

Human Friendship As a Channel for Grace

The Story of Bill Wilson and Father Ed Dowling, S.J.

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Bill Wilson, the co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, and Father Ed Dowling, S.J., were best friends for twenty years, from the time of their first meeting on a snowy night in late 1940 until Father Ed's death on April 3, 1960.

The highest kind of human friendship is often used by God as one of his most important channels for the healing and saving and empowering energy of his divine grace. Catholics believe in a sacramental universe: this means a world in which God cannot only reach out and directly touch us through the bread and wine of the mass or the water of baptism, but anywhere around us (and in and through anything else in this material universe) which he might choose to use. It is in this way that God can take what is at one level simple human friendship, but can elevate this love between two people to divine heights.

All who know about the origins of the Alcoholics Anonymous movement know that by November 1934, Bill Wilson's alcoholism had gotten totally out of control, and it appeared as though he was only going to drink himself to death. The situation seemed utterly hopeless.

Bill W. Remembering Winchester Cathedral

But then there entered the first friend to re-shape Bill's story, a sometimes drinking companion from Wilson's younger years named Ebby Thacher, who now seemed to have miraculously gotten sober through his joining the new Christian evangelical movement called the Oxford Group.¹ God's grace had saved him, he told Bill. And at that point, Ebby became the channel through which God reached from the heavenly realm into this materialistic box of space and time in which we human beings normally live during this life, and through his grace also saved Bill Wilson's life.

Bill Wilson had been telling Ebby that calling on God's grace would not work for him, because he was too logical and rational, and could not possibly accept the traditional Christian concept of God. But then Ebby made a simple suggestion and told Bill that if that was the problem, "Why don't you choose your own conception of God?" And using those words as his channel, God shone the light of his grace down into Bill's heart, and carried Bill back sixteen years in time.²

Bill W. suddenly remembered that day during the summer of 1918 when he was young artillery officer in the First World War, waiting in England to be transported over to France and thrust into the fighting. Bill had become deeply frightened at the thought of being killed or maimed on the bloody battlefields he was about to enter, until he walked into Winchester Cathedral one day. This great medieval church is situated about an hour or so's train ride southwest of downtown London. Standing underneath the soaring Gothic arches, and staring at the ornate carvings behind the altar, as a seemingly heavenly light streamed in through the windows, Bill suddenly felt an overpowering sense of the sacred or holy.

Learning to see the holy

This is an important component of what Catholics call the sacramental view of the universe: those instances when we feel God's presence shining immediately through the materialistic walls of the physical universe and enveloping us in the sacred light from above. Rudolf Otto's *The Idea of the Holy* and Mircea Eliade's *The Sacred and the Profane* talk about this at great length.³ We can be receiving the bread at mass in a simple parish church, visiting St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, viewing a magnificent tropical sunset along the southern Florida coast, gazing with awe over the Grand Canyon, or being present at the birth of a baby. We can learn to sense the holy while contemplating a single small flower in the grass (remembering what St. Thérèse of Lisieux said about the Little Flower). We can see the power of the holy especially illuminating the friendship between two people when they both seek God.

There at Winchester Cathedral in 1918, Bill suddenly realized that the true God was not an intellectual theory our minds created as we attempted to use rationalistic arguments to understand the universe. The real ruler of the universe was not a collection of doctrines and dogmas written in a ponderous book by the dry and sterile hands of pompous philosophers and theologians. The true God was something I could feel as an overwhelming living presence, invading my heart and soul with a power which surpassed everything else in the universe.

In Winchester, in England in the summer of 1918, the young army officer, overawed by his vision of the truly sacred and holy, suddenly felt all his fears and nightmares slip away, and stood there as a free man And then he turned around and walked out of the cathedral and promptly forgot what he had experienced, and eventually took up heavy drinking after the war was over, as what

seemed an easier, simpler way — the way of chemical self-medication — than the time and labor involved in trying to live a life of prayer, meditation, and good works.

Bill W.'s Conversion

For sixteen years he forgot what he had learned, but now in November 1934, the words of his friend Ebby became the sacred vehicle by which God once again handed that vision of sacredness and holiness back to Bill Wilson, and he remembered once again his experience in the cathedral. But this time he clutched it to his heart and refused to let go, and was saved. This was Bill W.'s real conversion experience, he told us: "At long last I saw, I felt, I believed. Scales of pride and prejudice fell from my eyes. A new world came into view."⁴

Bill Wilson was able to build on this experience to get sober, and for the next four years worked on forming a group of recovering alcoholics, and finally writing a book describing their spiritual method of calling on God's grace to heal their bodies, minds, and souls. In April 1939 this book was published. The title on the cover was *Alcoholics Anonymous*, but it quickly began being referred to simply as the "Big Book."

Two friendships that lost their power

Bill and Ebby continued to be friends until the end of the latter's life in 1966, but it quickly became mostly a one-way friendship. At the beginning, Ebby served as the channel of God's grace who saved Bill Wilson's life. But that changed rapidly, as Ebby kept going back to alcohol over and over again. Bill remained loyal however, and continually acted as Ebby's caretaker, putting him in treatment centers and halfway houses, and getting him sober again. Bill was the channel of grace here. And Ebby appeared to have died sober, the ultimate A.A. goal.⁵

At first, during that glorious summer of 1935 while Bill Wilson was living in Dr. Bob Smith's house in Akron and the two of them were planning out what would be the new Alcoholics Anonymous movement, Bill and Bob were friends who were as close as could be. That friendship provided a bright channel of incredible divine grace, from which the A.A. movement was born. But in the years that followed, even though the two of them continued to work cooperatively with one another at the basic level, Dr. Bob was clearly lukewarm to the writing of the Big Book (1938-39) and, later on, to the writing of the Twelve Traditions (1946-50). And there seems to me to have been no regular close sharing with one other of their deepest hopes and fears after that first summer. They did not remain truly deep friends. But friendship was the key to the most important things the two men worked out at the beginning of the A.A. movement, during the summer of 1935.

The descent into apparent total failure

Bill was convinced when he wrote the Big Book that it would quickly become a best seller all over the United States, and that the profits from its sales would allow A.A. to build hospitals and treatment centers, and give Bill and Dr. Bob stipends which would allow them to spend their full time working with alcoholics.

But hardly any copies of the book sold. And A.A. itself was not growing very fast. By October 1940, eighteen months after the Big Book was published, there were still only 1,400 A.A. members scattered around the United States.⁶ The Alcoholics Anonymous movement was simply not catching on and spreading rapidly in the way that they had fantasized.

And other things began to go wrong too. Bill Wilson and his wife Lois had been living in the house at 182 Clinton Street in Brooklyn, the family home where Lois had been brought up as a child. But now on April 26, 1939 (in the same month that the Big

Book was published), the bank which held the mortgage told them that they had to move out.⁷ It is difficult to imagine Lois's feelings while packing everything up and leaving the place where all her childhood memories were located. For almost two years after that, she and Bill had to move continually from place to place — fifty-four different places according to Lois. By November 1940, Bill and Lois had been forced to move into a single upstairs room in the A.A. clubhouse at 334½ West 24th St. in New York City. Isolated, and by now totally friendless, it seemed as if Bill's faith in God, and belief in his own divine mission, had been foolish and naïve.⁸

Father Ed Dowling, S.J.

But then there entered a new figure, a Jesuit priest from St. Louis, named Father Ed Dowling.⁹ He was going to become for the next twenty years the truly dependable and consistent friend that Bill so much needed — and both of them true God-seekers of the highest sort. Dowling, who was born there in the old Mississippi riverboat city in 1898, first became a newspaper reporter for the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, and then in 1919 abruptly left his newspaper job and entered the Jesuit order.

He regarded his eventual ordination as a priest in 1931 as a profound direct experience of the power of God's sacramental grace. As I interpret Father Dowling's feelings and emotions at that time, he regarded it as not only a consecration to Holy Orders and the ordinary priestly tasks, but as God's call to him to carry out a special mission, bringing the power of God's grace to the most despised and rejected members of society, the men and women whom everyone else looked down on and turned away from. This list was to eventually include alcoholics, whom people at that time regarded as evil and especially hopeless moral degenerates. Father Ed was not an alcoholic himself, but he had early on become addicted to cigarette smoking and compulsive overeating (which

helped bring about his death at the young age of 61), so he understood at first-hand the power of addiction.

In spite of the fact that he struggled with almost crippling arthritis in his back, which made walking (and especially climbing steps and stairs) extremely painful, he devoted his life to traveling all over the United States, working with groups of Catholic young people, alcoholics, and numerous others.

In his piety, he was most definitely a Catholic of the old school, who began each day by spending a long time quietly contemplating a crucifix, while he meditated on the importance of true humility, and the joyful and enthusiastic embracing of whatever kind of suffering was necessary to carry out God's tasks here on earth.

Yet in other ways, he was most definitely a representative of the liberal wing of the Jesuits, and seems to me also to have been clearly been a religious thinker who was locatable more or less within the Roman Catholic movement called the *Nouvelle Théologie* or "New Theology," that is, the mid-twentieth-century theologians like Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Karl Rahner, and Jean Daniélou, who eventually ended up remaking the Roman Catholic Church at the Second Vatican Council.¹⁰

The snowy day in New York City

In the Fall of 1940, after someone in St. Louis asked him for help in dealing with alcoholism, Father Ed got a copy of the A.A. Big Book, which he read through with awe and admiration, and putting that together with what he had seen in action in Chicago, called together the first meeting of an A.A. group in that city on October 30, 1940.

Not long afterwards, in late November or early December, Dowling was off to New York City. As Bill Wilson later described what happened: "One wintry night in 1940 in A.A.'s Old Twenty-Fourth Street Club in New York I had gone to bed at about ten

o'clock with a severe dose of self-pity and my imaginary ulcer Hail and sleet beat on the tin roof over my head; it was a wild night. The front doorbell clanged," and shortly afterwards [the live-in caretaker] pushed open my bedroom door. 'Some bum,' said he, 'from St. Louis is down there and wants to see you.' 'Oh, Lord!' I said. 'Not another one! And at this time of night. Oh, well, bring him up.'"

"I heard labored steps on the stairs. Then, balanced precariously on his cane, he came into the room, carrying a battered black hat that was shapeless as a cabbage leaf and plastered with sleet. He lowered himself into my solitary chair, and when he opened his overcoat I saw his clerical collar. He brushed back a shock of white hair and looked at me through the most remarkable pair of eyes I have ever seen. We talked about a lot of things, and my spirits kept on rising, and presently I began to realize that this man radiated a grace that filled the room with a sense of presence. I felt this with great intensity; it was a moving and mysterious experience. In years since I have seen much of this great friend, and whether I was in joy or in pain he always brought to me the same sense of grace and the presence of God. My case is no exception. Many who meet Father Ed experience this touch of the eternal."¹¹

Divine light coming through another person

When I seriously read these words again a few years ago, and started thinking about exactly what Bill Wilson was saying, I suddenly realized how totally extraordinary this all was. Feeling the "touch of the eternal"?

Bill went even further and described that evening elsewhere as being like "a second conversion experience."¹² In other words, he experienced such an overwhelming sense of the holy and the sacred when Father Dowling was speaking to him, that he could

only compare it to his meeting with Ebby Thacher back in 1934, when Ebby's words so vividly brought back Bill's memory of his experience in Winchester Cathedral, and he suddenly became willing to return to God once again.

Ernest Kurtz described the scene in *Not-God* in even stronger terms as a vision seemingly of divine light:¹³ "As [Dowling and he] began to converse, Bill noted that his visitor's round face seemed to gather in all of the light in the room and then reflect it directly at him." This is quite extraordinary. In Father Ed, Bill Wilson confronted not just a repetition of his experience in the cathedral, but his vision of the divine light at Towns Hospital on December 14, 1934, where by God's grace he received his divine mission to bring his saving message for alcoholics to the whole world.

Father Dowling's reaction to Bill

Back the other way, when I first read Dowling's response to Bill Wilson on that snowy night in New York, I found it equally startling. As Father Robert Fitzgerald, S.J. noted in an article in *The Catholic Digest*,¹⁴ "Father Ed counted many gifts from Bill. He had told his sister, Anna, that the graces he received from their meeting were equivalent to those received at his own ordination. And he thanked Bill for letting him 'hitchhike' on the twelve steps."

That is an extraordinary statement to make: a gift of divine grace as great as the one conveyed by the Holy Spirit at his ordination as a Catholic priest, an experience which most priests find quite overwhelming.

But in my understanding of Dowling, one of the most important things he received at his ordination in 1931 was a sense of having been commissioned, by the touch of God's grace during that profoundly moving ceremony, to carry a message of healing and

acceptance to the truly downtrodden and despised. When he discovered the Alcoholics Anonymous movement in the Fall of 1940, then began experimenting with setting up twelve step groups himself—groups dealing not just with alcoholism, but also with dozens of other kinds of personal problems—he obtained access to a whole new dimension of healing and nurturing. He was able to apply what he learned from his study of the twelve steps to all the other small group programs and religious activities he had become involved in all over the United States: Recovery Inc., the Montserrat Circle, Divorcées Anonymous, the Catholic Action summer school programs, the Christian Family movement, his writing for *The Queen's Work* magazine, and so on.

Bill Wilson helped fill him with a new life and creativity and dedication to serving God by helping his fellow human beings. And back the other way, on that snowy night in New York city, just before leaving, Father Dowling looked Bill straight in the eyes and declared, “There was a force in Bill ... that was all his own. It had never been on this earth before, and if Bill did anything to mar it or block it, it would never exist anywhere again.”¹⁵

Bill had been given a special mission from God, one that no one but him could carry out. But others could travel alongside him, and share in both his sufferings and his triumphs, and this is what Father Ed wanted to do. Bill found that Dowling was someone with whom he could discuss his deepest spiritual fears and concerns. And in 1952, when Bill Wilson began writing his second great book, the *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, he almost immediately started sending Father Ed copies of his drafts of the chapters as he was writing them, to obtain the priest's advice and criticism.¹⁶

The godbearers: human revealers of the divine

The concept of holy men and holy women who were special bearers of the divine went far back into the ancient world. When Christianity first appeared, the apostles spread the saving message above all by teaching people about Jesus Christ as a unique embodiment of the divine Presence. But Catholicism soon realized that there are also numerous other men and women who, although hardly possessing the perfections of Christ, were nevertheless saintly souls who could give us glimpses into who and what God is, in a way which could sometimes be far more understandable (and far less frightening) to our feeble human senses than an attempt to encounter God and the infinite divine abyss directly.

We ordinary folk are not asked, of course, to shine with the divine light with the power of a Father Dowling, let alone a St. Francis of Assisi or the Evangelist John — or a second Jesus! But even poor Ebby Thacher was enabled, on one occasion, to serve as the channel of one of God's most extraordinary acts of divine grace during the twentieth century.

So how do I become able to do that at least a few times in my life? I become transparent to God — paradoxically — by becoming most deeply human. I do not do this by striding around pompously and proudly, trying to proclaim my own holiness as I scold and berate others. Instead it means accepting my own failures and inadequacies and striving for true humility. It means being completely sincere in everything I say. And above all, it means trying to be a friend to the other person.

A famous A.A. speaker in Indiana, Sister Ruth of the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Joseph, explained it this way in telling her own story:¹⁷ “The turning point in my recovery began at a meeting held in the downtown ghetto in the poorest slum of Washington, D.C.... we pulled up in front of this liquor store, they

had a bouncer at the top of the stairs, and if a practicing drunk pleaded his case well enough to convince the bouncer that he really wanted help then he was admitted One night a wino got in that way. He was shaking too badly to hold a full cup of coffee so they gave him a half of cup and told him to sit quietly Before the meeting adjourned a couple of the guys went over to this trembling wino, put their arms around him, and started talking to him. And, it made no difference to them what he looked, smelled or acted like!”

“And when I witnessed that, it occurred to me that God must surely be kind and loving, not the punishing God that I'd imagined all of my life. All of a sudden in a flash of intuition, I understood that I had a warped image of God in my mind. Sometime during that ghetto meeting, God switched from the intellectual understanding in my head to a new kind of feeling in my heart!”

God uses our hands, feet, and mouths

One of the most important channels of God's grace down through the centuries has been via true human friendship. We need to find (and join) the kind of groups where real friendships can emerge. And we ourselves need to avoid scolding, lecturing, or trying to show off our authority when we are dealing with other people. As has been taught by the Jesuits for centuries (and by St. Augustine a thousand years earlier), we need to seek humility and avoid pride. By working to practice honesty and sincerity in everything we say, we can start to become transparent to God.

It is the divine grace that does the real work. We, as mere human beings, do not have the power to genuinely help even our very best friends all by ourselves—not when they are caught in real grief or pain or feelings of failure. But by becoming dutiful servants (servant means no arrogant pride!), we can help provide God the best channel through which to do his awe-inspiring work.

And never let us forget that it works back the other way too. Sometimes I am the one who has fallen into frustration and sorrow and despair. At that point, a single good friend can often help pull me back into a more Christian attitude of faith, hope, love, courage, enthusiasm, and spiritual optimism.

So often we see God using human feet when he needs to walk to the place where people desperately need help. We see God using human hands when he wants to reach out to those people and give them food, a warm coat, or care for their injuries and illnesses. So when one of my friends looks deep into my eyes and utters words which turn out to be the bearers of God's grace — consoling me, comforting me, exhorting me, showing me the way, loving me — I need to remember that, on these precious occasions, my friend's mouth has become the mouth of God. And the appropriate response on my part is to quietly say to God, inside my own mind, "Thank you, my Lord."

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NOTES

¹ Glenn F. Chesnut, *Changed by Grace: V. C. Kitchen, the Oxford Group, and A.A.* (Bloomington, Indiana: iUniverse, 2006).

² *Alcoholics Anonymous* (the Big Book), 4th ed. (New York: A.A. World Services, 2001). pp. 1, 8–12.

³ Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*, 2nd ed., trans. John W. Harvey Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950; orig. German pub.1917). Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959).

⁴ Acts 9:3–9 and 13–19, Acts 22:6–21, and Acts 26:19.

⁵ Mel B[arger], *Ebby: The Man Who Sponsored Bill W.* (Center City, Minnesota: Hazelden, 1998).

⁶ Arthur S., *A Narrative Timeline of AA History*, year 1940.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Glenn F. Chesnut, *Father Ed Dowling, Bill Wilson's Sponsor* (Bloomington, Indiana: iUniverse, 2015), Chapter 5.

⁹ Chesnut, *Father Ed Dowling*, and Robert Fitzgerald, S.J., *The Soul of Sponsorship: The Friendship of Fr. Ed Dowling, S.J. and Bill Wilson in Letters* (Center City, Minnesota: Hazelden, 1995).

¹⁰ The list of all the *Nouvelle Théologie* authors was like a Who's Who of major twentieth century Roman Catholic theologians. And although I am a minor figure indeed compared to these great thinkers, my own early work on Catholic theology — my book on *The First Christian Histories* — placed me within this group.

¹¹ *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age* (New York: A.A. World Services, 1957), p. 38.

¹² *Pass It On: The Story of Bill Wilson and how the A.A. message reached the world* (New York: A.A. World Services, 1984), p. 242.

¹³ Ernest Kurtz, *Not-God: A History of Alcoholics Anonymous* (Center City, Minnesota: Hazelden, 1979) p. 98.

¹⁴ Robert Fitzgerald, S.J., “Father Ed Dowling and AA’s Bill W.,” *Catholic Digest* (April 1991).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Chesnut, *Father Ed Dowling*, Chapter 33.

¹⁷ “A Nun’s Story: Sister Ruth Finds God in the A.A. Meetings,” by John Stark (a.k.a. Pirate John) in the *Waynedale News* (see <http://hindsfoot.org/barruth.html>).