father Ford then goes on to say:

“This organization and its publications . . . have made a deep and favorable impact on the American Hierarchy. The result has been a clearer understanding of the nature of alcoholism, a more intelligent and successful handling of the personal problems of priests; and a more effective approach to the professional pastoral work of priests with the alcohol problems of their parishioners.”

So as we look over the scene, we can truly say we have come far:

- knowledge and understanding about alcoholism is widespread, at every level of the Church particularly;
- hardly a spot in the country is out of reach of adequate and effective rehabilitation facilities;
- the stigma has been largely erased and the concept of sickness has replaced it;
- the alcoholic priest and religious no longer hangs swaying in the wing of controversy while well-meaning zealots debate moral responsibility.

Is it time then to bid each other farewell with pats on the back for a job well done?

I suggest that a quite dramatic answer to that question can be found by a rather simple device: a brief comparison between the topics in our program for these 1983 days and the conclusions of the 1949 sessions, five modest resolutions which were as follows:

1. NCCA should meet annually;
2. Circulate the proceedings to Bishops, Provincials, Rectors of seminaries;
3. Encourage participation of priests in AA in each diocese;
4. Promote the concept of Guest House;
5. Instruct seminarians about alcoholism for their future work and their personal lives.

You have read the rich brochure for this symposium so you know what we are now about. We are talking about areas of action hardly dreamed of back in 1949: alcoholism in the lives of religious women; the mounting problems in pastoring teenage alcoholics; intense concentration on our contribution to spiritual growth in recovery. We can boast that NCCA has come a long way to be sure, but the journey is far from over. If we are to be faithful to the heritage left us by Ralph Pfau, the other pioneers, those who came along later to bear the burdens of leadership, we in our turn must accept our responsibility to do the work of NCCA that still remains to be done — and there is, indeed, still much to be done.

Our brochure for this symposium speaks boldly on its cover of “NCCA — A New Life, New Beginnings.” That is not an epitaph on a tombstone but a banner leading us into the future. NCCA, despite its proud record, has not yet reached its full potential. We have a responsibility to the past which calls us to stride confidently into the future. Much of our service remains still to be given. We dare not fold our tent and quietly steal away. What are, as I see them, some of the tasks still before us?

Maybe it would be well to begin with the 1983 cover letter from our Executive Director John O'Neill, prelude to the 1982 Blue Book just recently circulated. I hope you read it — and were disturbed, as I was, by a few of the reflections therein. He sees evidence that in our declining national economy there is some rising reluctance to invest ecclesial funds — diminishing as they too are — in meeting the growing costs of rehabilitation for priests and religious alcoholics. Can NCCA do anything to counteract this economizing?

That same letter suggests a bit delicately and a bit obscurely the apparent resurgence in some treatment programs of primary emphasis on the concept of alcoholism as a symptom of deeper psychic problems which should be eliminated or lessened before the alcoholism can be successfully treated. That reflection suggested to me that maybe we ought tonight look again to the example of Ralph Pfau, sober in AA for over 25 years, when he opened his autobiography with these striking words:

“All my life I will carry three indelible marks.
I am a Roman Catholic priest.
I am an alcoholic.
And I am a neurotic.”

So let us take at least a brief look at some of the unfinished business still before NCCA:

1. Its basic educative function is on-going and never ending. We have a regular replacement in the Church of Bishops whom we can serve. We have a steady, if diminishing, number of priests being ordained, religious (both men and women) being professed, and should never make the fatal assumption of effective prevention of alcoholism in their lives, or readiness to walk the road of recovery if they become victims of the illness, or of adequate preparation for the pastoral ministry to alcoholics that these might provide.

2. It seems perfectly valid to suspect that still erratic and still gap-filled are the training programs in seminaries and formation institutions in the subject of alcoholism. What is being provided is too often not enough to meet what is needed for prevention, for recovery, for responding to pastoral ministry.

3. We should reflect also that every success in meeting our potential constituency at younger ages, in the ranks of priests, religious, adds a further handicap of which we should be aware. I have an impression that stories of uninterrupted sobriety seem to be declining. Am I right in suspecting that earlier recovery adds to the hazard of subsequent relapse? Do we need in NCCA not only attention to recovery — but also more emphasis on re-recovery? Do we have to stress more keeping alcoholics sober as well as getting them sober? Also, when we stress “getting them sober as young as possible” so as to lengthen their years of sober ministry we should not overlook the other end of the range: those into whose lives alcoholism comes only late in life. The onset of alcoholism among the aged is growing at an alarming rate. This development has implications for NCCA not only in its service directly aimed at bringing the message of recovery to priests and religious but also in making the Church in general more aware of this pastoral need in ministry to the aged, to senior citizens, or whatever is your favorite designation of this constantly growing segment of our population. Only about a week ago the incidence of alcoholism among the elderly merited the attention of a Congressional hearing. The statistic was accepted that 10% of this group are new victims of the illness of alcoholism, and the alcoholism was not a residue of their more active years. Later in life, tolerance diminishes. The hazard is amplified by the characteristic feelings of loneliness, uselessness and is complicated by medicine prescribed

for other ailments. Can NCCA move more vigorously into this area of need in the lives of older priests and religious into pastoral ministry to the elderly laity in need of AA or Al-Anon?

4. As the phenomenon of late-blooming vocations grows in the Church now and in the future, several consequences might well be explored by NCCA:

- a) Is there any residue of reluctance in the institutional Church about accepting as candidates for priesthood and religious life recovering alcoholics?
- b) Are some such candidates indulging in disastrous silence about their recovery?
- c) Should NCCA advocate some open policy of provision for regular attendance at AA meetings for candidates in the fellowship?

5. Surely an important item on the present and future agenda of NCCA must be outreach to women in the Church — in the ranks of religious, in the ranks of the laity, more and more in need of pastoring by alcoholics themselves recovering. If NCCA does not respond to these growing challenges, will there be any response to this need sponsored by the Church? A whole vast area of activity — perhaps far from sufficiently explored by NCCA — is our relationship to Al-Anon . . . to Alateen.

6. A special urgency is now emerging in our knowledge of alcoholism that impels me to plead that we not slack off — but rather speed up our efforts to reach suffering alcoholics with any claim on our concern and service as soon as possible. I suspect that we need to re-examine constantly the impact on us of the often fatal aphorism “You cannot help an alcoholic until he is ready.” Time is becoming more and more of the essence. Let me try to explain my understanding of this time-factor. In 1949 at the first NCCA annual meeting, the record seems to indicate that there were on hand something over 40 admitted alcoholic priests. I am presuming as of tonight — but without any Fichter facts to substantiate my presumption — that practically all of them are enjoying their eternal reward. I presume also that they died sober — after enjoying years of continuous sobriety. But tonight I want to ask an unanswerable question: how many of them died prematurely, died of illnesses which we now know stemmed from alcoholism, illnesses which might have been prevented if recovery from alcoholism had come sooner into their lives?

Not too long ago I attended a lecture — perhaps many of you heard the same talk — by Dr. Russ Smith of the Guest House staff, and he said quite dramatically that “most alcoholics do not live long enough to die of cirrhosis of the liver.” I took a tentative little poke at my own liver and figured that sobriety would take care of that hazard to my health so “What’s to worry?” He told me “What’s to worry!!” He developed in some detail the thesis that many fatal illnesses are now being discovered by research to be associated with alcoholism. He spoke, for instance, of “the alcoholic heart.” He seemed to be saying plainly that many sober alcoholics who die of heart attacks and strokes may indeed be dying of fatal residues of their alcoholism. So time is important in carrying our message.

I graduated from Guest House in the summer of 1978 (ending up in need of rehabilitation after many years of prior uninterrupted sobriety.) One of the most delightful fellow-students with me there was a Jesuit, Jim Mac, due to depart a few weeks after I left. Before his graduation however I had his memorial card in my breviary (where it still is). He was found dead in his room. He died, I know, happy in his sobriety . . . one of the happiest men I have ever known. His heart just gave out, I heard. He was in his early 60’s. I have since wondered if he might not be here tonight — and he would have us laughing if he were — here healthy and active if he had gotten the message a decade or two before he did. I have wondered if his heart damage was related to his alcohol problem.

7. We often hear it said at AA meetings that for every alcoholic in the room recovering, there are nine persons “out there” who need what we have, or wish they had what we have. Now, medical science is revising the statement thus: “For every alcoholic at an AA meeting, indeed for every alcoholic in this very hall, there are nine alcoholics out there dying.”

Perhaps you will be inclined to dismiss that as grossly exaggerated — needlessly dramatic — not sufficiently proven. I will not argue with you — and I know you will get no chance to argue with your undertaker: Even if it is only half true, can we here at this 1983 NCCA symposium ignore it? It seems to me we must take it seriously, increase the pace of our efforts to carry the message. If we are here asking ourselves what is

there still for NCCA to do in the years ahead, can we just turn our faces away when a voice calls out to us: “For every alcoholic in here there are nine out there dying”?

8. But I must get on with this attempt to probe our agenda for the future in NCCA. Now that it is routine practice for priests and religious to be part of AA all over the country, maybe we ought to be asking ourselves if it is enough that we just be there, active in our groups as others are active? Over the years it was in some large measure due to NCCA that we got into AA without having to check out our attendance with the chancery or provincial office. I honestly wonder if we have done as much as we could after we got into AA groups.

In the early proceedings of NCCA meetings and it comes through in the proceedings down the years, you sense a growing gratification at the contribution by NCCA members to satisfying the spiritual hunger around AA. I honestly rebuke myself regularly that so many ordinary members talk more about the spiritual at meetings than I do. Are you also still tip-toeing around the spiritual, providing hardly a trickle for fear “they” will think it is a flood? Ralph Pfau’s life has another message for us tonight. After a while he had to consciously limit the retreat commitments he could make with members of the fellowship. There will never be another Ralph — but could we walk in his footprints, even if we cannot fill his shoes? Many are certainly doing so but I do not think we have to feel yet that the field is overcrowded. Can we do more to feed the spiritual hunger in AA or Al-Anon?

Just last week I gave an evening of recollection to a group of women from Al-Anon and Families Anonymous. There were about thirty women from about six different groups. I told them I would be speaking to NCCA and asked if they had any messages to send. These were some of the things they thought we ought to hear:

1. Don’t just open your church halls to us. Come in: listen, learn, share your spiritual experiences, spiritual resources. Can’t you help us in our efforts to pray and meditate? Why do we so rarely find clergy ever aware that we are around?

2. Tell them again that for every suffering alcoholic there are four victims. Help the one but don’t just forget the four. It is the National Clergy Council on Alcoholism not the National Clergy Council on Alcoholics.

3. It seems to me that one columnist, Ann Landers, leads more anguished wives to Al-Anon and family groups than all the clergy in the country.

I carry the messages without comment and with no contract to carry return messages.

Over the years retreat activities such as Father Fred Lawrence’s National network of Serenity Retreats, Calix, the Matt Talbot retreat movement, have grown with the encouragement of NCCA. Is there more still to be done? Is NCCA too much leaving the vast area of spirituality in AA, Al-Anon, Alateen up to the zeal and interest of individuals? I suggest it is long overdue that NCCA make a concerted and organized effort to promote the retreat apostolate more than it has done up to now to the best of my knowledge. I am gratified that these topics come along later in our symposium this year.

We certainly make no claim that NCCA can get anyone sober. Our almost universal experience is that it is AA that brings sobriety and NCCA only tries to help us be better AA members. We recognize our joint debt to AA — recognize that we can never pay that debt — but maybe we have been defaulting on the payments that we can make. The GRAPEVINE for March, 1983 has an astounding figure that “AA is growing at the rate of 15 new groups daily.” That is what they say! Maybe all of us here, alcoholics or not, could be more aware of the need for encouraging these new groups, aware especially of the help we can provide with spirituality. Lest you think that this “keynote” is going to run up and down the scale all night, let me assure you that my little song is nearly ended nearly, but not quite!

9. I would feel seriously remiss in my commitment to take on this keynote address if I ignored one other topic crucial, I feel, to the future of NCCA. Certainly among our unfinished — by far — NCCA tasks are those emerging from the pervasive and exploding drug scene today. Can we ignore this — treat it as a passing fad — view it as a minor adjunct to our primary concern with alcohol? Hear these few reflections on the subject:

a) It seems fitting on this night that we begin with a reminder about Ralph Pfau’s struggle with drugs while attending his first AA meetings, so painfully recalled in his autobiography.

b) Then, about five years ago NCCA added to its title the words “and related drug problems.”

c) Between those two events another treasured voice in NCCA was heard: that of John Ford, S.J.. At the annual convention in the year after Ralph died, John, his friend and mentor, gave a talk entitled: "The new look of NCCA," proposed a new era after the first 20 successful years, a new era in which NCCA would move into our drug-oriented culture. That call came to us about 15 years ago. He ended his talk with a little prayer — maybe God has yet to answer it. "That God will give us the light to see the things we ought to see and the strength to do them."

d) I ask you to hold in one hand those three items I have just mentioned: Ralph's first AA meetings; our added title in NCCA; Ford's talk. In the other hand hold a pile of issues of GRAPEVINE over recent months. Maybe you have been following the discussions in that AA magazine about dual addiction and AA groups and meetings. Official AA literature recently labeled the problem: "AA groups' Dilemma." Some AA members seem to advocate a policy of "alcohol only." It is ironic that the man who was apparently the first Catholic priest very active in AA would have been ineligible for membership, when he first showed up if that were the criterion! I would not presume to propose a solution. I would not presume to speak for Ralph Pfau. But I do not hesitate to hazard the guess that he would not be on the sidelines waiting for "group conscience" to speak without a few pointed contributions from him. I would hate to think that NCCA has nothing to offer to the debate. I see by our symposium that many of the agenda items I have mentioned will surface for discussion as our sessions go on. I trust this latter one too will show up.

Conclusion

And now I must let the "keynote address" fade into silence. When 35 years ago NCCA heard its first keynote address, there was certainly desperate need for its messages and its services. With the proliferation of programs, agencies, activities in the field over recent years, we do well to ask if NCCA is now merely duplicating what is already being done and perhaps done better by others. I trust that tonight I have delicately answered "Nonsense." The problems are still running far ahead of all the proposed half solutions. I am reminded of a line from the old play "Green Pastures" where Gabriel, after looking over the earth, says to the Lord: "Everything nailed down is coming loose." We do live in a society in which everything indeed is coming loose — values, attitudes, convictions. I wonder if ever in human history there was instability comparable to the instability of our times. In our world, in our Church I hazard a guess . . . without any Fichter facts on my fingertips . . . that priests and religious recovering in AA, helped by NCCA, have as a segment of the Church, a more favorable stability index than many other segments. We did come loose but we are nailed down again.

No doubt many of you have paged through Ernest Kurtz' history of AA entitled "Not□God." I did not find therein any reference to Ralph Pfau or to NCCA. I did however get a sense of a parallel between the early history of AA and the early history of NCCA — discussions, diversions, differences. At the end of his book Kurtz asks: "How long will Alcoholics Anonymous last?" The answer he gives has its application to NCCA as well. Kurtz says:

"AA will live . . . so long as it is AA . . . an utter simplicity which encases a complete mystery that no one claims perfectly to understand."

NCCA will last so long as we have sense of our responsibility, of our message, even of our mystery, and above all of our special vocation in the Church and in the world.

Thank you.

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