

About AA

Alcoholics Anonymous and the Clergy and Religious

Alcoholics Anonymous is a spiritual rather than a religious program, but from its beginnings the clergy has played an important role in A.A. — opening its church doors to A.A. meetings, supporting the Fellowship, and carrying the message of Alcoholics Anonymous. Rev. Samuel Shoemaker, rector of Calvary Episcopal Church in New York City (where A.A. meetings are held to this day), was one of A.A.'s first nonalcoholic friends. Father Edward Dowling, a Jesuit priest, was the first to recognize the resemblance of A.A.'s Twelve Steps to the teachings of St. Ignatius. Father Ed, who became co-founder Bill W.'s spiritual adviser, was instrumental in spreading the word by personal example and writings. Sister Ignatia, of the Sisters of Charity of St. Augustine, worked with co-founder Dr. Bob S. at St. Thomas Hospital, Akron, Ohio. Together the nursing sister and the recovered alcoholic physician sobered up thousands of drunks.

Because many alcoholics look to their spiritual advisers for guidance, religious are in a unique position to help the still-suffering alcoholic. Clergymen — ministers, priests and rabbis — with an understanding of the disease of alcoholism and the A.A. recovery program may gently inform and counsel the parishioner who is in trouble with alcohol. Teaching sisters and laypersons in parochial schools can, with greater awareness of A.A., give more constructive guidance to children who are exhibiting the consequences of alcoholism in the home. The informed religious involved in social services will also be better equipped to handle individual and family problems that have their roots in alcoholism.

The following article is by a Catholic sister who is familiar with alcoholism and Alcoholics Anonymous, and who carries the A.A. message to members of her own religious community. Sister Maurice Dody is the founder and director of the Office of New Directions, New York City. Her program is not a treatment facility, but rather offers assistance to communities of women religious nationwide in the area of alcoholism and chemical dependency. She educates, consults, and makes appropriate referrals. She is one of the first women religious to address this illness for sisters.

A Religious Looks at A.A.

Dependency on a self-destructive form of behavior which involves the use of alcohol is an incurable self-perpetuating illness affecting people of every walk of life, of every religious persuasion. Alcoholism is a very democratic illness, an equal opportunity one.

Religious communities of women, perhaps better known as sisters or nuns, are microcosms of the world in which they live. We would be naive to think that one of the most prevalent human problems, alcoholism, would be a respecter of persons simply because they live in religious communities. Women religious engaged in the ministry of the Church and in its various forms of apostolates are no more immune to the illness of alcoholism than they are to other debilitating illnesses that afflict society. No longer should they close their eyes in denial or hide their heads in shame because this illness is attacking their members.

It is a fact that the problems that the alcoholic sister has are enlarged by the progression of the illness and become intensified by that progression. As the sister becomes dependent upon the alcohol, she becomes increasingly unable to experience the freedom to be the person she was intended to be. She is engaged in an unhealthy relationship, in a bondage to something that

she does not want, that she did not intend, and that she does not understand. It is an extremely frustrating, humiliating kind of experience when the minister to tangled lives finds herself tangled in alcoholism. As pertains to the realm of the spiritual, it can be said that the alcohol becomes her "Higher Power." It takes over; it begins to dictate what happens. Her focal point shifts from God to that next drink. Unknowingly, she begins to organize her life around when she will drink again.

The woman religious will predictably have many negative feelings and emotions. Remorse, guilt, shame, and self-hatred are frequent. Self-esteem will be shattered. Beneath the seemingly confident exterior is a frightened person overwhelmed with self-loathing and self-doubt. Feelings of loneliness, alienation, depression, hopelessness, futility, and a pervasive sense of meaninglessness in her life can further complicate the emotional life of the alcoholic sister. She thinks to herself, "Somehow I should have been able to avoid doing wrong. Somehow if I really used my head and all my religious training, I would have been able to live a more perfect life."

When the alcoholic is a sister, compassion usually takes a misdirected turn. Excuse or protection is offered under the guise of help. The alcoholic denies the reality of her situation, and family, community members, co-workers, friends refuse to accept the alcoholism despite its obvious visibility. Literally,

this is "loving the alcoholic to death." Sisters are human beings and they are subject to the same limitations of human nature as every child of God. Alcoholism, even for a woman religious, is closer to diabetes than it is to sin. We should keep in mind that when alcohol is ingested into the body of a woman religious, a sister, it does not know or care what she does for a living. If all systems are "go," she, too, can become an alcoholic.

Alcoholics Anonymous is unmatched by any other form of treatment, and is almost universally accepted as the one form of self-help that has been most successful in helping alcoholics recover. By joining together they help themselves maintain sobriety one day at a time. Ongoing association with A.A. provides a fairly constant supportive factor in a person's life, even though other changes may be occurring, e.g., residence, job, relationships. A.A. for the recovering person provides a safe, personal atmosphere in which a progressive improvement in the quality of a person's sobriety can occur.

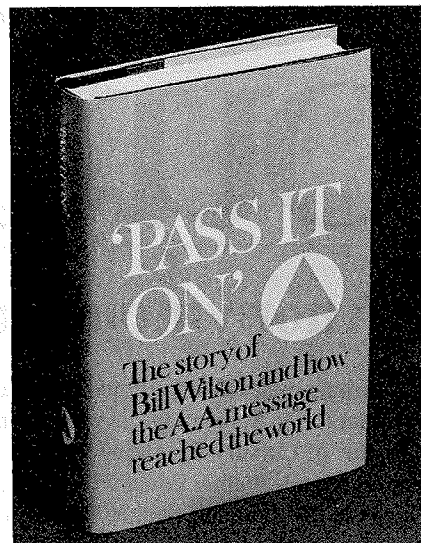
Alcoholics Anonymous is a fellowship of equals. What a person's lifestyle might be is not an issue. What one does or does not do for a living is not a concern. Therefore, the alcoholic sister is readily accepted in A.A. and can begin to be involved in the process of recovery and in the day-by-day struggle for spiritual progress. As she does this, she learns to live each day within the limitations of the realities of her life. She attempts to do this free of alcohol and with the support of others in the Fellowship.

What can be said about *one* person in A.A. can be said about *all* who share the same illness. They are more alike than different. If there is anything unique about the recovered alcoholic sister in A.A., it is that she who has been seen as "so good," witnesses to the Fellowship what is so true: that alcoholism is an illness. Alcoholism has nothing to do with one's character or virtues; once alcoholism is the diagnosis, there is nothing morally wrong with being ill. Alcoholism, the illness, is no respecter of persons.

"A Clergyman Asks About Alcoholics Anonymous" is a Conference-approved pamphlet, in question and answer format, that explains the A.A. program to members of the clergy who are unfamiliar with the Fellowship. Available from G.S.O. - 15¢ each.

'Pass It On': The Story of Bill Wilson and How the A.A. Message Reached the World

The long-awaited, A.A. General Service Conference-approved biography of Bill Wilson, co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, will be published in December. This definitive biography, carefully and extensively researched, has been over five years in preparation.



Bill's story, entwined with the founding of Alcoholics Anonymous and the growth and development of this worldwide Fellowship, makes for a book that will be of interest to scholars, sociologists, recovered alcoholics, and all who have been touched by the disease of alcoholism. Aside from its historical value it is exciting reading. The format of the book is similar to the biography of A.A.'s other co-founder - "Dr. Bob and the Good Oldtimers." Photographic endpapers, 37 photographs, annotated table of contents, index, and complete list of sources.

Order from the General Service Office: Box 459, Grand Central Station, New York, NY 10163. \$6.50 per copy; A.A. group price \$5.50.

"50 Years With Gratitude"

The Fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous will celebrate its 50th Anniversary at its Eighth International Convention, July 4 through July 7, 1985. The beautiful, modern city of Montreal will be the site; "Fifty Years With Gratitude" will be the theme.

The Convention will begin Thursday night with the "big band sound" at two get-acquainted dances. Marathon meetings, in both English and French, will begin at midnight and continue until 8:00 a.m. Sunday. Spanish-speaking A.A.'s will hold late-night meetings.

Step meetings, Traditions meetings, special meetings, a variety show, spiritual meetings, workshops in English, French, Spanish and German, make up the agenda of this very full weekend of A.A. fellowship and sharing.

Thirty thousand recovering alcoholics from approximately 30 countries are expected to attend. Friday night the meeting will open with the traditional flag ceremony, with representatives of each country carrying their flag to the stage. Each A.A. will say, in his or her own language, "We Are Grateful." The largest A.A. meeting in the history of the Fellowship will follow the flag ceremony.