

# THE TWELVE-STEP REVIEW

Fr. Emmerich Vogt, O.P.



## Winter 2012

Dear friends,

Often at conferences or missions people will ask me about my book. “Father, which table at the conference has your book?” And I would always respond, “I don’t have a book.” This year I was allowed to have a sabbatical while being chaplain for our cloistered Dominican Nuns in Hollywood. In the contemplative atmosphere of the monastery, I was able to study and write. I have put together a

small book entitled, *The Freedom to Love*. You can learn more about it on page 3.

In this season’s newsletter we take a look at the need to commit to a 12-step meeting. Some people wonder about the role meetings play in recovery. This newsletter places the role of meetings in the context of our nature as social beings and as Christians for whom grace is mediated in and through the human community.

People often ask for information about my retreats and parish missions, so in the next issue, when I will have a better sense of where I’ll be after my sabbatical, I will post any retreats or missions I will be giving in the near future. We will also attempt to list them on the website: [www.12-step-review.org](http://www.12-step-review.org). \*

*As we became conscious of His presence, we began to lose our fear of today, tomorrow or the hereafter.*

AA Big Book page 63

## Do I need a 12-Step Group?

One of the most difficult obstacles to recovery on the part of people who want to heal and grow is that they often prefer to do it alone. This rigid self-sufficiency can be based on fear—fear of having to expose their shortcomings, fear of what others will think of them, fear of letting go of control. Fear, however, is the chief activator of our faults. Recovery from the effects of sin in our lives is about connection with self and others. We can no longer live from a basis of fear.

By joining an anonymous fellowship of men and women in recovery, not only do we learn from their experience, strength, and hope, but we learn to share our feelings in all honesty which leads to healing. Many of you may know of Jean Vanier, a Catholic Canadian who many years ago founded communities for mentally handicapped people. He names these communities “L’Arche,” the French for *ark*, as in Noah’s Ark, that is, a place of safety and salvation. He wrote a book called ***From Brokenness to***

***Community*** in which he says,

*Experience has shown that one person, all alone, can never heal another. A one to one situation is not a good situation. It is important to bring broken people into a community of love, a place where they feel accepted and recognized in their gifts, and have a sense of belonging. That is what wounded people need and want most.*

Spouses, parents, or friends of addicts will try everything they can to fix the addict, with great frustration. They somehow expect that their pleading or threats are going to change the addict. A wise woman once told me, “An expectation is a premeditated resentment.” To expect that my efforts to change someone will be successful is setting myself up for

terrible disappointment. No change in others can be forced. Oftentimes when I give a 12-step conference, someone will invariably come up afterwards and say, “Father, what you were saying—that’s my husband!” Or, “Father my brother and mother are so codependent, I’ve come tonight to hear your talk.” So many are seeking to change others, perhaps without ever having taken seriously the Lord’s warning, “You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye” (Matthew 7:5). It’s easy to notice the addict’s problem but more difficult for codependents to see their issues. One wise woman, who finally had to come to grips with her own demons, said to me about the reason behind her marriage to the addict, “The rocks in his head fit the holes in mine!”

Pope Benedict notes that “faith by its inmost essential nature involves other people; it is a breaking out of the isolation of my own ego that is

*Continued on the back page*

## INSPIRATION FROM THE SAINTS



Sister Ignatia, Angel of Alcoholics Anonymous is the name of a wonderful biography about the life of one of the leaders of the 12-step movement when it first began in 1935. She was not an alcoholic but she was from an Irish family and, as you know, there is a lot of alcoholism among the Irish. The alcohol addiction is only the tip of the iceberg, so to speak. There is anger, fear, resentment and other emotions not matured in the alcoholic or the codependent. Although Sister Ignatia was not an alcoholic, she certainly was a workaholic and very much a perfectionist, characteristics often linked to a deep fear of failure. As a young teaching Sister—a gifted musician—Sister Ignatia had a complete emotional and physical breakdown. After her recovery, her superiors decided not to put her back in the classroom. Instead, they sent her to be the admitting sister in their hospital in Akron, Ohio.

Alcoholics Anonymous began when Dr. Bob got together with Bill W. who had come to Akron for a business meeting that got cancelled. There was a bar in the hotel and he was tempted to take a drink, but instead he had the grace

to call a friend in Akron, Henrietta Seiberling, and asked her if she could put him in touch with another problem drinker. His thinking was that only another drunk could understand what he was going through and would help him maintain his sobriety. The two met, were kindred spirits, and AA was born. People who know the history of Alcoholics Anonymous have heard of Dr. Bob Smith and Bill Wilson, credited with founding the organization, but few have heard of the woman who shaped the recovery concept used to this day in hospitals

Sister Ignatia was born in 1889 and died in 1966. Being assigned as the admitting sister in St. Thomas Hospital, and recognizing that the alcoholic was suffering from something deeper than a mere moral problem, she cleared out the old flower room, put a bed in it, and would assign it to an alcoholic, careful not to reveal his true condition to the nurses because the thinking in 1935 was, “Why give a good space in the hospital to a hopeless drunk?” Sr. Ignatia, through her own breakdown and recovery, knew better. She would get Dr. Bob and the beginners of AA to come and work on the alcoholic she took in. Once they helped him and he left, she took another. Soon the Sisters saw the good of it and built a whole wing—called “Rosary Hall”—just for alcoholics, thus making St. Thomas Hospital the first hospital in the world to treat alcoholism as a medical condition. Sr. Ignatia never returned to her love of music. Mary Darrah, the author of her biography, explains:

Since Ignatia was destined to live for a purpose higher than the one she could then envision, and since heroic 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? Why would God inflict Ignatia with a debilitating breakdown that totally incapacitated the musical talent essential to her life’s work? And lacking divine intervention, why would Ignatia deliberately choose to journey down a darkened, solitary path if the course she was pursuing in 1927 fulfilled her and accomplished God’s will for her life? The answers seem precisely why Providence suddenly struck Ignatia: to redirect her course of action; to rechannel her creative drive and energy; to refine and purify her spiritual path, to reintegrate her physical, mental, and spiritual natures; to teach her the power gained by letting go of self; and to open her heart in preparation for a new direction. Thus a total breakdown for Ignatia might be better likened to an illuminating *breakthrough* that finally allowed truth and a living vision of the will of God to reawaken and quicken her spirit.

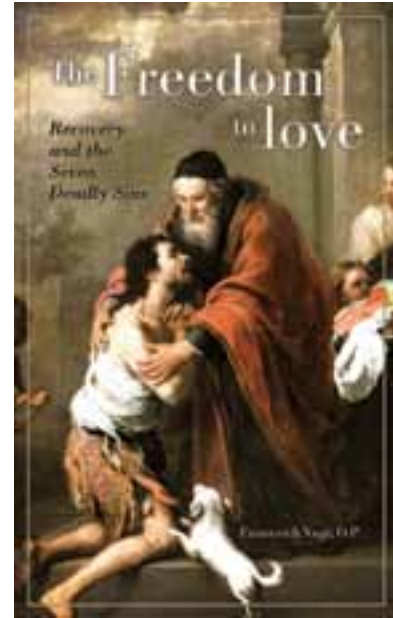
Although Sister Ignatia is not a canonized Saint, she was heroic in the living out of her religious consecration in service to those most in need. As Mary Darrah notes, “Precisely because Sister Ignatia viewed the alcoholic as a sick person who was also spiritually orphaned, she created a caring atmosphere of love and support, a spiritual home in which the patients could retreat to find or regain a sense of self-worth. Seen through the eyes of an accepting ‘substitute family’ of co-sufferers, patients were not judged or demeaned for their shortcomings.”

**Let us pray through the intercession of Sister Ignatia, the Angel of Alcoholics Anonymous, that we may imitate her genuine concern for those who suffer from any type of addiction, and that we who may have suffered through our own addiction or that of a relative or friend may find recovery ourselves.**

## FATHER EMMERICH'S NEW BOOK JUST RELEASED

### THE FREEDOM TO LOVE: RECOVERY AND THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS.

Some years ago I met a man who, in pursuit of a new relationship, abandoned his twelve-step meetings. After the relationship ended, he returned to his meetings but with a discouraged attitude. "The steps really don't work," he lamented. But the real issue was his inability to see a connection between his immoral behavior with a series of girlfriends and his lack of recovery through living the steps. It is not uncommon for people in recovery to neglect the life of virtue, yet with hopes of recovery from addiction or codependency. I have a friend who has sponsored women who are daughters of women she has sponsored, so long has been her involvement in AA. Based upon this experience, when a young woman asks that she be her sponsor, she says "yes" provided the directee agrees to several rules of behavior: one being "no relationships for one year"—and this for someone trying to recover from alcoholism. Is there a connection? In guiding alcoholics to do a Step Four inventory, AA has always recommended a reflection on the seven deadly sins. Without a serious attempt to overcome sin in our lives, healthy living, recovery, and a legitimate prayer life are not possible.



*The Freedom to Love* explores the need for virtue in the life of the Christian. It examines not only the seven deadly sins, but since virtue is the mean between extremes, it studies the opposite extreme. For example, chastity is a virtue that corrects the sin of lust, but to be chaste doesn't mean a person lacks warm affection. Those who overcome lust but are as cold as ice are disturbed by the opposing extreme, prudishness. The book takes a look at the following capital sins, their opposing virtues and opposite extremes, all in the context of recovery.

Capital Sin	Opposing Virtue	Opposite Extreme
Pride	Humility	Self-loathing
Envy	Kindness	Pusillanimity
Avarice	Generosity	Wastefulness
Anger	Patience	Servility
Sloth	Diligence	Workaholism
Gluttony	Temperance	Deficiency
Lust	Chastity	Prudishness

If people are serious about having an authentic prayer life in hopes of recovering from the effects of sin in their lives, a good understanding of the virtues and their extremes is a necessity. The more one does what is good, the freer one becomes. The paradoxical nature of true freedom is highlighted by St. Augustine when he comments on Christ's teaching that to die to oneself is to find oneself. Augustine notes that to part with one's will does not mean we lose freedom; it means we gain freedom in the loss. There is no true freedom except in the service of what is good and just. The choice to disobey and do evil is an abuse of freedom and leads to "the slavery of sin" (Romans 6:17; CCC 1733). *The Freedom to Love* explores these issues and shows the path to the freedom that enables a person to love properly.

*The Freedom to Love* by Fr. Emmerich Vogt, OP; hardcover; 170 pp; a donation of \$19.99 plus shipping and handling.

**Order from The Twelve-Step Review**

its own illness.” Since we are social by nature (created in the image of God who is not solitude enclosed upon itself but a Trinity of Persons), God’s grace is mediated to us in and through our lives with others. This is how healing takes place, as Jean Vanier records.

John Paul II, reflecting on a passage of the Vatican II document *Gaudium et Spes*, says,

Indeed, the Lord Jesus when He prays to the Father “that all may be one...as we are one” (John 17:21-22)...indicates a certain likeness between the union of the divine Persons and the union of God’s sons and daughters in truth and love. This likeness shows that man... cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself (cf. Luke 17:33).

Two alcoholic Jesuit priests in recovery (featured in the wonderful book by Gerard Goggins called *The Anonymous Disciple*) realized that if they were to stay sober and continue to get healthy, they would have to do more, so one said to the other, “I think we should go to the prisons and insane asylums. There are people there who are misdiagnosed. Which would you like to take?” The other priest responded, “I’m afraid of the insane asylum, so I’ll take the insane asylum.” And indeed at the asylum he finds a woman who is not insane but an alcoholic. What a wonderful commitment to genuine recovery—to reach out to those who still suffer while at the same time confronting one’s fears. Offering themselves in recovery as a gift to those who still suffered was a fulfillment of their Christian calling, explained in the above quote from John Paul.

The natural life of man, like the natural life of God, is a social life. Thus does Jesus teach, “Where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them” (Matthew 18:20). That’s how the Steps began, when two drunks wanting to get sober met in all truth and honesty. When two or more gather in search of the truth, the Truth is with them. It is the same in a meeting. There we learn from others’ experience, strength, and hope. We learn to overcome our shame by growing in humility, as shown in Steps 6 and 7. One acquires the virtue of humility in and through others. This is what a twelve-step meeting offers people. The alcoholic, for example, fearfully attends his first AA meeting, probably threatened into attendance. He is full of shame and afraid of what others will think of him. But

healing comes from a social situation because, as noted above, man was created in the image of God and God is not solitude enclosed upon itself but a Trinity of Persons. Healing comes, not from a one-to-one situation as much as from a fellowship of sufferers who can love the newcomer out of his shame. Love sets him free. It is important to bring wounded people into a fellowship of love, such as one finds in twelve-step programs (and is made evident for example in the closing remarks at an Al-Anon meeting, “After a while, you’ll discover that though you may not like all of us, you’ll love us in a very special way—the same way we already love you”). Belonging to an anonymous fellowship, the person feels accepted and has a sense of belonging that slowly begins to heal his shame. Finally, with St. Paul (2 Corinthians 12:9), he can boast of his weakness and announce, “Hi. My name is \_\_\_\_\_ and I’m an alcoholic.” Shame free.

Another obstacle committed Christians have to 12-step meetings is that they are not Christ-centered. This can be part of the problem: a Christian needing a meeting that meets with their specifications. The founders of

AA noted that in addition to having the compulsion to drink, they had the compulsion to be right, and I think this might be behind the need some Christians have for the “right” meeting. Jesus ate with tax-collectors and sinners, and we do the same, the only difference being that we are one of them! Provided the meetings adhere to the tenets of the founders, no harm is done to meet with people of all stripes and colors. It enables us to understand others better and to overcome our self-righteousness. However, it is helpful for Christians to come together to further their recovery by engaging in Christian practices, like

a Bible study or Adoration. The Calix Society is “an association of Catholic alcoholics who are maintaining their sobriety through affiliation with and participation in the Fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous.” See their website, [www.calixsociety.org](http://www.calixsociety.org). *Calix* is the Latin word for “chalice, and thus their motto: “A.A. restores your health and keeps you from an early grave. Calix saves your soul and puts you on the road to heaven.” ✱

• “At heart we had all been abnormally fearful.”

AA’s 12&12

• “Selfishness - self-centeredness! That, we think, is the root of our troubles. Driven by a hundred forms of fear, self-delusion, self-seeking, and self-pity, we step on the toes of our fellows and they retaliate.”

AA’s Big Book page 62

• “The chief activator of our defects has been self-centered fear—primarily fear that we would lose something we already possessed or would fail to get something we demanded. Living upon a basis of unsatisfied demands, we were in a state of continual disturbance and frustration.”

AA’s 12&12

## THE 12-STEP REVIEW

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