

say: 'May God abundantly reward you according to your blessed works—now and forever!'" (© AA *Grapevine* 1966)

On May 13, 2011 a group of recovering alcoholic women started the beatification cause for Sister Ignatia.

### INFLUENCE OF FATHER ED DOWLING, S.J.

Fr. Ed Dowling was another major influence on the 12-step Movement. His contribution is related by one of his fellow Jesuit priests, Fr. Fitzgerald, who wrote a book on the relationship of Bill W. with Fr. Ed, entitled *The Soul of Sponsorship*. He tells us:

"At one point in his recovery Bill Wilson got very depressed. What if he—five years sober—were to drink? It was 10 p.m. The doorbell rang. Tom, the maintenance man, said there was 'some bum from St. Louis' to see him. Reluctantly, Bill said, 'Send him up.' To himself, he muttered, 'Not another drunk.' But Bill welcomed the stranger, all the same. As the man shuffled to a wooden chair opposite the bed and sat down, his black raincoat fell open, revealing a Roman collar. 'I'm Father Ed Dowling from St. Louis,' he said. 'A Jesuit friend and I have been struck by the similarity of the AA twelve steps and the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius.'



"'Never heard of them,' Bill said. Father Ed laughed, and his infectious laugh endeared him to Bill.

"The curious little man went on and on, and as he did, Bill could feel his body relaxing, his spirits rising. Gradually he realized that this man sitting across from him was radiating a kind of grace....

"Primarily, Father Ed wanted to talk about the paradox of AA, the 'regeneration,' he called it, the strength arising out of defeat and weakness, the loss of one's old life as a condition for achieving a new one. And Bill agreed with everything...

"That night, for the first time in months, Bill Wilson slept soundly. Thus began a 20-year friendship nourished by

visits, phone calls, and letters. Both men spoke the language of the HEART, learned through suffering: Bill from alcoholism, Father Ed from arthritis that was turning his back to stone.

"Bill turned to Father Ed as a spiritual sponsor, a friend. Father Ed, in a letter to his provincial, noted that he saw his own gift for AA as a 'very free use of the Ignatian Rules for the Discernment of Spirits for the second week of the Spiritual Exercise.'

"Soon Bill was talking about all the steps and taking his fifth step (telling the exact nature of his wrongs) with this priest who had limped in from a storm. He told Father Ed about his anger, his impatience, his mounting dissatisfactions. 'Blessed are they,' Father Ed said, 'who hunger and thirst.'

"Thus Father Ed endorsed AA for American Catholics with his appendix in the Big Book and his Queen's Work pamphlet of 1947. He was the first to see wider applications of the twelve steps to other addictions, and wrote about that in *Grapevine* (AA's magazine) in the spring 1960 issue.

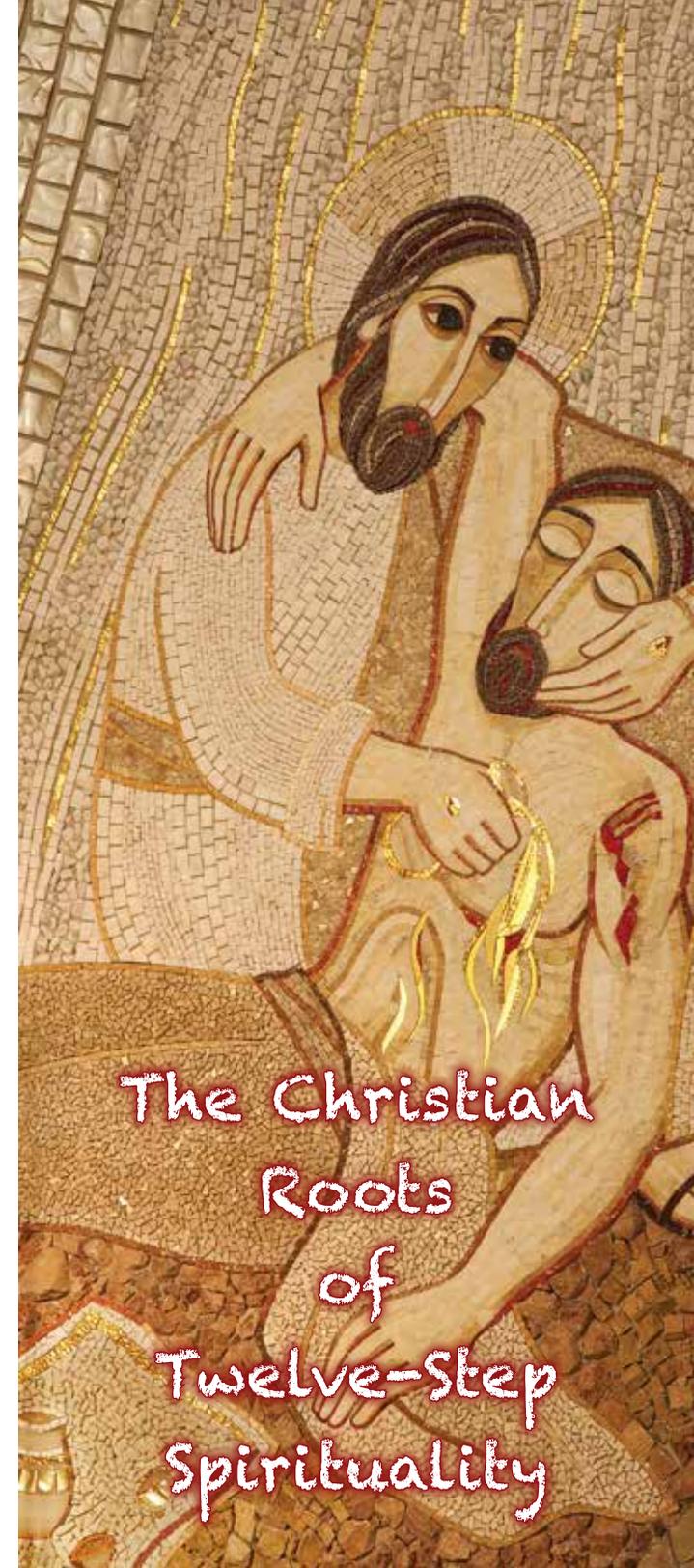
"Bill added a last line to that *Grapevine* article: 'Father Ed, an early and wonderful friend of AA, died as this last message

went to press. He was the greatest and most gentle soul to walk this planet. I was closer to him than to any other human being on earth.'"

Thus a small summary of the deep Christian roots of the 12-step movement whose principles came from 2,000 years of lived Christian experience. No Christian should find the steps alien to his Christian beliefs. The 12-step groups are for anyone who is willing to live according to its principles, which as you can see in the above history, are firmly rooted in a Judeo-Christian moral tradition. ✿

### THE 12-STEP REVIEW

[www.12-step-review.org](http://www.12-step-review.org)



## SPRUNG FROM THE OXFORD GROUPS

The 12-Step Movement began back in the 1920s, having sprung from the Oxford Groups, non-denominational groups of Christians committed to four principles: honesty, purity, unselfishness and love. They also practiced a type of confession, which they called “sharing,” and the making of amends for harms done, which they called “restitution.” One of these members—a man named Ebby Thacher—was an alcoholic who was able to maintain sobriety by living these principles, which he shared with an old friend and fellow alcoholic, Bill Wilson, who would become one of the founders of AA.

Ebby Thacher had become sober with his affiliation with the Oxford Group at Calvary Episcopal Church in New York, the head of which was wonderful minister named Rev. Samuel Shoemaker. About his first meeting with a sober Ebby, Bill W. tells us:

*When he arrived in New York in the late fall of 1934, Ebby thought at once of me. On a bleak November day he rang up. As I remember that conversation, he constantly used phrases like these:*

*“I found I couldn’t run my own life”;*

*“I had to get honest with myself and somebody else”;*

*“I had to make restitution for the damage I had done”;*

*“I had to pray to God for guidance and strength, even though I wasn’t sure there was any God”;*

*“And after I’d tried hard to do these things I found that my craving for alcohol left.”*

Then over and over Ebby would say something like this: “Bill, you don’t fight the desire to drink—you get released from it. I never had such a feeling before.”

As they separated from the Oxford Groups to begin AA, they began to state their principles something like this:

1. We admitted that we were powerless over alcohol.
2. We got honest with ourselves.
3. We got honest with another person, in confidence.
4. We made amends for harms done to others.
5. We worked with other alcoholics without demand for prestige or money.

6. We prayed to God to help us to do these things as best we could.

Bill W. tells us:

*Early AA got its ideas of self-examination, acknowledgment of character defects, restitution for harm done, and working with others, straight from the Oxford Group and directly from [Rev.] Sam Shoemaker.*

## SISTER IGNATIA & THE AKRON CONNECTION

In 1935 a sober Bill Wilson came to Akron, Ohio, for a business meeting, only to find it canceled. There was a bar in the hotel and he was tempted. Instead, he was given the grace to connect with a local alcoholic—Dr. Bob, who would become the other founder of AA. The two got together and AA was born. As the Christian knows, anywhere two or three are gathered in the name of all that is good and true, God Himself is in their midst (cf. Matthew 18:20).

Also at that time in Akron was Sister Ignatia—the admitting Sister at Saint Thomas Hospital. She would later be referred to by AA as “the Angel of Alcoholics Anonymous.” She had been a musician and a teacher, but because of a complete physical and mental breakdown as a young Sister, she had to forsake her music career. Mary Darrah, who wrote Sister Ignatia’s biography, notes that Ignatia’s breakdown “taught her the power of letting go of self,” a principle that would influence Ignatia’s treatment of the alcoholic. Mary Darrah explains:

*Since Ignatia seemed destined to live for a purpose higher than one she could then envision, and since heroic, extraordinary people discover new opportunities for love from their own human suffering, what event better than a breakdown would provide the impetus for her dramatic change in direction?*

After her recovery, she was sent to be the admitting Sister at St. Thomas Hospital in Akron, run by her Congregation—the Sisters of Charity of St. Augustine.

On August 16, 1939, she admitted the first alcoholic patient, subtly listing the diagnosis as “acute gastritis” so that the nurses wouldn’t freak out. In 1939 no hospital would take an alcoholic, for the alcoholic was regarded back then as a hopeless drunk, and the thinking was,

“Why give a good space in the hospital to a drunk when somebody really in need could use it?” But because of the physical, spiritual, and mental problems of her breakdown, and what recovery from that entailed, she was willing to accept the alcoholic into the hospital.

St. Thomas Hospital became the first religious institution to recognize the rights of alcoholics to receive hospital treatment. Today, many of AA’s practices—including the use of tokens to mark milestones in sobriety—find their origins with Sister Ignatia. When an alcoholic would “graduate” from the program, Sr. Ignatia would give them a Sacred Heart medallion for which they would promise her (and they loved her) that before they would ever take another drink, they had to first come to her and return the medallion. This kept many of them from relapsing.

Sister Ignatia was among the first to acknowledge alcoholism among priests and nuns. She was also instrumental in implementing the first Al-Anon program for families of alcoholics. In March 1961, Sister Ignatia received from the White House a letter acknowledging her pioneering contributions. Bill W. wrote to Sr. Ignatia regarding Kennedy’s letter, saying:

*We have read the marvelous letter which President Kennedy requested be sent to you. It reminds me that I have no words to tell of my devotion and my gratitude to you, of the constant inspiration you have given me and so many over the years by your example of the finest in all that is spiritual and eternal, as well as temporal.*

## A NOTE FROM BILL W. TO SISTER IGNATIA

Bill wrote to her, saying, “We of Alcoholics Anonymous look upon you as the finest friend and the greatest spirit we may ever know. We remember your tender ministrations to us in the days when AA was very young. Your partnership with Dr. Bob in that early time has created for us a spiritual heritage of incomparable worth.

“In all the years since, we have watched you at the bedside of thousands. So watching, we have perceived ourselves to be the beneficiaries of that wondrous light which God has always sent through you to illumine our darkness. You have tirelessly tended our wounds; you have nourished us with your unique understanding and your matchless love. No greater gifts of Grace than these shall we ever have. Speaking for AA members throughout the world, I