

# THE PRIEST AND THE SOBER ALCOHOLIC —SOBRIETY AND SPIRITUAL PROGRESS

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This morning we heard from Mr. Ashton Brisolara regarding the general concepts of alcoholism. One of the things that he emphasized was that it is a disease, that it is an illness, that it is an illness which is enduring, one that is permanent. In beginning my discussion of the priest and the sober alcoholic, I want to mention the fact that we need to emphasize that this disease is present even when the man is no longer drinking. The alcoholic is not just simply the individual who drinks without control. When he puts the cork in the bottle, he remains an alcoholic. He will remain an alcoholic for the rest of his life.

Therefore, the disease of alcoholism is present when he is sober. Every therapy that has successfully dealt with the problem of alcoholism has recognized this fact. Every program that has succeeded has been centered on the problems that arise in the life of the alcoholic after he is sober.

It has been mentioned that alcoholism is a progressive disease. I would like to point out that it is progressive not only when a man continues to drink, but that the inability to ingest alcohol in a normal manner with normal results is progressive even when a man is not drinking. Experience seems to indicate quite clearly that when a man has been sober for, let's say 10 or 15 years, and begins to drink again, he does not go back to the point of tolerance he was at when he quit drinking, but that a further progression of his inability to ingest alcohol in the normal manner has taken place. In other words, there it is a progression of the disease "alcoholism" regardless of whether a man is drinking or not.

Monsignor Dunne spoke about the fact that we can do a great deal to help the drinking alcoholic to find sobriety. We can help him to understand his problem, and it is also within our province to indicate to him that there is hope for him and that there is help for him. He indicated that dedicated priests, who may have made a special effort to inform themselves on this problem, may be able, personally, to give direct help to the drinking alcoholic.

For the average priest, however, it will be a matter of referring the drinking alcoholic to Alcoholics Anonymous, to a doctor, to a psychiatrist, or to some other therapy that may be of help for him. In other words, every priest can indicate to the individual who is drinking that there is hope for him and that there is help for him. We can assist him in finding this help. Working as a member of the team, as Mr. Brisolara said this morning, staying within the limitations of our discipline, we refer the drinking alcoholic to those who are professionally trained to take care of him — the doctor, or the psychiatrist, or those whose experience enables them to give expert help, the members of Alcoholics Anonymous, and others who are similarly informed.

## Therapy for Alcoholics

I think it might be well to mention that there is a variety of therapies that have helped alcoholics. The best known and the most successful, the one that has dealt with the greatest number of individuals, is Alcoholics Anonymous.

The program of Alcoholics Anonymous is characteristic of what is done in practically all of the therapies. Others may not speak about twelve steps, they may not talk specifically about doing this particular thing or that particular thing, but the total program is pretty much the same, regardless of what therapy is used.

## The 12 Steps

For some of the men present here, the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous are well known, but there are others here who may not know what we are talking about when we talk about these Steps. So I am going to go through them very rapidly, since many of the things I say will be based upon them.

The Twelve Steps of AA are:

1. We admitted that we were powerless over alcohol, and that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. We came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understand Him.
4. We made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. We admitted to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. We were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. We humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.
8. We made a list of all the persons we had harmed and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. We made direct amends to such people wherever possible except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. We continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong, promptly admitted it.
11. We sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry it out.
12. Having had a spiritual experience as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to other alcoholics and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

Now whether you know these steps by heart or whether this is the first time you have heard them, you will recognize that only the first step talks about alcohol. It is mentioned in the twelfth step, but only indirectly. The other steps are all a program for spiritual rehabilitation and for spiritual development.

### **Role of the Priest in Therapy**

Here we are in an area where the role of the priest is the role of one who is trained in spiritual development and in spiritual rehabilitation. Here we are dealing with things that are proper to us, things that we do not have to have special training in, things that are part and parcel of our daily pastoral or our priestly life. I do not believe that any priest can excuse himself from helping the sober alcoholic who does need help. I don't think any priest can excuse himself from that task and say that he is fulfilling his duty any more than we can excuse ourselves from any of the other areas in which we need to help in spiritual formation or in spiritual development.

Mr. Brisolara said this morning that each of the disciplines, represented by each of the members of the team that meets the alcoholic, must realize his own limitations. By the same token, each of the members of the team must do his job; each must realize his abilities. We do have the ability to help the sober alcoholic in his spiritual development. We can help him to remain sober.

It is not sufficient to help the alcoholic get into AA and then to say the job is done. We speak of alcoholism as a disease, but it is not like having a bad tooth. Once the dentist pulls the tooth, the ache is gone and the thing is finished. The matter of the alcoholic going to Alcoholics Anonymous or to any other therapy is only the very first step that he makes on the road to contented sobriety. The other steps are just as necessary, and they are absolutely essential to his continued sobriety.

### **Spiritual Progress Is Essential**

In my own experience, and I think that the experience of those here who have dealt with the alcoholic over a period of time will agree with me, I have found that those who only make the first step and who do not try to develop spiritually, do not try to become better men and women, just simply do not remain sober. Monsignor Dunne mentioned this morning that there are between five million and seven million alcoholics in the United States. He also mentioned the fact that only about 300,000 are members of Alcoholics Anonymous. Now this is correct, and yet it is incorrect. There are about 300,000 men and women in this country who are enjoying continued sobriety through Alcoholics Anonymous. But I would venture to say that there are another 500,000, as a minimum, who have gone to AA and have been there for a while, and then have fallen away and gone back to drinking.

There are hundreds of thousands of men and women who did not succeed in this program, not because they were unwilling to admit that they had a problem, but because they did not develop spiritually,

because they did not carry out the other steps. And many times this failure was due to some extent at least, to the lack of direction. They did not know whom to go to or, when they went to someone, they perhaps did not receive the help they needed in order to develop spiritually.

So I feel that we need to be aware, first of all, that the sober alcoholic needs help in order to maintain his sobriety, and especially to have what we term contented sobriety. And I also maintain that it is a normal responsibility of the priest to help in this area.

How can we help? What can you and I as pastors or as priest counselors do for the sober alcoholic? I don't want to go into the details of each "step"; that would encompass too much territory for this afternoon. But let me say this, there are two steps in particular in which we can give help. These are the fifth step and the eleventh step.

## **The Priest and the Fifth Step**

The fifth step, if you will recall, states; "we admitted to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs." Very frequently when the alcoholic is ready to make the fifth step, after he has made a searching and fearless moral inventory in the fourth step, when he is ready to articulate what he has found in his inventory, he will seek out a priest in order to reveal to "this other human being" the exact nature of his wrongs.

We need to acquaint ourselves with the procedure, and I am only going to say a few words, laying out general broad outlines, on how to help someone make the fifth step.

The very first rule to follow is this: listen! As Monsignor Dunne indicated this morning, we need a certain amount of humility to deal with the alcoholic. We need it when we go to AA meetings. We don't go there as the experts, we go there as those who are listening and wanting to be informed. Some of you have heard me say before that one of the greatest diseases that afflicts us as a group is that of "infallibilitis." We are expert, infallible in everything that we do. We may wish to be experts in everything that we do, but this is one area in which we must be humble. In dealing with the alcoholic making the fifth step, I think most of us find that we have to listen, give the person a chance to talk, let him express what he has found in the fourth step, let him paint outside himself that image which became clear as he made his moral inventory.

## **Sacramental Penance and the Fifth Step**

A question that has been argued, I suppose, in every gathering in which this matter has been discussed is: is the fifth step the same as a general confession? Now as a matter of personal opinion, and there are some who disagree, and violently, I feel that it is better to do the fifth step outside of confession. The fifth step is intended to deal with the nature of one's wrongs; it is not really supposed to be an enumeration of sins, according to species and number.

We admit to God, to ourselves and to another person the exact nature of our wrongs. We are trying to get at fundamental causes. What is the broad basis of my failure in various virtues or of my failure to do certain things well.

I have found in my experience, that for the Catholic who is not estranged from the Church, through a bad marriage or in some other manner that would make it impossible for him to go to confession, the ordinary sequel of a fifth step will be sacramental confession. I personally prefer to take the two steps separately. First the fifth step extra-sacramentally, and then, if a person is ready and willing to make a good confession, sacramental confession.

But we need to make ourselves available for fifth step work. Most Catholic alcoholics, and many non-Catholic alcoholics, will find it easier to make a good fifth step with us than they will with anyone else. They look upon us as persons to whom they can come with confidence; as persons who will be able to advise them properly in the matter of getting rid of the faults that they find within themselves.

## **The Eleventh Step**

As far as the eleventh step is concerned, it says "that we sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us

and the power to carry it out.”

Now here, Fathers, we are entering into something that is completely familiar to us, the task of helping others to live saintly lives. We will find that there are ordinary and extraordinary means which we can make use of to help the sober alcoholic.

And again, he needs this help, because unless he makes spiritual progress, chances are he is going to go back to drinking; unless he becomes morally strong, some of life's problems will be too much for him and will trigger further drinking. The sober alcoholic has just as many problems to face as the alcoholic who is drinking. He is human, and all human beings have problems. But if he is not developing spiritually, oftentimes those problems will trigger drinking that will bring him back into the acute stages of alcoholism.

Now, the ordinary means that we can use to help the Catholic person through prayer and meditation to become holier, more conscious of the presence of God within him, is to encourage him to frequent the sacraments. He has special need of mental strength that is given there. It is a wonderful thing to see how these men will respond.

I believe that, in general, the alcoholic will respond more readily to spiritual promptings from a priest than the average parishioner. He is just built that way. Whatever he does, he wants to do well. So urge the alcoholic to make more frequent use of the sacraments, and you may be surprised at the response that you get from him.

## **Special Groups for Catholic Alcoholics**

There are also in the country groups of sober alcoholics who have banded together in order that they may live holier lives, that they may become better Catholics. We have the Matt Talbot groups, we have the Calix groups and other groups.

I am best acquainted with the Calix group, and I am going to speak a little about that, because it will give you an idea of what can be done and what is being done.

In speaking about the Calix groups, I want you to understand that I am not saying that this is the thing. This is just one of a number of groups that are helping sober alcoholics. I am using it only as an illustration, and perhaps in the question and answer period, there will be some who are better informed with regard to other groups who will enlighten us on those particular groups.

It is the policy of the National Clergy Conference on Alcoholism not to give specific approval to any form of therapy for alcoholism, and certainly, the same thing holds true with regard to giving specific approval to one or the other group that is working with the sober alcoholic, such as Calix or Matt Talbot's League. We welcome them all. With that in mind, let me tell you what Calix does.

## **Calix**

Calix was founded in 1947 in Minneapolis, when a group of five men got together because they had all been trying to work with a certain alcoholic, and they just weren't getting anywhere with him. They decided that they would get together and pray for him. They did and the alcoholic sobered up. They then decided to see if they couldn't do something more with prayer.

As a result they formulated the rules and objectives of the Calix Society. They are:

“To interest Catholic men and women with drinking problems in the virtue of total abstinence, because even for the alcoholic, not drinking can be a virtue as well as a necessity.

“Second, to promote the spiritual development of alcoholics through worship at Mass, reception of the sacraments and the daily recitation of certain prayers which are called the Calix Prayers.

“Third, to strive for the spiritual sanctification of the whole personality of each member.

“Fourth, to promote the group reception of Holy Communion by the members once a month.” When they do this, they do not go to Communion as a body. Each one goes to his usual place in the Church or in his own parish, but they all receive the same Sunday. In order to preserve the anonymity, they do not go as a group.

“Fifth, to conduct a spiritual hour for all members and guests after this monthly Communion at a breakfast.

“Sixth, to strive to conduct and promote attendance at an evening holy hour once a month. This is

especially by way of reparation.

“Seventh, to have a Mass offered up once a month for the intention of the membership.”

They donate a chalice (hence the word "Calix") or some other religious article each year to be used in the Church, as a memento to the members that have died during the year. Their general motto is: “Calix, the cup that sanctifies, in place of the cup that stupefies.”

I think that any pastor would be happy to turn over the facilities of his parish for meetings of these groups.

Calix, Matt Talbot League, and other similar organizations are not substitutes for Alcoholics Anonymous or other therapy. They complement each other. Calix is frequently called the handmaid of Alcoholics Anonymous. We have had experience in our own area where a fair number of men who went into Calix without first having gone to Alcoholics Anonymous later on joined AA.

This is the sort of thing that can be done, and the results have shown that it is well worthwhile to work with these men in this special way.

Bear in mind, the sober alcoholic still is an alcoholic. He needs spiritual development in order to maintain sobriety. If he does not take care of his spiritual duties and spiritual development, chances are that he is going to slip, and he is going to be again the drinking alcoholic who in the past caused so much pain in the family, in the parish, in the community, and in his own life.

## **Retreats for Alcoholics**

Now there are other extraordinary ways in which the sober alcoholic has been helped in his spiritual development. Very briefly, he is helped especially through retreats and through days of recollection. Father Pfau, who is the founder of our Conference here, also was the first in the country to give special retreats for alcoholics. At the present time, he gives 12 of these retreats in various parts of the West and the Midwest every year.

There are also, I know, retreats given in the East for alcoholics. In our own Diocese, we have a priest AA group. This group decided 13 years ago that as a group project it would conduct a retreat for alcoholics. The Bishop was gracious enough to give the group the use of the Diocesan Seminary for this retreat.

The project developed and now there are two retreats each summer. We could fill the building, I am sure, a half dozen times because each of these retreats is completely swamped. The men come from great distances in order to make these retreats because making a retreat such as this is a big event in their lives. It is also, I might add, a tiring event in the life of the person who gives it, because the men really work you to death. Last year we had four priests there, and every one of these priests was busy far into the night Friday, all day Saturday, and until the time the men left on Sunday afternoon. It is a very satisfying feeling to be able to work with them, even though it is very tiring.

I mentioned that Father Pfau has been doing this for a great many years. We have been doing it for 13 years. I know that I am getting older. I know Father Pfau is getting older, because he told me this morning he didn't have to fast this Lent. And some of us who have been doing this are going to be running out of steam even in our own areas.

I think that it is about time that we stopped thinking that giving retreats for alcoholics is something that should be reserved for those who are alcoholics. Throughout the country we could offer special opportunities to alcoholics in our various retreat houses to make retreats as a group.

This does not mean that we don't encourage these men to make other retreats such as the general lay retreat. Many of the men that attend our retreats will make another retreat during the course of the year. They become retreat-conscious, and they really make use of it.

I know that a tremendous amount of good has been done by this sort of effort on the part of priests. Again, I want to emphasize that this can be something that is done by any priest within any given area.

## **Days of Recollection for Alcoholics**

The same things hold true of days of recollection. I gave a day of recollection just recently in Duluth, Minnesota, to a Calix group. They have 41 members in the two groups there, one group for women and one group for men. (The women's group, I think, has four members, and the rest are members of the men's

group.) But of a possible 41 there were 40 of them there. Only one was missing, and they were at pains to explain to me why that one wasn't there.

I was quite impressed with those that were there. It was on a day when we had one of the worst blizzards of the year, but they were there and everyone stayed until the very end, because they believed they got something out of it.

A day of recollection is something that any priest can arrange for any number of men. Oftentimes the smaller the number the better. A day of recollection doesn't require a lot of planning, it doesn't require a lot of facilities such as a retreat. They come and go the same day, and there is no need for rooms. Maybe a meal has to be served, but that isn't too difficult in most of our parish setups. The talks do not have to be about alcoholism. These men simply want to learn how to be better Christians, how to be more saintly in their daily lives.

For the most part, alcoholics, both men and women, are eager for spiritual programs, and they want us to take a part in them. We have to take the lead because we are the ones who give the retreats or the days of recollection, or at least arrange for them, both with regard to speakers and with regard to facilities.

## **Conclusion**

I would like to mention again that the sober alcoholic is still an alcoholic, and he is still a sick man in the sense that a diabetic, for example, is sick even though he may have his diabetes under control, or in the sense that the cardiac is a sick person even though he may no longer be stretched out on the bed with all the pills and all the gadgets that they use to measure his heartbeat and the like. As long as he doesn't climb stairs or play golf, he may be all right. But he is still a cardiac.

So the alcoholic is an alcoholic even when he is sober. And when he is sober, he needs our help. It is a help that is ordinary for us; the role that we play in the spiritual rehabilitation and the spiritual development of the alcoholic is one that is proper to us. It is one that I feel we need to do because of our responsibility and because of the need that the alcoholic has for our expert help.

As far as retreats and days of recollection are concerned, certainly it may take something out of the ordinary for us to arrange them, but it can be done and it should be done. The sober alcoholic is an alcoholic. He needs help. We can give him that help. We don't have to be sociologists, we don't have to get out of our own discipline, we don't have to be experts. All we have to do is be Christ-like priests who have compassion for those who are in need. If we have that idea, and if we try to carry that out, I am sure the number of drop-outs from Alcoholics Anonymous and other therapies would be less than what it has been in the past. Thank you.