

Father Pfau, Alcoholism Fighter, Dies

Father Ralph Pfau's obituary, from the Chicago Tribune, Mon., February 20, 1967. Contributed by John S. of Gary IN., and passed on to the No. Ind. Arch. Bull. by Frank N. of Syracuse IN.

Owensboro, Ky., Feb. 19 (AP)—The Rev. Ralph S. Pfau, 62, who helped alcoholics thruout the world after he had won his own bout with the bottle, died today of hepatitis.

Father Pfau, chaplain at the House of Good Shepherd in Indianapolis, died at Our Lady of Mercy hospital here.

He was secretary and organizer of the Catholic Clergy Conference on Alcoholism. It has headquarters in Indianapolis and is composed of Roman Catholic priests thruout the United States studying the problems and treatment of alcoholism.

Book Tells His Story

Father Pfau's autobiography, "Prodigal Shepherd," published in 1958, told his story of how he lost one parish after another because of drinking and his refusal to believe he was an alcoholic.

Look magazine published the book in three parts, telling how Father Pfau conquered alcoholism thru Alcoholics Anonymous. He was the first priest to seek help from A.A.

His talks thruout the country were recorded in 60 volumes known as the Golden Recordings of the Rev. John Doe. He also authored "Sobriety Without End."

Native of Indianapolis

Father Pfau was a native of Indianapolis and a graduate of St. Meinrad seminary in Spencer county, Ind.

His first assignment was at Vincennes, Ind. He was stationed at New Albany, Ind., during the 1937 flood.

He is survived by three brothers, G. Edwin and Harold J., both of Indianapolis, and Ray H., of Milwaukee.

Indianapolis: Dohr S.

Our knowledge of the beginnings of A.A. in Indiana is based on a short memoir written by the founder, John D. Holmes [No. Ind. Arch. Bull. 1(1998).1.3-4] around 1953 or 1954, and a brief history written for a talk which Dean Barnhardt gave at Turkey Run State Park in early 1955 [No. Ind. Arch. Bull. 1(1998).1.1-2].

John H.—Evansville beginnings in Spring 1940

On May 12, 1935, Bill W. met Dr. Bob, and a month later (June 10) the doctor had his last drink. They began spreading the message to other alcoholics, and in October 1936 got their eighth recruit: John D. Holmes got sober in Akron under Dr. Bob's care. It was still regarded as part of the Oxford Group's program at that time.

On Memorial Day (May 30) in 1938, John H. and his wife Rhoda visited Evansville, Indiana, where her family lived, and they decided to stay. They got a little four-room house to live in at 420 S. Denby St. There was no Oxford Group in operation in Evansville, and although John paid visits on numerous alcoholics, he could find none who actually wanted to stop drinking. Although his wife was not an alcoholic, he and Rhoda held something like an A.A. meeting every Wednesday night (just the two of them), reading a discussing the reading for that date in a widely-used Methodist meditational work called the *Upper Room*.

In April 1939 (a year after their arrival in Evansville) the Big Book was published—Dr. Bob sent him one of the first copies off the press—and John H. finally had the ammunition he needed. By October he thought he had found a good candidate for the program in a well-known local surgeon, Dr. Joe Weldorn, but for almost half a year Dr. Joe held off actually trying to get sober. It was only after the surgeon was drying out in the county jail in the Spring of 1940 (in April or May of that year) that he called out to John for help and actually meant it.

John visited Dr. Joe at the jail, and eventually it was arranged to send him off to Dr. Bob in Akron for ten days. When Dr. Joe returned to Evansville he was a convinced man. He and John went to work on some of the doctor's patients whom he knew were alcoholics, and they soon had a regular A.A. group meeting at John and Rhoda's house on Denby St. This was the beginning of A.A. in Indiana.

Doherty Sheerin of Indianapolis meets John H.

The first A.A. group in Indianapolis was started by Doherty "Dohr" Sheerin only a few months later, on October 28, 1940. Dohr was one of those extraordinary individuals, like Bill W., who was actually able to get sober on his own, and managed to do it completely by himself for almost three years. But like Bill W., his sobriety was extremely fragile, and he knew it.

The *Liberty* magazine article on A.A. had come out in the Fall of 1939. In the Spring of 1940, Dohr finally discovered this article and immediately contacted New York for help. What actually helped him most happened later that year, when Irvin S. Meyerson from the Cleveland A.A. group visited Indianapolis and took Dohr down to Evansville to meet John Holmes.

"Hope was revived in Dohr's breast," as he later told Dean Barnhardt, so that he was finally able to interest another alcoholic in joining him in founding the Indianapolis group around October 28, 1940.

Dohr had a spiritual quality and strength which John Holmes likened to that strange power which he had encountered in Bill W. and Dr. Bob. As John wrote in his memoir:

Sheerin came at a time when I needed someone who realized the need of A.A. and who was willing to work—someone with executive ability. Sheerin and I corresponded weekly, phoned each other and was of mutual aid to each other.

The growth of A.A. in Indiana is due almost entirely to Sheerin. While a few groups sprang up in the tri-state area from [the] Evansville group, Sheerin is really the boy that put A.A. on the Indiana map. I have always considered him the *number three man in A.A.*! I can boldly say this after having been closely associated with Dr. Bob and Bill Wilson. There are others that think the same as I do.

Of course there are hundreds of men and women in Indiana who have contributed much to A.A. However, when Sheerin and I started there was no literature. All we had was a hope and prayer and shoes that had been half-soled many times. Had it not been for my wife Rhoda I might have given up the effort. Maybe I might have given up had not Sheerin appeared on the scene.

Now it should be said that there was one other A.A. center in Indiana—in the South Bend, Mishawaka, Elkhart, Goshen area—which was started on February 22, 1943 by a totally independent chain of events. The St. Joe river valley was geographically isolated to a great degree from the rest of Indiana and the quarter of a million or so people who lived in that area centered their lives around their own major cities and institutions. But for much of Indiana, what John H. said about the central importance of Dohr Sheerin and the Indianapolis A.A. program was basically correct.

Ft. Wayne visits Indianapolis

In Ft. Wayne, C. L. Buckey had no success in forming an A.A. group until he talked three other alcoholics into

travelling to Indianapolis with him to attend an A.A. breakfast there on December 7, 1941. This was only a little over a year after Dohr had started the Indianapolis group, so he had clearly gotten things moving quickly there. The Ft. Wayne A.A. group grew out of the visit to Indy.

Anderson: Dohr and George L.

For Anderson the Indianapolis linkage was even stronger than with Ft. Wayne. George L.'s wife Frances had taken him (in convulsions and tied up in a strait jacket) to the Ben Hur Sanitarium in the Indianapolis suburb of Beech Grove. The account which was later written up for the Anderson group [see *No. Ind. Arch. Bull.* 1(1998).3. 23–26] gives us a picture of Dohr Sheerin at work with a new pigeon:

Doherty S[heerin] and Harry M. were the two men who called on George in the sanitarium. They gave him something that he needed: hope. They told him that there was an answer. They had tried it and it was working for them. They gave George a copy of the book *Alcoholics Anonymous* and told him that the way of life that they were talking about was detailed in that volume. They told him of a growing fellowship that was available to all alcoholics who wished to try it.

This was the first time in his life that George had ever seen anyone as bad as he was, who was not still drinking. He could tell from their stories about themselves that they had been as bad about their drinking as he was. He could tell that they were like he was, that they thought the same way as he did, that they felt the same way as he did, but that they had found a way to live without drinking—they had, in effect, been given release from the compulsion to drink.

This simple but powerful process of identification, coupled with the power of example, has touched many alcoholics at a very deep level of consciousness. This process is at the heart of our program, giving hope to the hopeless, and giving the power of example to the powerless. This is how it worked for George, and in turn for each of us. Frances read the book to George in the sanitarium and he went to his first A.A. meeting at the Riley Hotel [in Indianapolis] before they went home to Fowler [back in western] Indiana. George had a few reservations about whether this thing would work for him or not, but he was encouraged by the example of these two sober men.

It was hard for George to return to his old surroundings sober, but he did. Doherty and Harry sponsored him by mail, and he went back to the Riley Hotel for a meeting once every month. Between meetings Doherty and Harry would send him things to read and give him encouragement to keep on going. There were

no others in his area to talk with about how to stay sober and work the program. He did manage to stay sober and after about six months [in November of 1943] he and Frances moved to Anderson seeking employment.

In Anderson, George was still the only A.A., but he could telephone Dohr and Harry when he need to, go to meetings in Indianapolis more often, and visit and drink coffee with A.A.'s at the Indiana Home treatment facility. Then in 1946, an A.A. member named Bob B. came from Indianapolis to live for a while in Anderson, an Anderson man named Clyde L. got sobered up by first going to the Indiana Home, Bob S. joined them and offered the use of his

home for regular A.A. meetings, and A.A. in Anderson was finally going strong.

Lafayette and Williamsport

In Lafayette, Gene Fitzgerald had become a lone member of A.A. about 1940. He had to attend meetings in Indianapolis, when he was able to make the trip, until the Lafayette group was formed about January 1, 1948. In Williamsport, Dr. Clarence Dimmick was taken to the Indiana Home in Indianapolis in October of 1946. He also attended meetings in Indianapolis for a while until A.A. groups sprang up closer to him.

Indianapolis: Father John Doe (Ralph Pfau)

Doherty Sheerin's most famous pigeon was the first Roman Catholic priest who got sober in A.A. Ralph Pfau later went on to speak all across the United States, wrote fourteen small volumes called the Golden Books which are still being used by A.A.'s today (Hazelden has now taken them over), made a set of thirty recordings of talks on various A.A. topics, and wrote an autobiography, Prodigal Shepherd (1958), with the help of Al Hirschberg, a former sports writer for the Boston Post. A shorter version of the autobiography ran as a three-part series in Look magazine. Ralph founded the Catholic Clergy Conference on Alcoholism to help bring knowledge about alcohol treatment to Roman Catholic priests and bishops all around the United States.

In June 1946 he ran a weekend spiritual retreat for members of A.A. at St. Joseph's College in Rensselaer, Indiana, the first of its kind. It was run in some ways like a Roman Catholic retreat, but without the lectures and references to Roman Catholic dogma and practice. Of the ninety A.A.'s who showed up for this first retreat, eighty per cent were non-Roman Catholics. It worked so well that the retreats continued every year, and Ralph discovered that he could, in effect, take off his clerical collar and speak about the spiritual life in ways that could be understood by anyone who had come to know a higher power through the A.A. program.

Each of the Golden Book series was based on Ralph's remarks at one year's St. Joseph's retreat.

RALPH S. PFAU was born November 10, 1904; he was brought up in Indianapolis, graduated from Cathedral High School there, and began studying for the priesthood in 1922 at St. Meinrad's Archabbey and Seminary in Spencer County (only ten miles or so north of the Ohio River, about halfway between Evansville and New Albany).¹ He had his first nervous breakdown in connection with his ordination as a deacon in the Roman Catholic Church on May 29, 1928.² He could eat almost nothing, his weight dropped drastically, and he could not sleep at night. A doctor in Indianapolis gave him a barbiturate called Nembutal, and then strong bromide compounds (which were used in those days as so-called "sedatives" for treating *grand mal* epilepsy, mania, hysteria, delirium tremens, and "morbid mental excitement"). A year later, on May 21, 1929, he had to be ordained to the priesthood sitting down.³

On September 13, 1929, he was appointed as assistant pastor at the Old Cathedral in Vincennes, and also taught four Latin classes every day at Gibault High School. In the summer of 1930, he went to New York to begin the Fordham University summer school master's degree program in education for priests and nuns. There at the age of twenty-five he drank the first alcoholic beverage he had ever consumed: two fingers of bootleg bourbon (it was still the Prohibition period) mixed with ginger ale. He liked it, and had a second one.

By 1932, he was making trips from Vincennes to Jasper, the bootleg headquarters of southern Indiana, to buy unaged corn liquor from one of the dozens of local suppliers. The bishop finally gave him a warning about his drinking, he tried to go cold turkey, and had his second nervous breakdown. They sent him first to St. Vincent's hospital (where they put him on barbiturates) and then to

a sanitarium called the Alexian Brothers Hospital in St. Louis. When he finally got out, he went back to New York to finish his master's degree at Fordham University, and managed to survive without drinking by taking massive doses of pentabromides, the strongest non-prescription variety available. But when he actually received the M.A. degree on June 13, 1934, he started back to drinking the very next day.

He tried to control the drinking, and survived a year as assistant pastor at St. Anthony's in Indianapolis, then was assigned as assistant pastor at St. Augustine's in Jeffersonville in July 1935. By the end of his stay there, he was having "a few highballs" every evening.

On November 12, 1937, he was appointed pastor of St. Bernard's Church at Snake Run in Gibson County, and had switched from highballs to shots of bourbon with a beer chaser. He had his first major blackout while driving back to Snake Run from Evansville. But he was still convinced that he was not an alcoholic, because "he never drank before noon." By the summer of 1939, he was up to a fifth of bourbon at least two days out of every three.

This was the first parish the bishop removed him from because of his drinking. The bishop sent him to Sacred Heart Sanitarium in Milwaukee this time, where, when he told them "I don't drink much at all," they diagnosed him as a manic depressive.

In November 1939 he was sent back to Holy Rosary in Indianapolis, then in February 1940 given another pastorate of his own once again. This one was St. Anne's, in the Mars Hill section of Indianapolis. By December of that year, he was back on the same merry-go-round: bromides, bourbon, and beer chasers. By May of 1943, the bishop had to remove him from his parish for a second time because of his drinking.

The bishop sent him to the Alexian Brothers Sanitarium in Oshkosh, Wisconsin. He drove there from Indianapolis in a total blackout, drinking straight from a bottle as he drove. Again, he denied that he had ever drunk to excess, so this time they diagnosed him as a schizophrenic, and put him through a long series of electro-shock treatments, done the hard old-fashioned way, with 1,000 milliamps of AC current at 110 volts sent straight through his brain each time.

In late October of 1943, the bishop brought him back to Indianapolis and told him to go to St. Joan of Arc parish in that city. This was to be his last chance. But a week or

so later he started drinking and having blackouts again.

Ralph went to another doctor in Indianapolis, who first put him on a large enough dose of Benzedrine to produce total incapacitation, with frightening head-spinning and dizziness. Then the doctor gave him barbital (barbituric acid) instead, which produced images of continually shifting and changing brightly-colored pictures in his head. In those days they called this kind of psychedelic experience having "kaleidoscopic images."

Someone called the rectory at two o'clock in the morning, asking him to come give the last rites to a man who had just dropped dead in his home. When he got there, a doctor (who had also been summoned) quickly revived the man—he was not dead, merely passed out cold from an overdose of alcohol and barbital—the same combination which had caused Ralph to experience the brightly-colored pictures in his head.

On the way out of the house, he saw a book called *Alcoholics Anonymous* lying on the mantel, and asked to borrow it. He spent the rest of the night reading the whole book. Every day for the next three or four weeks, he read in the book at least once every day. And he did not drink through that entire period. Then he noticed some pamphlets about A.A. sitting on a table in the vestibule of the rectory. He was told that they had been left there by a fine man, a member of the parish, named Doherty Sheerin: "I think he's president or something of A.A. here in Indianapolis."

I read all of the pamphlets in one sitting, and, during the next few days, I read them all through several more times before returning them to the side table in the vestibule. They told stark, simple stories of despair and hopelessness and terror and defeat, and, somehow, I felt a little better each time I read them.

*Of course, none of these things apply to me. I'm not an alcoholic. But these poor people have had a terrible time on account of liquor. I wish I could do something to help them. I ought to be able to, since I'm a priest.*⁴

Part of Ralph's problem was that he had an incredible intellectual arrogance that came partly from a belief that his position as a priest made him "above" the A.A. people in some way. His situation was unique. He knew all about theology and philosophy, and how to think and reason, and act as a leader. Why, it should be him helping

them, not vice versa!

Now there are many other people who come into A.A. with the same kind of attitude—nuclear scientists, military officers, college professors, graduate students at universities, successful business people, and prominent lawyers, as well as carpenters, plumbers, secretaries, and store clerks—not to mention people who have been sleeping in abandoned cars and eating at rescue missions. They all have severe problems with the program until they develop enough humility to become teachable.

I wasn't drinking, but I was shaky, and still plagued by sleeplessness and lack of appetite. Outside of the A.A. material, I had no particular interest in anything. I dragged myself around, listless and lifeless and continually more confused.

I replaced the void left by the absence of alcohol by stepping up the medication the doctor had prescribed after I had had that attack of kaleidoscopic pictures. This was a combination of barbitals and Dexedrine which I was supposed to take during the day, and at specific times. But they seemed to relax me, and I took them whenever I was jittery.

I didn't know what to do. I wanted a drink, but the A.A. book and the pamphlets had already begun to take hold . . . One evening, while I reading the A.A. book, I suddenly came to a decision.⁵

It was the evening of November 10, 1943—it was in fact Ralph P.'s thirty-ninth birthday that day. It was the most important decision he had ever made in his life: because he made it, he was able to stay sober from that point on, and was able to die sober on February 19, 1967, his life having become a blessing to many.⁶ The decision was to make one simple phone call and *ask for help*:

I'll call this Doherty Sheerin. What have I got to lose? I'm not an alcoholic—not really—but maybe he can help me. At least, he might give me some kind of answer to my problem, whatever it is. I don't need A.A., but I certainly need something. . . .

So I got his phone number and put in a call for him.

"Mr. Sheerin?"

"Yes."

"This is Father Pfau—one of the priests at St. Joan of Arc."

"Oh, hello, Father. What can I do for you?"

"Well," I said, "I was just wondering—could I possibly

see you some time? I'd like to talk to you about—something. There's no hurry—"

"I'll be right over, Father."

He hung up before I could say any more. And he was at the rectory fifteen minutes later. The housekeeper called me downstairs and I met him in the living room. When I went up to him, he held out his hand and said, "I'm Doherty Sheerin. Just call me Dohr."

I liked him on sight. He was a bald-headed, heavy-set man, with a tan, healthy complexion, deep, dark brown eyes and the most attractive smile I had ever seen. There was strength and character and leadership in his rather square face, and I felt almost a compulsion to put myself in his hands and let him steer me any way he wanted to.

This man will help me.

"Sit down—Dohr," I said.

"What's on your mind, Father?"

"Well, I understand you're president of Alcoholics Anonymous here in town."

"Of course, I'm not president. We don't have any such thing as president. After all, Alcoholics Anonymous is only a group of individuals all faced with the same problem, you know. We only recently began the Indianapolis group and I happen to be the first member of it, but that's neither here nor there."

"I see," I said. "I wonder if you can help me. I have some personal problems, and I thought maybe you could give me a little advice. Of course, mine isn't really an alcoholic problem. I never drank very much."

His smile never left his face.

"Yes, Father, go on."

"As I say," I continued, "I haven't ever drunk a whole lot. On occasion, I'll take a drink, and maybe once in a while I'll have a little too much. But, of course, I'm not an alcoholic."

"I know what you mean, Father," he said gently. "I don't know whether we can help you or not. All I can do is pass along a few ideas, then perhaps you can help yourself. This A.A. movement is unique. We don't teach anything. We don't lecture anybody, or tell anybody whether he is or isn't an alcoholic. All we do is suggest, 'Take another look at yourself, and form your own conclusions.'"

"Why don't you go to a meeting with me? You'll learn more from one meeting than if you sat here for hours listening to me."⁷

Immediately, Ralph felt the alcoholic panic: there might be somebody at the A.A. meeting who knew him and knew who he was, who might think that he was just a drunk, and hold him in contempt and disgust for years to come. What he said to Dohr next was, at one level, extremely insulting to that good man: I could not be seen at

a meeting with shameful, contemptible people like you and your group! Dohr's answer contained a good deal of compassion, but a rather pointed comment as well. The priest was so consumed by his own overwhelming problems at this point that he was not giving other people's feelings and problems a second thought, but he might be able to take some comfort in the fact that any other newcomers whom he encountered at that meeting would have a tunnel-vision preoccupation with themselves which would be just as absolute as his. They would hardly be aware he existed and could care less.

"Now, wait a minute," I said. "Do you mean I should go to a meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous? Remember, I'm a priest. If I should go to one of those meetings, what would people think? Why, they'd say, 'Look at that Catholic priest sitting down at a meeting with a bunch of drunks.'"

"Well, Father," Dohr said slowly, "I don't think you have to worry about that. Nobody will say anything. As a matter of fact, they're all so busy with their own problems that they won't give you a second thought."⁸

Dohr told him that the next A.A. meeting would be on Thursday evening at eight, and that he would be by to pick him up at 7:15. Ralph continued to stew as to whether he should go to the meeting or not.

Once, at the dinner table in the rectory, I brought up the subject of A.A. I asked if anyone knew about it.

"I don't know anything about A.A.," one priest said, "but I do know Doherty Sheerin, and he's a wonderful man."

"What does he do?" I asked.

"He's a retired manufacturer. He was in business for many years, and was very successful. I guess he gives all his time to Alcoholics Anonymous now."

Later, I pulled one of the other priests aside and asked him, "What do you think of this Alcoholics Anonymous?"

"I don't know much about it," he said. "But if Dohr Sheerin's got anything to do with it, it must be good."

"Do you think it's the sort of thing a priest should get involved in?"

He shook his head vigorously.

"No, no, not a priest," he said. "A.A. isn't for a priest. A priest doesn't need that. He has everything he needs for sobriety in his Church."⁹

Now it is not just priests and pastors and other religious functionaries who have that same basic problem of thinking that religion by itself should be enough. Anyone who belongs to an organized religion is apt to be told by some well-meaning person within his group that the religious principles and practices of that institution will get anybody sober who really takes their beliefs seriously. In practice, of course, it hardly ever happens for a true hard-core alcoholic—perhaps with one out of a thousand? one out of ten thousand?

Newcomers to A.A. also, for similar reasons, sometimes fall into the trap of believing that they can master the spiritual principles of the A.A. program by starting to attend the services of some sort of organized religion. But invariably, people who try to go to church or synagogue to learn what the spiritual principles of A.A. are about learn nothing about A.A. How could they? If your television set is broken, you will get nowhere taking it to a washing machine repair place. The fact that television sets and washing machines both run on electricity is true enough, but not terribly useful if you have one that is broken and take it to the wrong place to be fixed.

A.A. had to break with the religious organization called the Oxford Group in order to teach the kind of spirituality which will keep an alcoholic sober. Ralph P. was the first Roman Catholic priest in the United States to go to A.A. to get help for his alcoholism, but in the years that followed, it became clear that priests and pastors of all sorts of religious denominations had to go to A.A. if they became alcoholics. If a religious group has to send its own leaders to A.A. to get them sober, then it becomes especially clear why newcomers to A.A. who try to grasp the spiritual aspects of A.A. by going to church or synagogue will always fail. It is not a question of theory, but of hard practice. If you are an alcoholic, then even if you become as "holy" as a priest, a nun, an evangelical preacher, or a rabbi, it is almost invariably true that you will still not have learned about the parts of the spiritual life which will put you into the kind of continuous and vital God-consciousness which will actually get an alcoholic sober and eventually give him or her some real serenity.

Father Ralph Pfau of Indiana, as the first among many who followed his lead in later years, was the earliest living example of what all A.A. oldtimers now recognize instinctively as an irrefutable practical truth.

RALPH DID GO to that first A.A. closed discussion meeting, and received his first shock. The other two people in Dohr's car were like Dohr himself—not only neatly but expensively dressed, and obviously successful businessmen. One turned out to be a retired banker, and the other one was a manufacturer's representative. There were two people already at the meeting place: an attorney and a hardware salesman. Alcoholics were not necessarily shabby old men in dirty trenchcoats sleeping in alleys and hiding their wine bottles in paper bags.

Ralph could not make himself speak at all during the meeting. How could he ever say, "My name is Ralph and I'm an alcoholic"? But at one level Ralph felt better somehow than he had in weeks, and admitted afterwards, in the automobile ride back to the rectory, that the meeting had been "interesting."

"That's good," Dohr said, as he pulled the car up in front of the rectory. "Now, keep coming back. Someday, everything will fall into focus."

I walked thoughtfully into the rectory and up the stairs to my room on the second floor. And, as I began to get ready for bed, I could feel the seeds of discouragement begin to crop up again.

This A.A. is great for laymen. It gives them a new awareness of God, and that helps to keep them from drinking. But I have always had a strong awareness of and faith in God, and that didn't keep me from drinking. They talked about honesty tonight—honesty with themselves and honesty with other people. I know all about honesty. Honesty is one of the virtues that any priest adheres to as a matter of course. So there are two things—awareness of God and honesty—which are keystones of success in A.A., and I have both, but neither stopped me from drinking.

*So what can A.A. do for me?*¹⁰

Now the absurdity of Ralph's thinking was no greater than that of many an alcoholic new to the program. He was not at all an honest man: He had broken the law continuously by buying whisky from bootleggers. He had constantly lied about his drinking to his religious superiors, to doctors, and to the people in the mental health institutions in which he had been confined. He had grossly lied about how much he drank to Dohr during their first conversation in the rectory, even though the A.A. man was trying to help him.

Even at the level of having some kind of awareness of and faith in God, he had no ability whatsoever to go

through a day's work deeply feeling God's presence and trusting in his goodness, for a variety of reasons. One was the conviction he had had, ever since he had approached his ordination, that he himself was not morally worthy to be a priest—and yet he allowed himself to be pressured into being ordained anyway, which meant that his whole fundamental relationship with God was tainted with what (to his own mind) was gross hypocrisy on his part, with a consequent inability to have anything even remotely like an honest and open relationship with God. Down deep, he did not really think himself good enough to deserve God's love.

He had all sorts of intellectual knowledge about theology and philosophy, so that he was "aware of God," but *only as an abstract theory* for the most part. He was not truly aware of God as a constant, living, gracious presence in his daily life. He recited ritual prayers to God every day, but used the traditional ritualistic language to form a barrier between himself and God—to a far greater degree than he realized, his God was an almost totally depersonalized God. At the everyday practical level, instead of trusting in God's plan for his life, and *accepting* it, he had fallen into resentment and self-pity every time one of his religious superiors did not let him do exactly what he himself thought he wanted to do at exactly the time that he wanted to it.

God had a plan for Ralph, just as he does for all of us—ultimately he was going to become an extraordinarily successful servant of God in a new and unique kind of way—but Ralph's old ideas and attitudes had to be broken to pieces and destroyed before he could be liberated to serve God in the way God intended.

DOHR CALLED HIM on the phone the next morning, just to ask how he was doing, and regularly every subsequent morning. They never talked about anything major, but Ralph felt better for a while after each call, and began to look forward to them. Then the next Thursday came his second A.A. meeting. A visitor was there, who talked about drinking a fifth of whisky every day for forty years. He had woken up from benders in mental institutions, hospitals, Salvation Army shelters, elevated train platforms, and gutters.

Ralph refused to identify with the man, in spite of the fact that he had been sent to mental institutions himself, and had gone through blackouts where he later had to call the person who was with him to find out what he had

done. Ralph still refused to acknowledge to himself the times when the bishop had removed him from a parish because of his out-of-control drinking—that his bishop was clearly at the end of his patience and was going to throw him out of priesthood entirely if he drank again—and continued to insist to Dohr (in bizarre fashion) that he had never been more than an occasional social drinker. In fact he was at the end of the line, if he wanted to remain a priest, and yet he still could not control his unbearable craving for alcohol.

On the way home, I said, "I don't know, Dohr. After hearing that man, I'm convinced I don't have an alcoholic problem. I really don't drink more than once in a while, and then only for old times' sake. This program is for somebody like him, and it really helped him. But I don't see how it can help me. I've got a good many more years of heavy drinking to do before I'm an alcoholic, judging by his experience."

"Well, Father," Dohr said, "I suggest you just keep coming to the meetings. Just keep coming and don't drink. Let's see what happens. Let's take one day at a time. You know, we have what we call our twenty-four-hour program. That means we're not worried about yesterday or tomorrow. We only think of today. What are we doing today? That's the big thing. And we know that if we don't drink today we're not going to have any trouble today."

"That's fine," I said, "only I never did drink every day. I'm really not an alcoholic, Dohr."

"Well, Father, I hope you're really being honest with yourself, if not with me. And tell me, if you don't think you're an alcoholic, why—really, be honest now—why did you call me in the first place?"

"Oh, I don't know. I had just read your literature. And everyone—Monsignor Bosler and all the priests at the rectory—said you were such a nice, decent fellow."

"But why call *me*? Why bother with Alcoholics Anonymous? You must have many priest friends to consult on other problems. You could have gone to any of them. And you must know plenty of doctors who could treat you if you felt you were sick. You wouldn't be here with me, riding in my car on your way home from an A.A. meeting—you surely wouldn't have contacted A.A. or anyone in it—unless you thought you had an alcoholic problem."

That made sense. It made sense to me all the way back to the rectory . . . But ten minutes after I walked into my room, it didn't make so much sense anymore.¹¹

THIS IS THE PROBLEM of the First Step: admitting your powerlessness over alcohol, as well as the total un-

manageability of your life. Many years later, Ralph issued a set of thirty recordings in which he spoke on various A.A. topics. Four of these dealt with the twelve steps, and in the section on Step One he referred to his own difficulties when he first came into the A.A. program.

Now you hear a lot of discussions in the A.A. groups, "Just what is an alcoholic?" And whenever you see a group together discussing that, to quite some length, you can be pretty sure somebody's looking for an out! [Laughter] Somebody's looking for a definition that lets him out! [Laughter] He's looking to justify the next drink. I think it is very secure if—instead of asking ourselves "am I an alcoholic?"—[we] simply ask ourselves "has alcohol become to me a serious problem in life?" If it has, then I am a fit member for Alcoholics Anonymous and I certainly am fit to take these twelve steps of the A.A. program.

You know, when I first came into A.A., I wasn't quite sold that I was an alcoholic. That was a "nasty word" in those days, and still in some circles it's a nasty word, because still the world does not understand what an alcoholic is. But I remember at that time, I was talking with my sponsor, and I happened to mention, I said, "Dohr, I'm not quite sure whether I am an alcoholic or not." And he looked at me, he said, "Look father, let's get this settled once and for all." He says, "Why in the heck did you come to see me if you're not an alcoholic? [Laughter] Why did you come to A.A.?" He said, "Now I'm sure there's many priests in the world who are a thousand times more competent to solve your moral problems than I am. I'm sure also there's many psychiatrists in this world who also are a thousand times more competent to solve your mental problems, your emotional problems, than I am. If you're not an alcoholic, why did you come to see me?" Well, I couldn't answer him. [Laughter]¹²

And Dohr kept on pressing that same series of simple questions: Why do you keep on coming back to A.A. meetings and reading A.A. literature? Why does this program have such a peculiar fascination for you? Why do you spend so much time obsessively trying to "prove" that you are NOT an alcoholic? There are mechanisms of thought which operate down at the Freudian level that are sure tip-offs that something is vitally important to a person in ways which the person is totally denying on the surface: A man who is constantly telling you "I am NOT a horse-thief" should probably be watched carefully whenever he is around your stable.

And finally Ralph said, "I made up my mind that I couldn't drink"—that is, that alcohol was thoroughly tied into the major problems of my life—and that meant "that I *am* an alcoholic." In that same recording where he talked about the First Step, he said that being an alcoholic (or being anything else) was not so bad if you just changed your attitude about what being that actually meant.

You know this question of attitudes changing the entire perspective of a truth: There were two fellows discussing the inequalities of life one day, and they were bricklayers. And one of them said, "Isn't it a shame, Pat, how everything is so unequal in this world?" He says, "Take yourself for example," he says, "Here, your brother, he's a bishop. And here, what are you?—you're a bricklayer." "Yes," Pat said, "isn't it a shame! His excellency couldn't lay a brick if his life depended on it." [Laughter]

Then also speaking of the matter of attitude and terminology, they tell the story of two Irishmen who met in A.A. one time. One's name was Shaughnessey and the other's name was O'Flannigan. So when he was introduced to the other fellow, he happened to think, "Well maybe he's a Catholic, maybe I'll ask him." He says, "By the way, are you a Catholic?" And the other guy says, "Lord no, it's bad enough to be an alcoholic!" [Laughter]¹³

Talking to Dohr could calm him down for a while, but then Ralph would start getting "the jitters" again. Finally he went to the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, where they gave him two large boxes of phenobarbital pills. But as soon as the effect of a pill wore off, he would get jittery again. Fortunately, there in 1943 one of the A.A. people had created a treatment facility in Indianapolis called the Indiana Home, where Ralph was finally told about the dangers of his drug usage.

That year, we had opened our "jitter-joint," officially known as the Indiana Home. This was a place where alcoholics could come and spend four or five days drying out and getting back to a place where they could eat again. It was sponsored by a member of A.A. and was—and still is—strictly non-profit. It is operated under the supervision of a board of directors . . .

I stopped by often, partly to see if I could do anything and partly for my own benefit, for I had long since learned that I must never lose contact with other alcoholics if I hoped to stay sober myself. I would just sort of hang around, talking to people, perhaps having a cup of coffee

or two and trying to make myself useful.¹⁴

One day, he dropped by, and found the resident nurse trying to revive a man who was sitting there with his tongue out, his lips swollen and blue, and his eyes staring blindly. He was a hearing-aid specialist with an office in downtown Indianapolis, and he had taken an overdose of pills, Seconal in his case. Ralph went to see the doctor who was in charge of the Indiana Home.

"I'm scared, Doctor," I said. "I just got back from Mayo, where they gave me a couple hundred pills to take for my nervousness. But now I don't know what to do with them."

"Well," he said, "those people know what they're doing up there. Did you tell them you are an alcoholic?"

"Oh, no."

"You should have, Father. The doctors at Mayo would never have given you all those pills if they'd known that. Phenobarbital and seconal can both be dangerous drugs, especially to the alcoholic and the addictive personality. You might take too much of either without realizing it . . . [People] don't get enough relief from one, so they take two—or three—or even more—and pretty soon they've taken so many they pass out, or even die. You often hear of people dying from an overdose of those drugs. It sounds like suicide, but in most cases it isn't. These people were just trying to get relief. What happens is, they have a couple of pills, then unconsciously reach for the bottle and finish it. It could happen to you."¹⁵

The doctor finally convinced Ralph to "take those two boxes of pills and get rid of them before they get rid of you." He spent a terrible week. When Dohr called him on the phone, he babbled endlessly to him. When Dohr came by to pick him up for the next meeting, he still could only think about how terrible he felt.

"I'm terribly worried, Dohr," I said. "I've had a bad reaction from not taking pills. I'm so nervous I can't still sit."

"Well, now, Father, you've got something there that i'm not familiar with. We don't profess to know anything about barbitals. The only thing I can tell you—and it's only a personal opinion—is that if anything is worse than alcohol it's probably drugs. I imagine that monkeying around with barbitals would be the first step towards drug addiction for the alcoholic and would eventually lead to

drinking again. You've lasted almost a week without those pills. If you can just go a little while longer, I should think eventually your nerves would quiet down."¹⁶

Ralph discovered that the A.A. program helped him get through the withdrawal symptoms, and although it took months, the effects of the drugs eventually left his system.

I noticed that, while my nerves were jumpy and my mind wandered from time to time, my general condition was nowhere nearly as bad as in [previous periods of nervous breakdown] One factor that nearly drove me out of my mind during other shaky spells was now missing. I no longer was assailed by the deep depression and despair and fear of the future. Those old fears had robbed me of the ability to think clearly. I couldn't take account of my own stock intelligently.

But now I could almost stand in the wings and watch my troubles run their course on the stage. For the first time in my life, I could look at myself objectively while in the throes of a nervous reaction. Now I knew that this was only a temporary condition which would go away in due time.¹⁷

The allies landed on Normandy Beach at D-day on June 6, 1944. By the fall of 1944, Ralph had made his own new beachhead: after going to A.A. for a full year, he spoke in a closed A.A. discussion meeting for the first time! Dohr asked him afterwards if he was finally ready to say that he was an alcoholic. Ralph said, "Well Dohr, let's put it this way. I'm ready to admit I'm a member of Alcoholics Anonymous." "That's something, anyhow," Dohr responded.

The Second World War ended with the surrender of Japan on August 14, 1945. Ralph decided he needed to contribute something to the A.A. program, so he came up with the idea of taking a traditional Roman Catholic retreat and discarding the talks on Catholic dogma and practice, and turning it into a spiritual retreat for alcoholics instead. He set up a one-day retreat on a Sunday at the Little Sisters of the Poor, and sixty-seven men came. Only twenty of them were Roman Catholics, the talks were all strictly A.A., and the Protestants seemed to gain as much from the retreat as anyone.

On the basis of this experiment, in June 1946 he set up a weekend spiritual retreat for members of A.A. at St. Joseph's College in Rensselaer, Indiana, which was such a huge success that it became an annual event from that point on.¹⁸ Nevertheless, in spite of Dohr's regular prodding, Ralph was still not willing to say "I am an alcoholic."

The theme of the talk he himself gave there was "The Spiritual Side of Alcoholics Anonymous," which went over so well that he continued to give it to other groups, and eventually made a recording of it. One of the first places where he was asked to repeat this talk was for an A.A. meeting in Cincinnati, held in 1946 not long after the St. Joseph's at Rensselaer retreat.

There were more than a hundred people present, filling the little meeting hall to the doors. The chairman introduced me, and I gave the talk in the same way I always had. When it was over, the chairman opened the floor for questions.

A little fellow at the back of the room got up and said, "Father, that was a fine talk. I liked it and maybe I got something out of it. But, Father, what the heck do you know about this problem? You're a priest. or are you an alcoholic, too?"

I swallowed.

Then in a voice I hoped was steady, I said, "Yes, I'm an alcoholic."

"Well," the man said, "that's fine. Tell us about it."

So, for the first time, I told the story of my alcoholic life in an open meeting. I told of my first nervous breakdown, my first drink, my subsequent breakdowns, the fluctuations of my alcoholic appetite, my experiences in various hospitals and sanitariums, my frequent troubles with the Bishop, everything, in fact, that I could think of. I talked for half an hour, and the place exploded with applause when I was through.

And after I sat down, I felt a deep relief There was nothing more to hide, either from them or from myself

The next time I was asked to speak, I stood squarely on my feet, looked around at the expectant faces in front of me and said, firmly, "My name is Father Pfau. I am not going to spell it for you. You can use your imagination. Most people do. I am a member of the Indianapolis group of Alcoholics Anonymous and *I am an alcoholic*."¹⁹

1. Ralph Pfau and Al Hirschberg, *Prodigal Shepherd* (Indianapolis IN: SMT Guild, 1958, but from a later edition published after Ralph P.'s death on February 19, 1967), pp. 13 and 195.

2. *Ibid.* p. 34.

3. *Ibid.* pp. 48 and 96.

4. *Ibid.* p. 192.

5. *Ibid.* pp. 192-3.

6. *Ibid.* p. 251. Obituary in the *Chicago Tribune* for February 20, 1967.

7. *Prodigal Shepherd* pp. 193-4.

8. *Ibid.* pp. 194-5.

9. *Ibid.* pp. 195-6.

10. *Ibid.* pp. 197-8.

11. *Ibid.* pp. 199-200.

12. Father John Doe (Ralph Pfau), Recording No. 23, "The 12 Steps—I (1-2-3)." Distributed at that time by SMT Guild, P.O. Box 313,

Indianapolis IN. Much of his material has now been taken over by Hazelden.

13. *Ibid.*

14. *Prodigal Shepherd* p. 202.

15. *Ibid.* p. 203.

16. *Ibid.* p. 204.

17. *Ibid.* pp. 204-5.

18. *Ibid.* p. 217.

19. *Ibid.* pp. 225-6.

SPONSORSHIP

Father John Doe (Ralph Pfau), *The Golden Book of Sponsorship* (Indianapolis: SMT Guild, 1953), pp. 3, 5, and 44:

IN MEMORIAM

DOHERTY SHEERIN

Founder of A.A. in Indiana, and the
author's sponsor.

Died January 27, 1953

having enjoyed

With the help of God and A.A.
15 years of continued
sobriety

May God grant him eternal peace and
serenity—of which Dohr GAVE
so much to so many

"This Is a Give Program"

What we give away—we keep; for it is in
the giving that we receive:

What we keep to ourselves we lose; for in the
keeping we cannot reproduce:

And when we die, we take with us only that
which we have given away.

Don't *practice* what you are going to say to the prospect
. . . . we don't have anything to sell through a sales talk.
"Tell them what happened to you." We all know that *very*
well. And we do not need *practice to relate it*. But you
know something? We might need a little *humility!*

The founder of A.A. in Indianapolis was asked in a
meeting one time what he thought about on the way to call
on a new fellow. He answered in his own simple yet
sincere way: "I don't think about anything; *I pray.*"

THE SPIRITUAL SIDE

Father John Doe (Ralph Pfau), *The Golden Book of the Spiritual Side* (Indianapolis: SMT Guild, 1947), selections from pp. 7-18.

"Sought through prayer and meditation . . ."

IN ORDER TO HAVE a clear mind in considering the
subject of prayer and meditation, a true concept of the
nature of spirituality is paramount. Many have much diffi-
culty with the so-called "spiritual side" of the program,
because they have a distorted idea of what is meant by the
term "spiritual." To many such a term conjures up in their
minds innumerable prayers, a long face, isolation, *inhuman*
qualities of human association, a retreating gait, sombre

groanings, and what-have-you. Nothing could be farther
from the truth, for a truly spiritual man is a saint, and a
saint is very human—but one who has built his life and his
actions on *God's* will and not his own.

Spiritual men and women are happy—they have no
conflicts—for their will is trained to be always subject to
the will of God. As St. Theresa put it in two pertinent
remarks: "A saint sad is a sad saint" and "Lord, deliver
me from sour-faced saints." Spiritual men and women are

normal, whereas the grotesque figure conjured up above is very abnormal. They keep such people locked up.

A spiritual person is one who does *what* he has to do, *when* he has to do it, in the *best* way he can do it and who gets the guidance, the strength, and the success from God through humble prayer and meditation. They realize that whether they pray or eat or work or play or sleep, they do it all for the honor and glory of God and thus they praise God in doing His Will.

Some obtain their wrong idea of spirituality and sanctity from the pictures and statues of the saints. In order to denote sanctity, they are usually depicted in a "saintly" pose *but* we should not conclude from this fact that their whole life is consumed in such pose. Do we think for one moment that St. Joseph went around day after day with a lily in one hand and the Christ Child in the other? . . . St. Joseph was a carpenter and as such had to work every day to support Mary and Jesus. He had to put up with all the inconveniences of life the same as you and I. He laughed, and wept, and ate, and slept, and talked with friends, and suffered and died—even as you and I. But he did all these things as *God* willed them—and *that* made him a saint.

AS AN outstanding member once remarked, "Spiritual side? The *whole* program is spiritual" . . . Have you ever analyzed the twelve steps and eliminated those steps that are spiritual? . . . What have we left of the program after having thrown out all the steps that are spiritual?

We admitted that we are powerless over alcohol, that our lives had become unmanageable!

What a mess! Open the barred gates, Richard! Therefore, understanding that the leading of a spiritual life is nothing more nor less than the honest effort to live daily in accord-

ance with the known Will of God to the best of our ability, let us proceed to the consideration of the one thing that is the cornerstone of the whole program, . . . the eleventh step:

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 that out.

No one will achieve sobriety and happiness and serenity for long unless he or she honestly practices the eleventh step. Thousands of alcoholics have slipped. But experience proves that *every slip* was preceded by a period of neglect of the eleventh step, by a neglect of honest prayer, by a neglect of humbly asking God for the guidance and strength to remain sober.

The writer has made it a point to ask hundreds of men who had slipped whether they had sincerely prayed on the day they began to drink. Only one answered affirmatively, and his qualified his answer with, "I prayed and prayed that *God would not let me get hurt* during this drunk"! This is tantamount to no prayer . . .

On the other hand *all things* are possible to the man who prays. No matter in what condition or how entangled one may be in the problems of life; no matter how long or how much a man has drunk to excess; no matter how low such a person has sunk in the quick-sands of immorality or mental aberrations, *if he prays he will recover!* For alcoholism, unhappiness, wrong-doing, self-pity, resentments, conflicts, and all the hosts of things the alcoholic knows so well *can not* co-exist with prayer. One will be eliminated—either he will stop praying or even the worst of human problems eventually will clear up under the power of God's grace.

The Northern Indiana Archival Bulletin is published in South Bend, Indiana. Please contact the Michiana Central Service Office, 814 E. Jefferson Ave., South Bend, IN 46617. Phone (219) 234-7007, 11 a.m.—3 p.m. Mon—Fri. The bulletin is produced under the auspices of the Archives Committee for Northern Indiana Area 22 of Alcoholics Anonymous. Current members of the Archives Committee include:

Floyd P. (chair), Frankton
765-754-3251

Beth M. (alter.), Lafayette
765-474-4125

Big Al M., Milford
219-658-4077

Klaus K., Fort Wayne
219-484-7282

Frank N., Syracuse
219-457-3843

Bulletin editor: Glenn C., 219-233-7211, South Bend IN. Submissions are welcome from archivists working on materials from anywhere in northern Indiana or in adjoining regions of southern Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, and Ohio. This bulletin is not intended for general publication, but for the use only of people with legitimate archival or scholarly concerns. Full names have therefore been given of people who are now dead. For the living, the A.A. anonymity principle is applied to all names (first name and last initial, or a pseudonym) whether they are A.A. members or not, unless their association with A.A. is clearly tangential.