Father Ralph Pfau: 
Alcoholics Anonymous Author and 
American Catholic Thinker

by Glenn F. Chesnut

Fr. Ralph Pfau — along with Bill Wilson, Richmond Walker, and Ed Webster — was one of the four most published early A.A. authors. He was one of the key figures who helped to shape the Alcoholics Anonymous movement during its second major phase: the thirty-year period which ran from the publication of the Big Book in 1939 to the end of the 1960’s.¹

He had made his own plunge into alcoholism not long after his ordination as an Indiana diocesan priest in 1929. During a period of only ten years, he had to be removed from three different parishes in different parts of the state because of his excessive drinking,² with each of these episodes (in 1933, 1939, and 1943) resulting in a complete nervous breakdown which required long hospitalization.

He finally telephoned a representative of the Alcoholics Anonymous group in Indianapolis, Indiana, on his thirty-ninth birthday, on November 10, 1943, and began going to A.A. meetings in that city. He never drank again. In a talk given fourteen years later, in 1957, Fr. Pfau talked about his role as “the first priest-member of Alcoholics Anonymous.”³ As the first Roman Catholic priest to openly attend ordinary Alcoholics Anonymous meetings on a regular basis, and to get and stay sober via that route — he confessed even before large groups at major A.A. conferences that he too was an alcoholic just like them — he played the role of the
pioneer who broke the trail for numerous other Catholic clergy and religious to follow.\(^4\)

In addition to his publications, Fr. Ralph also traveled all over the United States and Canada speaking to A.A. groups and conventions, and running weekend A.A. spiritual retreats, with an energy and enthusiasm which would have daunted most human beings. In the autobiography which he wrote in 1958, he said that over the past ten years, "I have traveled nearly 750,000 miles .... I have spoken before nearly two hundred thousand members of A.A. at retreats, meetings and conventions, and personally discussed problems with more than ten thousand alcoholics."\(^5\) That was an average of two hundred miles a day or 1,400 miles per week simply spent on the road traveling, in addition to all of his speaking and writing.

Fr. Ralph was also the founder in 1949 of the National Clergy Council on Alcoholism, today called the National Catholic Council on Alcoholism and Related Drug Problems, one of the most vital and important American Catholic organizations dealing with the problem of alcoholism. The NCCA’s annual publication, the *Blue Book* (whose 58th volume came out at the end of 2008), also provides, through a host of articles by leading figures, a detailed historical record of Catholic thought about alcoholism and recovery through the course of the past six decades. There is no body of literature even remotely equivalent coming from Protestant or Jewish sources during that period.

**Writings and recordings:** Fr. Ralph was especially famous for a popular series of fourteen short books, averaging around 50 to 60 pages in length, called the Golden Books, which he wrote (under the pen name “Father John Doe”) on a variety of spiritual topics: *Spiritual Side* (1947), *Tolerance* (1948, originally entitled *Charity*), *Attitudes* (1949), *Action* (1950), *Happiness* (1951), *Excuses* (1952), *Sponsorship* (1953), *Principles* (1954), *Resentments* (1955), *Decisions* (1957), *Passion* (1960), *Sanity* (1963), *Sanctity* (1964), and *Living* (1964).\(^6\) These were read and studied by A.A. members all over the United States and Canada, and still are being used and treasured today.
In addition, Fr. Ralph published two long books of essays — *Sobriety and Beyond* (1955) and *Sobriety Without End* (1957) — and his autobiography, *Prodigal Shepherd* (1958), a shorter version of which appeared as a two-part article in *Look* magazine. That article made his name known to people all over the nation: of the four major general interest large-format magazines in the United States at that time, *Look* (which would have had a circulation of at least four million by that time), was second only to *Life* magazine, and had a greater readership than either *The Saturday Evening Post* or *Collier’s*. So Fr. Ralph’s article reached more people than the 1941 Jack Alexander article in *The Saturday Evening Post*.

He also published a little book called *Contact with God*, and issued a set of thirty recordings in which he spoke on various issues, including such titles as No. 11 “Father John Doe — Alcoholic,” No. 22 “The Lord’s Prayer,” No. 2 “Alcoholism — Sin or Disease,” and Nos. 23-26 “The Twelve Steps.” He spoke on these recordings with a flamboyant old-time preacher’s style: his high voice, with its sharp-toned southern Indiana accent, could penetrate to the back of a church without benefit of microphone, and knock any drowsy parishioners on the back pews out of any tendency to go to sleep.

As A.A. has spread to countries like Ireland, Fr. Ralph’s writings have been found to speak with a clarity and sense surpassing most other A.A. literature to alcoholics from Catholic backgrounds.

**Fr. Ralph in the Spanish Catholic world:** Juan Rodriguez in California, who has carried out extensive research in this area, has found that Spanish translations of Fr. Ralph’s writings were used as the basis of Spanish-language A.A. in both North and South America during the years before there was a widely available Spanish translation of the Big Book. Ricardo Perez in Cleveland, who worked for the Mexican consulate, had translated the Big Book into Spanish by March 1946 (some said that it was his wife who did most or all of the translating). But the Perez translation does not seem to have been widely available until a printing was done in 1959.
The translations of Fr. Pfau’s works were in the form of small, inexpensive booklets, about one-third to half the length of the Golden Books, giving individual sections from his writings. So the twenty-page booklet entitled *La Vida Emocional y el Mito de la Perfeccion* (“The Emotional Life and the Myth of Perfection”) was taken from *Sobriety Without End* (1957) and the twenty-four page booklet on *Resentimientos* (“Resentments”) was taken from *Sobriety and Beyond* (1955). The thirty-six page booklet entitled *Sano Juicio* (literally “Sane Judgment”) was a translation of *The Golden Book of Sanity* (1963).

Fr. Ralph has continued to be a great hero among Spanish-speakers in the United States as well. There is a beautiful memorial to him on a hilltop called Serenity Point at the St. Francis Retreat Center just outside of San Juan Bautista, California, which is regarded with special reverence among Spanish-speaking Californians.

**Birth and early years:** Ralph Sylvester Pfau was born on November 10, 1904 in Indianapolis, Indiana, to Charles Pfau and Elizabeth Smith Pfau (his father was of French background and his mother of German background). He was baptized on December 4 in the old Holy Cross Church in that city, which was a rather modest brick structure, for the parish had only been founded nine years earlier by Irish immigrants (the present large stone church was not built until 1922, when Ralph was eighteen).

Ralph’s father, who made his living doing sales with a horse and buggy, was a heavy drinker, almost certainly an alcoholic. He died when Ralph was only four, probably as a consequence of his drinking. But he left his family with a building on North Rural Street in Indianapolis, with a place for them to live upstairs and a downstairs that could be rented out for commercial purposes, so Ralph’s mother was able to stay home and spend her full time taking care of her children. Ralph was the youngest of the six (all of them boys). Ralph’s brother Jerome (“Jerry”), who was six years older, seems to have acted as a father figure (and sometimes deeply
frustrated would-be caretaker) to him on numerous occasions through the years, even after they were both adults.\textsuperscript{15}

There was a strong tradition in the family of service to the church. Ralph’s Uncle George was a priest and his Uncle Al in particular was the sixth Bishop of Nashville, Tennessee. This was the Most Rev. Alphonse John Smith (November 14, 1883-December 16, 1935), who during his early career established the parish of St. Joan of Arc in Indianapolis (where Ralph was appointed as an assistant pastor in 1943 when he finally hit bottom and telephoned A.A.). When he became bishop of Nashville in 1924 (the year Ralph turned twenty), he found that there were only a few priests in his diocese who actually came from Tennessee, and only ten Tennessee seminarians preparing to enter the priesthood. Within two years he had recruited sixty young Tennesseans to enter seminary, and was busy building churches and schools all over Tennessee.\textsuperscript{16}

The family (and particularly Ralph’s mother) had decided when Ralph and his brother Jerry were little boys that the two of them were also going to become priests, and continue the family tradition of clerical greatness. Jerry, who was six years older, was ordained around 1923, when Ralph was eighteen; he was then sent to Rome to earn a Doctorate of Sacred Theology, and was already back in Indiana, teaching at Saint Mary-of-the-Woods College near Terre Haute, when Ralph was ordained deacon on May 29, 1928.\textsuperscript{17} This was the nation’s oldest Catholic liberal arts college for women, founded by Mother Théodore Guérin, Indiana’s first saint. It was a quite distinguished place to be teaching for a Catholic academic at that point in history, and in particular, it was firmly linked into the ruling circles within the Archdiocese of Indianapolis.

But one can see the problem which this represented for the young Ralph. In most Catholic families of that period, having a son in the priesthood was in and of itself an accomplishment of enormous note, even if he never rose beyond the parish ministry. But in Ralph’s family, one was expected to be not only a capable priest, but also a great scholar or administrator, who could earn yet further renown for the family.
There was an additional difficulty here. Jerry was an alcoholic just like Ralph. But Jerry managed to last quite a few years longer than Ralph as what is sometimes called a “functioning alcoholic,” meaning that he did not lose his job because of it, or get arrested for drunken driving, or encounter any other kind of major public difficulties because of his compulsive drinking. In addition, Jerry had Ralph convinced for many years that one was not an alcoholic as long as one did not drink before noon. So Ralph would use drugs (barbiturates and sedatives) to endure painfully through the mornings, keeping his eye on the clock at all times, and would force himself to wait until noon (on the minute) before throwing down his first desperate drink of the day.

Jerry however did not escape the consequences of his drinking forever. He ended up a tragic figure, finally dying in June 1957 when he was around 59 years old, because of problems which were at least partially brought on by his alcoholism. He was hospitalized in Louisville and still trying to bribe the nurses to bring him a bottle as he lay there dying.  

Putting all of these pieces together, we can see how Ralph, during his childhood and adolescence, was put under a great deal of psychological pressure by his family background. Furthermore, as not only the youngest child (the baby of the family), but also as the boy “who was going to become a priest,” young Ralph was given enormous privilege. According to what his brothers said later on, he was totally spoiled. At breakfast time, if an egg yolk was broken, his mother would cook him another egg. That sort of treatment created in him a sense of entitlement where — even after he was an adult, and even though he knew better intellectually — a part of him down at the subconscious level believed that people around him were supposed automatically to give him whatever he asked for.

On the other hand, he was simultaneously put under enormous pressure to behave like a little plaster saint instead of like a normal small boy, and to end up at the top in every sphere of activity into which he entered. As Ralph’s niece commented, many years later,
“Uncle Ralph felt like he never came up to [his mother’s] expectations,” no matter what he accomplished.19

**Seminary:** In 1922, at the age of seventeen, Ralph graduated from Cathedral High School in Indianapolis and began studying for the priesthood at the seminary at St. Meinrad Archabbey down in the hills along the Ohio river. Indiana was still a largely rural state at that time: young Ralph was able to make most of the journey by local trains, but the last stage was by horse and buggy — a one-horse shay with a fringe on top — down crude dirt roads. The abbey church at St. Meinrad was set on top of a hill, surrounded by green woods and rolling fields. The Benedictine monks who lived in the abbey also ran the seminary. The boys slept in a sixty-bed dormitory, where each boy was given a bed, a chair, and a row of hangers on the wall. The outside toilets were sixty yards away.20

**Scrupulosity and perfectionism:** Ralph got through his first six years at St. Meinrad with no notable problems, but then fell into a long period of debilitating psychological turmoil which continued with greater and lesser degrees of severity from the Spring of 1928 to the Spring of 1929. The onset came when he was scheduled to be ordained deacon on May 29, 1928. Young Ralph, now twenty-three, could not eat. He could not sleep, he could not think straight, and torrents of thoughts circled around and around in his mind as he grew ever more frantic. His obsessive perfectionism was so great that he did not feel morally “worthy” to be a priest.

The two advisors whom he went to both said the same thing. First Fr. Anselm told him, “This is just a matter of scruples.” Then he went to talk about his fears with Monsignor Joseph E. Hamill, the Chancellor of the diocese, who likewise told him, “This is just scruples.”21

Ralph made himself go through the ordination service, but afterwards, he said, “I was so depressed I wished I were dead.” The summer which followed was a nightmare. Doctors in Indianapolis finally put him on barbiturates and powerful bromide compounds.

When he returned to St. Meinrad in the fall for his final year of seminary, he once again was unable to eat or sleep, and by the
middle of October was in the depths of total depression. He tried all
the traditional methods of prayer and meditation, including all of the
recommended Catholic spiritual literature of his era, such as Louis
Blosius’s *Comfort of the Faint-Hearted*, but none of this seemed to
help much. Fervent prayers to the Blessed Virgin Mary finally
seemed to lift him out of the worst of his distress, but then the night
before his ordination to the priesthood, he came down with a 104º
temperature and had a complete physical collapse. The next day,
May 21, 1929, he was ordained priest while sitting on a chair instead
of standing and kneeling through the course of the service like the
other ordinands. 22

As was noted, the priests whom he had consulted had all
diagnosed Ralph’s problem as one of scrupulosity, using the old
traditional technical term from Catholic moral theology. A
*scrupulus* in Latin was a small pebble, and hence by extension,
could be used to refer to worries over tiny things, anxiety over
something small which nevertheless nagged continuously like a
pebble in one’s shoe. In the modern English metaphor, it was a
pathological compulsion to turn molehills into mountains.

Scrupulosity traditionally meant behavior such as a
hypermoralism involving the insistence that even quite innocent
things which devout people commonly did were nevertheless totally
sinful, constant unfocused anxiety about sin without being able to
tell why, repeatedly asking your priest whether an action was sinful
even when he kept assuring you that it was not, repeatedly
confessing the action as a sin anyway each time you went to
confession, refusing to believe your priest and perhaps going to a
series of different confessors in an attempt to find one who would
agree with you about the sinfulness of your actions, and so on.

The traditional Catholic answer to scrupulosity, as we see for
example in Alphonsus Liguori, the eighteenth century Neapolitan
saint, was strongly authoritarian. The person concerned should
choose one confessor, and then obey all of that priest’s decisions and
rulings absolutely and without question.
The modern literature on scrupulosity tends to view it as a form of OCD (obsessive compulsive disorder), which I believe is a mistake, at least in most cases. OCD is a disorder which drives people to compulsive hand washing, counting ceiling tiles, repetitive fears over simple actions, and so on. In about 2% of the cases of clinically diagnosed OCD, it does involve some religious elements, but these are of a different sort from the things which were disturbing Ralph so much at the end of his seminary career. Joseph Ciarrocchi for example describes treating a priest who, after conducting his weekly outdoor mass, would compulsively crawl around on the ground trying to make sure that no tiny pieces of communion wafer had fallen. Another case of this kind of OCD which is recorded in the literature is that of a man who would think obsessively, while bathing his small children, about the Devil trying to compel him to hold them underwater and drown them. The therapist reported that this man would have similar horrific thoughts about the Devil when he was holding a knife or pizza cutter in the same room as his children. If a person suffering from this kind of OCD obsesses on trying to avoid all food and beverages for one hour before receiving communion at mass, the sufferer may be driven frantic with questions such as: Is it breaking your fast if (as a woman) you accidentally chew on your lipstick? Or if a particle of food stuck between your teeth is dislodged and you accidentally swallow it? One should also probably include in this category, cases like that of the nine-year-old girl who kept on obsessing about being damned to hell because she had forgotten to capitalize the word God once when she was writing it.

That sort of OCD, whether religious or nonreligious, can usually we treated fairly well with medication (especially serotonin re-uptake inhibitors) and cognitive-behavioral therapy, particularly by desensitization via ERP (exposure and response prevention).

Feeling unworthiness and shame: Ralph’s fears however as he faced the ordination ritual were of a different sort from what we see in religiously-focused OCD. He tells us that he kept on asking himself questions such as this:
Can a child who told fibs grow into a man with priestly qualities? Can a child with a quick temper, a child who talked back to his mother and disobeyed his teachers grow into a man with priestly qualities? Can a child who once stole an apple off a passing pushcart grow into a man with priestly qualities? Can a child who made his mother weep because she could not afford to buy him a sled grow into a man with priestly qualities? Can a child who made his mother weep because she could not afford to buy him a sled grow into a man with priestly qualities? Can a child who had fist fights with other children grow into a man with priestly qualities? How can I go through with this? A priest must be a holy man, and I am not a holy man.25

And then he would start worrying about his mother’s role in his life. “Did I really want to become a priest? Was this, after all, meant for me? Wasn’t it all my mother’s idea?” “Didn’t she choose it for you? And don’t you resent her for choosing it? And don’t you show your resentment whenever you see your mother? Does this make you worthy?” And these latter questions raised yet another problem, which he continued to worry over for years afterwards: was he in fact damming his soul to hell every time he said mass or performed similar priestly duties? For he had become obsessed by the neurotic fear that his ordination was not valid if the proper intent had not been present.

Perhaps part of what was going on in Ralph’s case could be included under the category of scrupulosity, but I think it is useful to look at two of Ernest Kurtz’s books, Shame & Guilt and The Spirituality of Imperfection,26 for a different kind of perspective on Ralph’s spiritual problems. It is interesting how these two Catholic thinkers, Pfau and Kurtz, albeit in slightly different ways, nevertheless considered the resolution of some of the same spiritual problems as central to the process of healing from alcoholism. In the workings of Ralph’s inner thoughts, it was as much, or more, a matter of what Kurtz referred to as “shame” — a sense of personal unworthiness, of a failure to accomplish what he felt he “should” have done — as it was of guilt over any particular sins committed. And at an even deeper level, there was Ralph’s inner conviction that
because of his having failed to achieve perfection — which was what he believed, down in his gut, the Church’s teachers had required of him — he was totally and irrevocably doomed, and beyond any possible redemption. For perfection, Ralph was convinced, was what had been required of him: a priest must be a sanctus, a holy man, a saint. It was this failure which tortured him: he was so far lost in his shame and failure as a person, that no sanctification — no return to complete holiness and approval in God’s eyes — could ever be possible for him. He could never be a good priest.

It was when Ralph finally figured out (after he came into A.A.) a way of speaking to this soul-destroying dread, that he discovered that he was not alone in believing that God had irrevocably rejected him for his sins. He found himself in the role of prophet for a joyous message of freedom from divine condemnation and the re-hallowing of human life, not only for numerous frightened Catholic alcoholics, but also for many equally tormented Protestants in A.A. One of the frequent effects of long-term chronic alcoholism is the belief that one is such a bad and evil person, that it is fruitless to even think of turning to God. Opening one’s eyes to the light of his holiness is the most frightening thing that one could possibly imagine. Ralph gave hope and the chance of new life to these terrified souls.

**Teaching and graduate studies:** In September 1929, Ralph was sent to his first post, to serve as assistant pastor at the Old Cathedral in Vincennes, Indiana (the oldest church in Indiana, first established a quarter century before the American Revolution), and with the additional responsibility of teaching four Latin classes and one religion class daily at Gibault High School. The following summer (1930), he was sent to Fordham University in New York City to begin work on a master’s degree in education. The course work was so undemanding and lacking in intellectual challenge, that he found himself purchasing half a dozen books on the Latin of Caesar, Cicero, and Virgil and spending most of his time studying them instead. It is significant that it was not the medieval world of St. Thomas Aquinas, nor the world of the French and Spanish saints of
the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which ended up at the focus of Ralph’s intellectual interests, but the classical world of ancient Rome. It was therefore not totally surprising that it was St. Augustine, the last great thinker of the classical world, who was later going to provide Ralph with a route out of scrupulosity and neurotic perfectionism which was going to finally make sense to him.

Doing a master’s in education and teaching high school was hardly the same as doing a doctorate in Rome and teaching at the college level — he had failed to measure up to the standards set by his older brother Jerry — but it was all he had. Significantly, this is when Ralph first started to drink — bourbon mixed with ginger ale — even though only moderately at first. It was bootleg liquor of course, because it was the Prohibition Era. The sale of beverage alcohol, outlawed in the United States in 1920, was going to continue to be illegal until December of 1933, when the prohibition amendment was finally repealed.  

When Ralph returned to Indiana, the head pastor at the Old Cathedral told him that all the teaching at Gibault High School was now going to be done by teaching brothers instead of priests. Ralph was now out of his teaching job, the only thing which he loved, and the only thing which had seemed to give much meaning to his life. His immediate response was to phone a lawyer friend in Vincennes, and ask him to help Ralph start drinking the case of illegally imported bourbon he had brought back with him from New York City. After that ran out, he found himself driving down to Jasper, the bootleg headquarters of southern Indiana, to buy unaged corn liquor from one of the many local folk who ran illegal stills back in the hills surrounding the town. He was eventually up to almost a quart a day. His resentment ate at his soul, and he could find no rest.

Why was Ralph unable to solve his drinking problem with the spiritual tools which had been given him by the Church? The Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous said quite bluntly that resentment was the number one killer of alcoholics, and this, Ralph discovered, was the key to finally unlocking the mystery of his own
obsessive drinking. The problem, he said, was that the Church in which he had been brought up had never adequately warned him of just how destructive obsessive resentment could be to the spiritual life. Perhaps another way of putting it would be to say that traditional Church teaching tended to concentrate on the question of whether what I was doing (or was thinking of doing) at any given time was or was not a “sin” according to all the rules and doctrines of the Church. The Big Book on the other hand only used the word sin once in its first 164 pages (on page 13). It refused to lay out complicated rules and doctrines defining what was and was not sinful, and instead told us to focus on preparing a written list of our resentments. The presence of a resentment guaranteed the presence of some underlying character defect, and in actual practice, identified these moral flaws a good deal more precisely than trying to figure out, in various situations, who was “at fault” and who was “the innocent victim.”

What did resentment mean, in the A.A. sense of the word? *Sentire* meant to feel, Ralph noted in one of his writings (using his priest’s knowledge of Latin), so *re-sentire* meant to re-experience the same feeling again and again. Resentment meant taking a negative feeling, like anger or self-pity or some feeling of being injured, and falling into a compulsive cycle of rehearsing that bitter feeling over and over in our minds, without being able to break ourselves free from its hold. Where it became especially deadly was when the person who was feeling the destructive resentment had convinced himself that the resentment was justified.

And as far as Ralph was concerned, during the many years of his out-of-control drinking, was he not in fact justified in feeling resentment at being denied the opportunity to do anything other than the most routine parish work? Was this not an outrageous rejection of what were his obvious talents and abilities? Or so his mind would tell him. But the alcoholic’s mind can never forget the other possibility: that this was the proof — undisputable evidence of what everyone except himself could see — that he was totally unworthy of the priesthood, and that he was in fact lucky that they were even
allowing him the trivial jobs which he was now being given. Either side of that dilemma was too painful to handle without the aid of alcohol or drugs to dull his mind.

**A series of further breakdowns:** The next eleven years were grim ones. He rapidly went through seven different parishes and had to be sent off to a sanitarium three times, as he plunged into yet another total mental breakdown. The repeal of Prohibition had taken effect on December 5, 1933, which made it easy to obtain as much liquor as he wanted.

The last of these assignments — he was sent to serve as assistant pastor at St. Joan of Arc’s in Indianapolis in October 1943 — must have been a particularly bitter pill to swallow, for this was a parish, as we have noted, which had been founded by his notably successful uncle, Bishop Alphonse John Smith. The contrast between the accomplishments of his notable uncle and his own failure as a priest must have been extremely painful.

**A.A. in Indianapolis:** Indianapolis was one of the first twenty-seven American cities where A.A. groups were established. The group was founded on October 28, 1940 by Doherty “Dohr” Sheerin, a retired businessman in Indianapolis, who was an Irish Catholic and a devoutly religious man. In desperation over his inability to stop drinking, Dohr had written to Cleveland, where Clarence Snyder was the great A.A. leader; they sent Irwin Meyerson to Indiana to make a twelfth-step call on Dohr and teach him how to set up an A.A. group in Indianapolis.

In many cities, A.A. still had a strongly Protestant cast in 1940, deriving from its early roots in the Protestant evangelical movement called the Oxford Group. New York for example only had one Catholic member during these early years. But Mitchell K. tells us (based on his interviews with Clarence Snyder) that Cleveland was quite different, even as early as April 1939:

The majority of people from Cleveland who were attending the Oxford Group gatherings at T. Henry’s home in Akron were Roman Catholic. According to Clarence (and I see no
evidence to the contrary) that was one of the main reasons they started the group to be called AA in Cleveland. The Catholic members were being told by their respective churches that since several of the practices of the OG went against what the RC church preached, they shouldn’t or even were forbidden to go.

Clarence Snyder went to Dr. Bob in Akron and finally persuaded him to sever the connection between Alcoholics Anonymous and the Oxford Group in that city in October 1939. Since the New York alcoholics had already broken away from the Oxford Group meetings in August 1937, and Cleveland had declared its independence on May 10-11, 1939, Dr. Bob’s decision to stop meeting with the Akron Oxford Group was the breaking of A.A.’s last official linkage to Protestantism.

Clarence said that he went to the Archbishop at the time after they had broken off from the OG to show that there was no longer any connection with the OG and asked that there no longer be any problems. Clarence’s letter to Hank proves that the Golrick group was not as evangelical as Dick [B.] claims and that once AA broke off from the OG in Cleveland, the practice of surrendering by accepting Jesus wasn’t used so that AA would be open to ALL who sought recovery.34

It was this kind of upper midwestern pro-Catholic A.A. which the Indianapolis group came out of. And Doherty Sheerin, the group’s leader, was Catholic himself, making Indianapolis A.A. even more Catholic-oriented than Cleveland A.A. It should also be noted that Irwin Meyerson, the Cleveland alcoholic who made the twelfth-step call on Dohr, was Jewish, so that it was made especially clear that Indianapolis A.A. was not a Protestant indoctrination center which was attempting to lead people away from the basic principles of the Catholic faith, but a genuine interfaith movement.

When Fr. Ralph finally decided to reach out to Alcoholics Anonymous for help on November 10, 1943 (the evening of his thirty-ninth birthday), it was Doherty Sheerin whom he telephoned.
Dohr had put A.A. pamphlets out in the vestibule of the rectory at St. Joan of Arc’s; he was well known by the Indianapolis priests and greatly respected by them. Dohr took Ralph under his wing, and he never drank again.  

**Perfection and St. Augustine:** Once he was going to A.A. meetings, Ralph had to start working on his own inner issues, some of the most important of which centered on the problem of his scrupulosity and perfectionism, and his conviction that he was a failure because he had never produced the kind of accomplishments which others in his family had achieved. He eventually turned to the writings of two important saints to find spiritual answers to these issues: St. Augustine and St. Thérèse of Lisieux.  

The first saint made good sense, once one thought about the basic underlying issue, and when it had first emerged in Catholic history. One of the key questions in the fifth-century Pelagian controversy pertained to the possibility of Christian perfection. St. Augustine and St. Jerome were two of the principal leaders in the Catholic attack on the teachings of Pelagius and his supporter Celestius.  

As Jerome noted in his *Dialogue Between Atticus, a Catholic, and Critobulus, a Heretic*, the Pelagians argued that “God commands us to be perfect, and he does not command impossibilities.” The Pelagians had held that sin arose only as a *peccatum habituale acquisitum*, an acquired sinful habit or disposition. By using their natural will power, and the proper ascetic exercises, human beings could eliminate all sin from their lives and become perfect.  

This kind of Pelagian perfectionism was nonsense of course, and totally in opposition to the Catholic faith. St. Augustine joined St. Jerome in condemning the Pelagians and wrote a series of works against them, one of the most important of which was his work *On the Spirit and the Letter*. This was most likely the principal work upon which Ralph relied in working out his own position, particularly chapters 65 and 66 of that work, although he could also have studied works like Augustine’s *Concerning Man’s Perfection in Righteousness*, where chapter 19 was especially relevant.
Lutheran theologians have traditionally cited *On the Spirit and the Letter* as a defense of the Protestant doctrine of justification by faith alone and not by works of the law. But in fact that doctrine was not taught there, for Augustine was a Catholic, not a Protestant.

Ralph interpreted the work in Catholic fashion, not as a call to have faith, but as a description of *the kinds of actions* which we must perform in order *to perfectly strive after the highest perfection* in a world where we will never arrive at that ultimate goal in this life, but can nevertheless *completely fulfill* what God actually wants us to be doing, which is continually striving in that direction.

**The Myth of Perfection:** Ralph first gave a long discussion of his new understanding of the issue in *The Golden Book of Resentments*, which he published in 1955, twelve years after joining Alcoholics Anonymous. He gave that section of the booklet the provocative title “The Myth of Perfection,” and began it with a quote from St. Augustine: “*Let us admit our imperfections so we can then begin to work toward perfection.*” Then he explained what that statement meant in the simple Hoosier language of the small towns and countryside of Indiana: “*There ain’t nobody perfect in this world.*”

“There ain’t nobody perfect in this world” . . . . All of our lives we expected perfection, and when we again and again found instead imperfection, faults, failings, even serious ones, we became “disillusioned”—which in reality was only a vicarious form of self-pity . . . .

We first thought our parents were perfect. Then we found out they weren’t! Frustration number one. Then we met the gal (or guy) of our dreams. And think we to us: here is perfection. And then we married her (or him)! Frustration number two . . . .

Then along came our children. And without doubt they were perfect. “Isn’t he the most perfect thing that ever lived?” And then the policeman brought T. Jonathan home one day . . . . Our child? Never! But it was our child. More frustration . . . .
But we held on to the mirage to the very last: We were perfect, and if you didn’t believe it, all you had to do was to ask us! . . .

The truth? No one is perfect . . . . Like a little Scriptural proof? “If anyone among you says he is without sin, he is a liar and the truth is not in him.” Just a longer way of saying: There ain’t nobody perfect.

Perfection is a myth based on spiritual pride. But in fact we will never have a perfect family, perfect friends, perfect business associates, or a perfect body. Sometimes we will get sick, or have aches and pains. We will also never have perfect emotional lives.

Fr. Ralph comments:

How many come to us and complain: “I have been trying so long — for years — to control myself and I still get upset, I still get jittery, I still get angry, and I still get nervous.” Well, what did they expect? Perfect control? Perfection?

This is the alcoholic mind at work, Fr. Ralph says, the “persistent struggle to reach that smooth feeling.” When alcohol stops doing it, some people then turn to drugs. Ralph tried to use combinations of alcohol, barbiturates, and bromide compounds to help him get through each day — never too keyed up, never too depressed, never upset or disappointed by anything which happened — but just sailing along, as it were, on a waveless sea under a cloudless sky. But that was not the way the real world ever worked, no matter how hard we tried to make continual microadjustments in our mood with alcohol and other chemicals:

There will be days when we will be feeling wonderful and there will be days when we will be feeling lousy; and there will be days when one is quick to anger and days when nothing upsets; and there will be days when we feel mean as all get out and days when we feel like doing a good turn even for our worst enemy. But then, life and emotions are like that, very uneven and imperfect, even in the best of men.
We also need to remember that perfection is a myth when we get too worried about the wandering thoughts running through our heads. We may even be kneeling in church and trying our best to maintain a worshipful and prayerful state of mind, when a wildly inappropriate train of thought suddenly pops into our heads and threatens to lead us into total distraction. Angry thoughts, envious thoughts, sexual thoughts, the yearnings of worldly ambition, and temptations of every other sort may erupt without warning in the minds of even the holiest of us, and throw us into at least a brief spiritual struggle before we can lay them once more to rest. Even Jesus himself was not exempt: the story of his active ministry began with the story of the temptation in the wilderness and ended with the story of his temptation in the garden of Gethsemane. And as for the rest of us, as Fr. Ralph pointed out, “We may live to be a hundred, but we shall still have distractions, and ‘bad’ thoughts, and ‘screwy’ thoughts, until we’re dead.”

Ralph was speaking partly to his own spiritual problems of course: his tendency to scrupulosity, the sense of personal failure which he had when he entered A.A., and so on. But he found that this message also spoke to a central spiritual problem found among large numbers of Catholic alcoholics. It is amazing how many newcomers to A.A. who are of Catholic background are initially terrified by the spiritual dimension of the program because of their belief that they have sinned so wickedly against God — not just by their out of control drinking but in many other ways — that God would never hear their prayers for help. Most of them need, not being scolded and berated for their wickedness and supposed lack of will power and ordinary responsibility, but constant reassurance that God loves them and is going to keep on helping them recover, even if it takes months and years to begin getting their lives back in order again. And then Ralph discovered to his amazement, that up to sixty per cent of the people attending his weekend spiritual retreats were Protestants. They were just as terrified of God (and of the demands of real holiness) as the Catholics were!
**Father Dowling and St. Ignatius:** The story is often told of how Fr. Edward Dowling, S.J., paid a visit to Bill Wilson after reading the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous. It seemed to Fr. Dowling that the twelve steps were so closely similar to the teaching of St. Ignatius of Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises*, that Wilson must have had some kind of contact with Ignatian spirituality.

In Fr. Dowling’s interpretation, the Big Book’s twelve steps formed a complete *ascetic system*, as he termed it, that is, a detailed program of *Catholic spiritual development* which led people from the horrifying vision of their own personal hell, to the realization that the self (the ego) was the underlying problem and had to be totally denied, to the culmination of the twelve steps in “the imitation of and union with Christ.” It was a very Catholic understanding of the spiritual life: the third step for example made clear that the route to freedom lay in learning to use the rational will to make decisions, rather than allowing oneself to be totally ruled by emotions, feelings, and the destructive passions of those who are controlled by blind faith in ignorant and fanatical leaders. The fourth step was an inventory of one’s sins, which had to be followed, in good Catholic fashion, by a “general confession” in the fifth step. These sins left us with a two-fold liability or obligation (*reatus*). The task of the sixth and seventh steps was to heal the *reatus culpae*, the liability of *guilt* which arose from those sins, where God’s forgiveness had to be sought. The sixth step, Fr. Dowling said, was “love of the cross.” Then in the eighth and ninth steps one dealt with the *reatus poenae*, which was the obligation to provide *punishment, penance, compensation, or restitution* (for the word *poena* in church Latin could mean any or all four of those things). Practicing the eleventh step then led to continual growth in our conscious knowledge of God. All this, Fr. Dowling said, was an accurate description of the second, third, and forth weeks of the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius. Finally, in the twelfth step, our growth “toward Christ-like sanity and sanctity” allowed us to become full apostles and instruments of God.44
The twelve steps were a divinely inspired spiritual program. Bill Wilson said that it took him only twenty minutes to write them. Now if it had taken him twenty weeks, Fr. Dowling said, one might argue that he worked out this program by the use of his natural reason. But twenty minutes only seemed “reasonable under the theory of divine help.”

**Via purgativa:** Fr. Ralph Pfau strongly disagreed with Fr. Dowling’s interpretation. Alcoholics Anonymous, Ralph insisted, only dealt with a small portion of the spiritual life — the Purgative Way — and in addition, it was certainly not divinely inspired. To understand what Ralph was saying, we first need to remember the distinction frequently made in traditional Catholic spirituality between what are called the Three Ways.

The via purgativa (the Purgative Way, *Katharsis*) was comprised of the first set of activities involved in beginning the spiritual life, where our work consisted of repentance for our past sins, cleansing ourselves of our character defects, and amending our lives. That was where beginners started the spiritual life, working at first (as we see in the first part of St. Teresa of Ávila’s *Interior Castle*) only on their most obvious and gross sins.

The via illuminativa (the Illuminative Way, *Phôtismos*) represented a more advanced stage, in which souls were progressively enlightened by a series of insights into the things of the spirit which transformed their lives at the deepest level.

The via unitiva (the Unitive Way or *Henôsis*, also called *Theōsis* or *Teleiôsis*) formed the third and last stage, where the soul achieved union with God and was filled with the divine holiness. This was the culmination of the spiritual life, which St. Teresa of Ávila referred to as the spiritual marriage.

Furthermore, Ralph said, the twelve steps were not the result of divine inspiration. As he said when interviewed by Ted Le Berthon for *Catholic Mind*:
Those spiritual laws always existed thus long before St. Ignatius formulated them in a particular way. They still exist. Adherence to them can still help any human being, whatever his or her problem. The fact that A.A.’s twelve steps coincide with St. Ignatius’ delineation of the purgative way is significant. For persons, while in the purgative way, are making spiritual progress, but are far from having attained spiritual perfection. That is why contrary to the implications of some shallow writers, A.A. is not a religion, for a religion is a program of perfection in its ultimate object. The A.A. program is only a program of spiritual progress, and then only for one unique kind of person, an alcoholic, a compulsive drinker.\(^{45}\)

So in Ralph’s interpretation of the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous, it is first a work which deals only with the Purgative Way. It does not formulate a complete ascetic system describing the entire course of the Christian spiritual life.\(^{46}\) But equally importantly, in Ralph’s interpretation, the Big Book was a work of natural theology and natural law moral theory only.

**Natural theology:** As a work on natural theology, the Big Book was like St. Thomas Aquinas’s *Summa contra Gentiles* as opposed to his *Summa Theologica*. The Big Book made no appeal to revealed truths. It made no major use of scriptural quotations to prove points. It never cited church dogmas as a rule of faith. It based its teaching about the nature of God and the difference between right and wrong solely on rational inquiry and empirical observation. It only pointed us in the direction of a natural theology, or at least for the most part. And it should be noted that Fr. Ralph also wrote his Golden Books in the same way, likewise for the most part.

**Bill Wilson’s vision of light and the Twelve Steps:** To the extent to which the A.A. Big Book was simply a work of natural theology, Ralph did not believe that participating in the A.A. program could lead to eternal salvation, not without access to the Church’s store of grace. And it certainly could not lead non-Catholics to the higher
visions and ecstasies reported by the Catholic saints. Mel B., the primary author of *Pass It On* (the official biography of Bill Wilson), interviewed Fr. Ralph at one point in his researches, and was a bit taken aback when Ralph insisted that Bill W. could not have had a genuine vision of divine light at Towns Hospital in December 1934, because Bill was not a Catholic. But Ralph’s position was consistent with traditional Catholic theology.

And likewise, Ralph believed, no matter how excellent the twelve steps were, “God did not write these steps.” Nevertheless, Ralph said, “He did use those early members of A.A. who did write them as ‘instruments’ to bring His message to us alcoholics.”

And even more importantly, for the Catholic who could make use of the sacraments and call upon the Church’s store of grace, the twelve steps provided one with a road map leading toward the fullness of the Christian life. The Church could not forbid Catholics to join A.A. on the claim that A.A. was “a merely ‘naturalistic’ program” because of the eleventh step in particular, which said: “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.”

How can anyone read this step and miss the Finger of God in it? Naturalistic? If any member would ever achieve this step perfectly every day — their name would probably be Therese! Of Lisieux? For all in all, perfection ... must be brought about by perfect union of wills — the human and the Divine. And when that union is uninterrupted and constant — that is heroic sanctity [i.e. the fulness of sainthood in the tradition of the great Catholic saints of the past].

**Abraham Low:** Fr. Ralph turned to the work of the Chicago psychiatrist, Dr. Abraham Low (1891-1954), in his search for a modern philosophical and psychological system which would help him to better interpret, for today’s world, the theological issues with which he was struggling. Low, who began developing his ideas in the 1930’s, should probably be considered as the real founder of the
kind of cognitive-behavioral therapy which was later associated with the names of Albert Ellis and Aaron T. Beck in the 1950’s and 60’s (Ellis took pains to give Low credit for developing many of the basic concepts).

Abraham Low, who obtained his medical degree from the University of Vienna, came to the United States in 1920 and ended up in Chicago at the Psychiatric Institute of the University of Illinois Medical School, where he was associate professor of psychiatry and neurology and assistant director. He eventually turned against the underlying philosophy of Freudian theory, with its pessimistic view of the human will and its denial that human beings could achieve mental health through learning to act rationally. “Life is not driven by instincts,” Low said, “but is guided by the will.” He began developing his own theory of will and decision-making, where he not only rejected Freud but especially set himself in opposition to the kind of continental European pessimism represented by Arthur Schopenhauer’s notorious work, *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* (“The World as Will and Representation”). We can see the influence of Low’s theories on Fr. Ralph in *The Golden Book of Decisions* (1957) and many other of Ralph’s writings.

Low was also influenced by the modern study of semantics, which had been founded by the philologist Michel Bréal in his book *Essai de Sémantique* (1897). The same event could be described using different sets of words, each set conveying a different semantic connotation, that is, a different emotional state, feeling tone, moral judgment, set of associated ideas and beliefs, and so on. If I could train myself to change the words I used in my inner self-talk, I could change my emotional and feeling response to the world.

**Recovery, Inc.** In 1937, Low founded a mental health self-help organization originally called Recovery, Inc. (now called Recovery International), to help patients deal with a wide range of different psychological problems, including anxiety and panic attacks (including phobias), depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and bi-polar disorder. It can even help in anger management and make it easier for patients to manage schizophrenic symptoms. There are
over six hundred groups meeting today in various parts of the United States and abroad. Low publicized his ideas in two important bodies of work, which came out in 1943 and 1950 respectively.\textsuperscript{49} The \textit{Saturday Evening Post} also published an article on Recovery, Inc., in its December 6, 1952 edition, which gave the group enormous national publicity.

Fr. Ralph recommended Recovery, Inc., several times in his autobiography,\textsuperscript{50} and told how he went to their group meetings in Louisville, in addition to his participation in A.A. Fr. Ed Dowling likewise recommended Recovery, Inc. in his speech to the NCCA in 1953.\textsuperscript{51} One of the modern experts on Recovery, Inc., is Ernest Kurtz’s wife, Linda Farris Kurtz, DPA, who is now Professor Emeritus at Eastern Michigan University’s School of Social Work, and who also highly praises the group.\textsuperscript{52}

Low teaches us — to give one example — that when I enter a restaurant (let us say) and someone else rudely pushes past me and grabs the seat where I had been planning to sit, causing me to feel an explosion of anger, anxiety, depression, or some other kind of strongly negative feeling, to repeat to myself the phrase “this is average.” This is the kind of thing that happens to everyone on occasion. My having an emotional reaction is also the sort of thing that just about anyone would feel, a commonplace happening. The best way to handle this is to analyze my negative reaction, and then take steps to calm myself down instead of plunging into out-of-control rage, hysterical anxiety, or the deepest pits of depression. Anyone who studies Fr. Ralph’s Golden Books carefully can see this kind of basic approach coming out in Ralph’s calming pastoral advice over and over again.

\textbf{God’s approval and sinner saints:}\ In his musing on the nature of perfection and sainthood, Ralph made an interesting word play. A “saint” in Latin was a \textit{sanctus} or \textit{sancta}, which was usually taken to mean a \textit{holy} man or woman. But that same Latin root also gave us the word \textit{sanctio}, which could mean “sanction” in the sense of giving something one’s \textit{authoritative approval}. 
To begin walking the road which led to the fulness of sanctity, one had to have three things: (1) weakness, (2) willingness, and (3) grace. That is, to obtain God’s approval — his divine sanction — we must (1) admit our total powerlessness in the first step, then (2) become “willing to grow along spiritual lines” as the Big Book says on page sixty, and then (3) turn to God’s grace. Since number one and number three — our weakness and God’s freely offered grace — are always there, our responsibility is to supply the part in the middle, that is, to provide the willingness. But we must remember here that “the perfection which God expects is in the willing, not in the fulfillment.” As long as we keep on picking ourselves back up, over and over again, and doing the best we can, we will retain God’s total approval. We become that greatest of all paradoxes, “sinner saints.” We learn to pray the prayer of the Pharisee (which we remember is also the basis of the Eastern Orthodox Jesus Prayer) — “O God be merciful to me a sinner” — and then we keep on trying to do what God wants us to do, in our own best understanding of what he wants.\(^{53}\)

And it was at this point that Fr. Ralph did provide a more positive place in his theological system for Protestants and Jews by further radicalizing his teaching on the divine sanction:

We must accept ourselves as we are — today: good or bad, sinner or saint, ignorant or educated, screwball, or alcoholic (or both), or rich, or poor, Catholic, Protestant, Jew, agnostic, single, married, working, or out of work — and on and on: exactly whatever we are now. Then we do the best we can to fit in this place in life as we are — with what we have, not what some pious theorist tells [us] we ought to be or have. Let us never forget that one thing sanctity is not — it is never objective. This is precisely the error made by many spiritual writers. “To be a saint,” they tell us, “we must do this and that and follow this rule and that and obey this law and that — perfectly” .... All rules and regulations and laws — human or Divine are to be obeyed in so far as one is capable of so doing .... The old Romans used to say “Omnes leges
secundum capacitatem.” (All laws are to be obeyed according to the capacity of the individual.)

Unlike the Protestants, Fr. Ralph does NOT see having faith as a necessity for obtaining God’s sanction or approval, at least not in the case of beginners in the twelve step program. “Sanctity in an agnostic?” Fr. Ralph asks. “Hmmmmmm, could be!” Faith is a gift of grace. On the matter of when faith is given, and how much faith is given, that is God’s decision. Even if our will is hesitant, rebellious, skeptical, or fearful, it is the only will we have here and now, today. We turn that flawed will over to God in the third step, and God will “clean up our will” so that we can become ... completely willing — and with that comes complete approval, sanction.”

Sanctity is sanction. We aim our will at God as it is; He strengthens and remakes it; they join to each other — the human and the Divine. That is perfection, that is sanction, that is approval, that is sanctity; the union of wills, not the perfection of action!

Ralph totally rejected that version of popular evangelical Protestantism which seemed to think that one could have a single ecstatic faith experience in which one took Jesus as one’s personal savior, and then became totally and permanently cleansed of all sin and character defect as soon as one had confessed these wrongdoings. Instead he turned to the Catholic understanding that the spiritual life is a process taking days, weeks, months, and years. This was the ancient patristic Christian doctrine of teleiôsis, of going on to perfection. As Ralph put it, “a seed of corn will eventually become a stalk of corn if it grows.” That is our task, if we wish our activities to be sanctioned by God.

St. Thérèse of Lisieux: Fr. Ralph found a model of the higher forms of sainthood in an interesting figure, the young French girl St. Thérèse. At first glance this might seem a highly unlikely kind of place to turn, when preaching to a group of tough and pugnacious drunks. But let us remember the influence of St. Thérèse and the
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Carmelite tradition — including also St. Teresa of Ávila and St. John of the Cross — on Dorothy Day (1897-1980) and the rough and tumble world of the Catholic Worker movement. In fact, a thorough study of the literature on St. Thérèse can be extremely eye-opening for those who wish to understand better what Ralph Pfau was trying to do, and why.\textsuperscript{57}

St. Thérèse, the Little Flower, was a young French girl who, at the age of fifteen, entered the Carmelite Monastery at Lisieux in Normandy, where she spent the rest of her short life. She had dreams of doing great things for God — she had been fascinated by St. Joan of Arc as a child, for example, and actually obtained an invitation, at one point, to join a group of Carmelite missionaries in French Indochina — but all of this came to naught because she developed tuberculosis. She died at the age of twenty-four on September 30, 1897.

She was a very modern saint: at the time of her death, Bill Wilson was not quite two years old, Sister Ignatia was eight, and Dr. Bob was eighteen. And she represented an approach to the spiritual life which was in direct opposition to a great deal of the Catholic piety of her time, an approach which spoke directly to Fr. Ralph’s struggles with scrupulosity and obsessive perfectionism. The fine article by Vilma Seelaus, OCD, entitled “Therese: Spirituality of Imperfection,” expresses this aspect of the saint’s teaching extremely well (this article, we should note, shared a title with one of Ernest Kurtz’s best known books, the one which he and Katherine Ketcham wrote on \textit{The Spirituality of Imperfection}). As Seelaus notes:

Even the smallest sin is unbearable when the self needs to be perfect and the goal is self-sanctification. Through years of struggle with her own fragility, Thérèse finally comes to the graced conclusion — extraordinary for her time — that her daily faults are not important in her life with God. Such an attitude was virtually unheard of in devout French circles. Her lack of illusions in regard to what it is to be human, allows her to come to such freedom that she can assign her
imperfections no more importance than they deserve. She awakens to the truth that God is not concerned about the limitations of being human, but about love.\textsuperscript{58}

St. Thérèse also had to deal with another of the great spiritual issues which Kurtz wrote about: the problem of shame which Kurtz focused on in his beautifully done book on \textit{Shame & Guilt}.\textsuperscript{59} There is a great difference between guilt and shame. We feel guilt for having crossed the line into behavior which we should not have engaged in — we broke the commandments and the laws set out by the Church, and did forbidden things. But we feel \textit{shame} for an entirely different reason, for \textit{not having met the goals which we had set for our lives}. As St. Thérèse’s health grew worse and worse, she felt an increasing sense of having failed to do anything at all worthy or important in her life, in spite of her love for God and her desire to give herself totally to him. In her spiritual quest, she had to learn how to overcome this pervasive sense of shame — the same kind of feeling of total failure as a person, which had so dogged Fr. Ralph’s life, along with the lives of most of the alcoholics who came into the A.A. fellowship only after making a complete shipwreck of their lives.

There was no reason to feel this way, St. Thérèse learned. She used the colorful biblical metaphor of the flower of the field (Isaiah 40:6, Matthew 6:28) to explain what God had shown her about the goal she should actually have been striving for, which was to enjoy and glory, not in becoming a grand prize rose, but in simply being one of the many little flowers which make the world so beautiful:

Our Lord .... showed me the book of nature, and I understood that every flower created by Him is beautiful, that the brilliance of the rose and the whiteness of the lily do not lessen the perfume of the violet or the sweet simplicity of the daisy. I understood that if all the lowly flowers wished to be roses, nature would lose its springtide beauty, and the fields would no longer be enameled with lovely hues. And so it is in the world of souls, Our Lord’s living garden. He has been pleased to create great Saints who may be compared to the
lily and the rose, but He has also created lesser ones, who must be content to be daisies or simple violets flowering at His Feet, and whose mission it is to gladden His Divine Eyes when He deigns to look down on them. 60

The route which St. Thérèse discovered toward becoming one of the little saints, was to practice love and service towards all the other people around her, in all the little ways that she could discover.

Great deeds are not for me; I cannot preach the Gospel or shed my blood .... But how shall I show my love, since love proves itself by deeds? ... The only way I have of proving my love is to strew flowers before Thee — that is to say, I will let no tiny sacrifice pass, no look, no word. I wish to profit by the smallest actions, and to do them for Love .... I will sing always, even if my roses must be gathered from amidst thorns; and the longer and sharper the thorns, the sweeter shall be my song. 61

It was the same basic message of love and service that Dr. Bob gave later on in his last speech in Cleveland, the call to be continuously kind and thoughtful to even the least of the souls around us, in every small way that we could think of. 62

**Ralph’s adaptation of St. Thérèse:** We can see Fr. Ralph drawing directly on St. Thérèse’s ideas and adapting it to A.A. purposes, in his *Golden Book of Sanctity.* 63 There are three different kinds of sanctity, Ralph says: three different (perhaps partly overlapping) types of saints. We see *Heroic Sanctity,* he observes, in men and women like “St. Paul, the Apostles, the Martyrs, and the like; all of whom accomplished great deeds perfectly both in view of God and man.” These are analogous to the great roses and fine lilies of St. Thérèse’s metaphor.

Then Ralph adds a category not found explicitly in St. Thérèse’s writings, to accommodate saints like Thérèse herself, who received formal canonization in spite of not being a great Catholic academic scholar, or missionary, or martyr, or the founder of a religious order:
In this class we find the long list of *canonized saints* ... who performed ... through the grace and call of God heroic virtue but did not accomplish outstanding tasks, or deeds in public life .... St. Therese of Lisieux in her own autobiography emphasized the fact that *great* deeds are not necessary to qualify for heroic virtue — perfection in simple daily life also takes heroism — a special vocation. She simply did all things each day in her ordinary life — as a Nun — perfectly.

Ralph’s third category is what he calls *Simple Sanctity*: “here we find or should find the rest of the vast human race — you and you and you and me! It is not a *special* vocation, it is a universal vocation to *all* mankind.” That is what the rest of us are called to accomplish, to become the cheerful and happy little flowers scattered about the meadow. This is not a matter of neurotic, compulsive perfectionism, or authoritarian slavery to rules and regulations, but a simple commitment to treating everyone around us with love and compassion and tolerance, and helping every person we come upon with little acts of service. There is no shame in being one of the Little Flowers of St. Thérèse, to becoming one of the shower of roses which she promised she would let fall from heaven after her death.

*National Catholic Council on Alcoholism:* The NCCA honors Fr. Ralph Pfau as its great founder. The NCCA leader Monsignor William J. Clausen quoted from a talk which Ralph gave in 1957 in an account he gave of how the group was created:

In talking to Father Dowling in St. Louis in 1948, Father Pfau said: “You know . . . it would be a nice thing if we could find out who else among the clergy are in AA, because I think that priests in AA feel the need to know if there are other priests in AA,” Father Dowling suggested, “Why don't you have a retreat of some kind?”

Mary Darrah says that more detailed planning began as part of “an informal discussion among four priests eating hot fudge sundaes at an Indiana soda shop in 1949,” Ralph Pfau, John Dillon,
Raymond Atkins, and John C. Ford. Ralph gave special credit to Fr. Dillon in particular in the foreword to the first *Blue Book* (the volume published by the NCCA every year, containing the text of the talks given at that year’s conference). We should also note the reference to four important bishops and archbishops, about which we will comment further along:

> Early in 1949 plans for a seminar for the Clergy who are active members of Alcoholics Anonymous were made by Fr. Ralph Pfau of the Archdiocese of Indianapolis and Fr. John Dillon of the Diocese of Lafayette, Indiana. From Aug. 23 to 25, 1949, more than 100 priests gathered at St. Joseph’s college, Rensselaer, Indiana. Their Excellencies, Archbishop Schulte, Bishop Bennett, and Bishop Cody (representing Archbishop Ritter) were in attendance.

The conference has continued meeting annually since that date. Originally called the National Clergy Council (and/or Conference) on Alcoholism, it is now referred to as the “National Catholic Council on Alcoholism and Related Drug Problems, Inc.” In 2008 it became a service arm of Guest House (the treatment center for Catholic clergy and religious), using Guest House’s Lake Orion, Michigan, address.

**Gaining acceptance of A.A. among the Catholic hierarchy:** At the time the Big Book was being written, the A.A. group had only one Catholic member whom we know of — at least in Akron or the New York area — an Irishman named Morgan Ryan from Glen Ridge, New Jersey, who had just gotten out of the asylum and had not participated in the actual writing of the book. Morgan gave one of the multilithed manuscript copies to the Catholic Committee on Publications of the Archdiocese of New York, which gave it a positive review. But this small committee certainly did not speak for the Catholic Church as a whole. Later on, Bill Wilson became friends with Monsignor Fulton Sheen. But Sheen, even though a popular radio (and later television) figure, could not have spoken for
(or influenced the opinions of) the Catholic hierarchy vis-à-vis the young A.A. movement.\textsuperscript{70}

\textbf{Opposition from Cardinal McIntyre:} Although the official conference-approved A.A. literature tries to give the impression of warm and widespread Catholic support for Alcoholics Anonymous from the beginning, in fact there were some members of the Catholic hierarchy who were strongly opposed to A.A. Cardinal McIntyre in Los Angeles, for example, told Fr. John Ford that he would not allow him to speak at the 3rd A.A. International which was to be held in Long Beach, California, in 1960. Fr. Ed Dowling said that when he wrote the Cardinal asking whether he would be permitted to speak, McIntyre wrote back saying that he would allow him to do so since he was not an alcoholic, but only provided that he follow the ideas set out in the pamphlet “Help Your Alcoholic Friend” by Rev. William Kenneally. In his letter to Fr. Dowling, Cardinal McIntyre said that he did not want an alcoholic priest talking; and that he objected to the disease theory of A.A.\textsuperscript{71}

James Cardinal McIntyre, who was Archbishop of Los Angeles from 1948 until 1978, was an arch-traditionalist, as we know, who later deeply opposed many of the changes made by the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), especially the changes in the liturgy (after he retired as archbishop and took on the duties of a parish priest at St. Basil's Church in downtown Los Angeles, he celebrated the old Tridentine Mass on its side altars as a rebellion against the new liturgy).

\textbf{Fr. Ralph brings in Archbishops Ritter and Schulte to support A.A.} But Fr. Ralph was a superb ecclesiastical politician, who managed to get some other very powerful members of the hierarchy on the A.A. side. He served under three bishops in Indianapolis: Bishop Joseph Chartrand, who had died in 1933, but more importantly, Bishop/Archbishop Joseph Ritter (1934-1946) and Archbishop Paul Schulte (1946-1970).

It was Schulte who on Christmas Day of 1947 had released Ralph from his parish duties at Holy Cross parish in Indianapolis, and had given him a special mission where he was allowed to spend his full
time as a priest working with A.A. The archbishop also inscribed his official Imprimatur on the inside front page of Fr. Ralph’s first three Golden Books: The Spiritual Side (1947), Tolerance (orig. titled Charity, 1948), and Attitudes (1949).

By appearing at the first meeting of the NCCA, Archbishop Schulte helped give the participants confidence that important members of the hierarchy would give them backing in their mission.

Archbishop Ritter had been transferred to St. Louis in 1946, three years after Ralph got sober, but had been impressed so favorably by the young priest, and how his life had been turned around by A.A., that he sent his then Auxiliary Bishop, John Cody, to represent him and convey his blessings also upon the NCCA. Ritter was later one of the leading reformist bishops at the Second Vatican Council in 1962–1965, and a very powerful and respected figure in the American Catholic hierarchy.

(Cody was not a negligible figure himself. He later became Archbishop of Chicago and a Cardinal, of course, and although he eventually became involved in a good deal of controversy and strife, he was nevertheless an important figure within the hierarchy to have on one’s side.)

We should give adequate recognition to what Fr. Pfau accomplished in starting the NCCA (and keeping it going), and in bringing in extremely high-powered ecclesiastical supporters, by the power of his charm and hard work, to support the organization. A.A. was certainly not going to be automatically accepted by the Catholic Church, once theologians and bishops began looking carefully at its principles, and could easily have ended up being officially condemned by a combination of moralistic and authoritarian forces within the church. But Ralph got a number of powerful figures supporting the A.A. cause.

Society of Matt Talbot Guild: The SMT Guild was the group which published and distributed Fr. Ralph’s books and recordings and helped support the NCCA through the work of Marge Klemm, Pat Worrell, Josephine Pfau, Mary Pfau and her husband Ralph, and their dear friend Marge McMahon. The first printing of the first
Golden Book (1947) had a photo of Matt Talbot at the back along with a description of his work and a “Prayer for the Canonization of Matt Talbot.” This is a theme which continues to be important in the Catholic tradition of the treatment of alcoholism down to the present day, as one can see in the many articles on the website which John R. Blair maintains for the Venerable Matt Talbot Resource Center.

1950 — Third Covenant Controversy: At the first International A.A. Convention in Cleveland in 1950, A.A. was just embarking on a five-year trial period of using the General Service Conference as its central governing body. The Twelve Traditions were approved, and in various other ways the basic rules and understandings were being worked out for giving A.A. its long-term permanent organization. Any major statements or positions taken would have shaped the course of the twelve step movement from that time on.

At the Sunday morning session, one of the speakers was apparently trying to set up a theological scheme in which the first covenant (according to his scheme) was the one received by Moses on Mt. Sinai, the second covenant was the one which came through Jesus Christ, and the third covenant had Bill W. and Dr. Bob as its co-messiahs. His intention seemingly was to proclaim Alcoholics Anonymous as the new world religion.

A.A. historian Nancy Olson got an eye-witness account of this session from Tex Brown, one of the great oldtimers from the Chicago area.

At the Spiritual Meeting on Sunday morning the main speaker’s topic dealt with the idea that the alcoholic was to be the instrument that God would use to regenerate and save the world. He expounded the idea that alcoholics were God’s Chosen People and he was starting to talk about AA being “The Third Covenant,” when he was interrupted by shouted objections from the back of the room. The objector, who turned out to be a small Catholic priest, would not be hushed up. There was chaos and embarrassment as the meeting was quickly adjourned. I was upset and in full sympathy with the
poor speaker. I did not realize it at the time, but I had seen Father Pfau in action and Father Pfau was right. I had heard the group conscience and I rejected it.

Nancy also found Bill Wilson’s account of that same event, in a talk which he gave on the 1950 Convention later on:

On Sunday morning we listened to a panel of four A.A.’s who portrayed the spiritual side of Alcoholics Anonymous — as they understood it .... A hush fell upon the crowd as we paused for a moment of silence. Then came the speakers, earnest and carefully prepared, all of them. I cannot recall an A.A. gathering where the attention was more complete, or the devotion deeper.

Yet some thought that those truly excellent speakers had, in their enthusiasm, unintentionally created a bit of a problem. It was felt the meeting had gone over far in the direction of religious comparison, philosophy and interpretation, when by firm long-standing tradition we A.A.’s had always left such questions strictly to the chosen faith of each individual.

One member rose with a word of caution. [Apparently he was referring to Fr. Pfau.] As I heard him, I thought, “What a fortunate occurrence.” How well we shall always remember that A.A. is never to be thought of as a religion. How firmly we shall insist that A.A. membership cannot depend upon any particular belief whatever; that our twelve steps contain no article of religious faith except faith in God — as each of us understands Him. How carefully we shall henceforth avoid any situation which could possibly lead us to debate matters of personal religious belief.

Fr. Ralph had single-handedly taken the situation in hand and prevented a major catastrophe from occurring by sheer force of his personality and leadership, a disaster which Bill Wilson and the other conference planners do not seem to have recognized in advance (which is also rather amazing, to say the least). If the Third Covenant theory had become A.A. policy, every Jewish and Christian religious group in the entire world would of course have
immediately distanced themselves from the twelve-step movement, and would have advised their members against joining it. On that one occasion at the very least, Fr. Ralph saved the entire A.A. from itself!

1955 — A.A. Comes of Age: At the Second International A.A. Convention in St. Louis in 1955, an important decision had to be made. The system of governing A.A. through an annual General Service Conference had been set up in 1950-51, for an initial five-year trial period. Now the A.A. members assembled in St. Louis was going to have to decide whether to make this governmental scheme permanent.

Attendance at the convention was very small. Clarence Snyder in Cleveland, along with Henrietta Seiberling, had formed an “Orthodox Group” to organize opposition against this kind of bureaucratic structure, which to their minds left the officials of the New York General Service Office in control of all of A.A. in between the annual meetings of the Delegates, and gave them a dangerous amount of arbitrary authority. These officials would quickly become tempted, they feared, to act as a sort of all-powerful papal curia, with the Delegates never assembled in New York for long enough to be able to truly control them. Clarence and Henrietta and their supporters had decided to boycott the St. Louis gathering.

Fr. Ralph had also been one of the people who had opposed the General Service Conference structure as Bill W. had designed it. On the basis of comments he made at various points, it seems that he believed that the structure was too rigid and authoritarian, and feared that it would degenerate into a body which overreached its real purpose, and that it would soon be attempting to pass hundreds and thousands of rules governing everything A.A. members said and read. Fr. Ralph did go to St. Louis however, and was present at four o’clock on Sunday afternoon, July 3, 1955, when the matter was called to a vote:

“From today’s perspective,” recalls Nell Wing, Bill’s longtime secretary, “it’s hard for people to realize what a momentous decision was made that Sunday morning 30 years
ago. It was dramatic and very moving to us who knew what an effort of Bill’s this was, over a lot of opposition.” Bill had pushed through the idea of a Conference largely by campaigning for it vigorously and personally. One of the members who opposed the idea, the influential and controversial Father P[au], had announced he was going to rise and speak against it. “So after Bill had presented his resolution and Bern Smith asked for the vote of approval,” Nell continues, “we from the office sat with bated breath.” But Father P. remained silent [and the resolution was carried unanimously by a show of hands].

1958 — falling out with Bill W. over anonymity: Ralph began a long friendship with Bill Wilson when he and Bill met one another in San Diego in 1948 and then traveled to Ensenada, Mexico together. The two of them also appeared on the same speakers platform in Austin in June of that same year, and remained lifelong friends, except for this dispute over the anonymity principle which put them temporarily at odds with one another for a period of time.

Ralph had long had his detractors within A.A. Letters in the New York A.A. Archives complained for example, because Ralph would give A.A. groups an up-front charge to speak at conferences and conventions ($75.00 to speak at a meeting in Philadelphia in 1962 for example) and he also asked them to allow him to sell his books at places where he spoke. He did this to cover his travel expenses but also to pay his yearly living expenses. Under his arrangement with the Archbishop, he received no salary from the Archdiocese of Indianapolis. He may have received room and board free from Sister Austin and the Magdalen nuns at the Convent of the Good Shepherd in Indianapolis in return for acting as their confessor, or he may have had to pay them a nominal amount for that. This is unclear, but we do know that his overall expenses were in the neighborhood of $600 a year when he first began devoting his full time to his A.A. work. He was eventually able to purchase a fairly nice automobile towards the end of his life, to use in traveling about giving talks, but continued to live in the three rooms which the
convent allowed him to use (using one room as an office during the day and as a place to sleep during the night), in monastic austerity.

But the issue that actually caused the break between Ralph and Bill W. was a different one, the anonymity issue. Ralph had headed the NCCA openly and under his full name from the time of its founding in 1949. His niece said he felt he could do a lot more good by breaking his anonymity in that fashion, no matter the consequences to his own priestly career. *A priest in A.A.?* Ralph wanted people to stop and realize, *well why not, and of course!*

Bill W. did not openly criticize Ralph’s role in the NCCA, but finally became angered by Ralph’s breaking of his anonymity in the publication of his autobiography in *Look* magazine in 1958. It not only gave his full name, but there were also a number photographs showing Ralph’s face, portraying him in full ecclesiastical vestments celebrating mass, and so on. In Bill Wilson’s letters, he linked this with Lillian Roth’s publication of her autobiography, *I’ll Cry Tomorrow* four years earlier, in which she also broke her anonymity and spoke of her A.A. membership in print in public. Bill W. roundly condemned both of them to the rest of the A.A. fellowship.

It should be said, however, that Bill Wilson himself had been on the road promoting A.A. all across the country during the 1940’s, and allowing his photograph to be taken and printed in the local newspapers with great regularity. See for example his full face photo in the August 9, 1942 issue of the *Knoxville Journal*. Bill had changed his mind by the 1950’s, but not everyone in A.A. believed that the newly devised and far stricter rules about anonymity were wise or good.

**1965 — making peace in Toronto:** At the Fourth A.A. International Convention in Toronto in 1965, Ralph and Bill W. restored their friendship. A Canadian Catholic priest, Father Pete W., was present when Ralph and Bill W. met and made their peace with one another. He told me the story in a long telephone conversation. Pete (who was a relative newcomer to A.A. at that time, and had not become a priest yet) was one of the A.A. people posted on guard duty in the hotel hallway on the floor where Bill W.
had his hotel room. His instructions were to let no one disturb Bill, with one exception: if Father Ralph Pfau came up, he was to immediately take him to see Bill. Ralph did in fact come, and went into Bill’s hotel room where the two of them talked for a long time, an hour and a half or two. Pete says that it was very clear from the expressions on their faces when Ralph came back out, and from the way the two men said good-by to one another, that they parted the best of friends once again. Both these great A.A. leaders were near the ends of their lives by that point: Ralph died only a year and a half later and Bill passed away on January 24, 1971.

Death — February 19, 1967: Ralph died of hepatitis early Sunday morning, February 19, 1967, at Our Lady of Mercy Hospital in Owensboro, Kentucky, on the south bank of the Ohio river, separated by just the river’s width from his own beloved Indiana. Ralph’s niece told me that he was already in poor health, and was considering visiting Lourdes or one of the other great Catholic healing shrines in Europe. But the immediate cause of death was an anti-nausea shot for airsickness given him by a physician who used a needle that had been improperly sterilized (this was back in the days when doctors reused hypodermic needles over and over again). Apparently the person on whom the doctor had used the needle the previous time had hepatitis. They rushed Ralph to the hospital in Owensboro, Kentucky, where one of the doctors was an A.A. member, and the only physician whom Ralph trusted by now.

He did not last long. Ralph was sixty-two years old, and had been sober for twenty-three years. A Pontifical Funeral Mass was held for him at St. John’s Church in Indianapolis four days later, on February 23, 1967, and he was buried in Priest’s Circle at Calvary Cemetery. 

He was one of three good priests who, through their work together over the years, particularly set their mark on early Alcoholics Anonymous: the other two were Fr. Ed Dowling, S.J. (who had already died in 1960), and Fr. John C. Ford, S.J., who was now the only one left alive. It fell to him to write the epilogue at the
end of Ralph’s autobiography, for a new printing was issued shortly after his death. Ford concluded his postscript with the simple words:

The accomplishments of his life’s work .... live on ... in the countless lives of those who found sobriety and peace, under God, through Ralph Pfau. May his courageous soul rest in peace.
NOTES

1. Walker was the author of *Twenty-Four Hours a Day* (1948), and Webster wrote *The Little Red Book* (1946). All four of the major early A.A. authors died within six years of one another — Richmond Walker in 1965, Ralph Pfau in 1967, and Bill Wilson and Ed Webster in 1971 — producing a major change of era by the end. Sister Ignatia also died during this same period, in 1966.

2. The Old Cathedral in Vincennes, St. Bernard’s in Gibson County in extreme southern Indiana, and St. Anne’s in Indianapolis. See Ralph Pfau (Father John Doe) and Al Hirshberg, *Prodigal Shepherd* (Indianapolis, Indiana: SMT Guild, orig. pub. 1958; references in this article are to the edit. pub. after Pfau’s death in 1967), pp. 83-89, 141-151, 161 ff.


4. Fr. John C. Ford, S.J., in a telephone conversation with Mary Darrah in 1985, spoke of his own “alcoholism and recovery from it some forty years earlier under the care of Dr. William Silkworth at New York’s Towns Hospital.” This was the first time he revealed publicly that he was an alcoholic himself; it had been a closely guarded secret for many years. See Mary C. Darrah, *Sister Ignatia: Angel of Alcoholics Anonymous* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1992), ix. The figure of forty years has to be approximate, because Fr. Ford was in Italy teaching at the Gregorian University from 1945 to 1946. In an interview in 1984, Fr. Ford said that an A.A. member took him to several A.A. meetings in 1947. He seemed to be describing that as his first contact with regular A.A. meetings. This statement was made in an interview with David A. Works at Campion Center (Weston, MA), June 26, 1984, pp. 1-2 (transcript available at the archives of The North Conway Institute), as cited in Oliver J. Morgan, “‘Chemical Comforting’ and the Theology of John C. Ford, SJ: Classic Answers to a Contemporary Problem,” *Journal of Ministry in Addiction & Recovery*, Vol. 6(1) 1999: 29-66, see note 13. Ernest Kurtz, in a note to
Glenn F. Chesnut, 20 January 2009, warns us however that Ford’s involvement in A.A. was different in kind from Ralph Pfau’s, so that a simple-minded attempt to determine “which one came into A.A. first” does not necessarily do justice to either man’s important contribution to the A.A. movement: “Ford was an alcoholic and joined A.A. early. But because of his position as America’s most respected expert in moral theology, he feared that he would lose credibility if his disease or A.A. membership became known .... So he took on quite a bit of anonymous service work. For example, Ford was one of those involved in the hot line that ‘those concerned about their use of alcohol’ were encouraged to call. But on chronology, I am not sure. John was already showing signs of weakening memory for details when I interviewed him in 1977.”


6. Originally published in Indianapolis, Indiana, by the SMT Guild, they are now kept in print by Hazelden in Center City, Minnesota.

7. Ralph Pfau (Father John Doe), *Sobriety and Beyond* (Center City, Minnesota: Hazelden, 1955) and *Sobriety Without End* (Center City, Minnesota: Hazelden, 1957).


9. *Look’s* circulation reached 3.7 million in 1954 (see “Shake-up at Look,” *Time*, January 11, 1954) and peaked at 7.75 million in 1969. As a side note, after *Look* magazine finally closed in 1971, their five million item photograph collection was eventually donated to the Library of Congress. There are presumably a number of excellent photographs of Fr. Ralph in that collection, including not only the originals of the ones which were published in those two *Look* magazine articles, but also others which were not used. There are other excellent photos of him at various ages in the archives of the Archdiocesan headquarters at Indianapolis, Indiana.

11. Originally issued through SMT Guild in Indianapolis as 33 rpm long playing records, the complete set of thirty recordings is now available from Hazelden in Center City, Minnesota, as tape cassettes.


14. Archdioc. Arch. Ralph’s first name was given in Latinized form as “Rafael” in the old documents in the archives, which were still kept in Latin during that period.

15. Telephone conversation with Ralph’s niece and executor Pat Worrell (daughter of Ralph’s brother George Edwin “Ed” Pfau) on 27 February 2002. Also from notes made the next day when Pat Worrell allowed herself to be interviewed by archivist Frank Nyikos and myself at a restaurant in Indianapolis, on 28 February 2002. Also see Pfau *Prod. Shep.* 17 and 51.


29. *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 4th ed. (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 2001; orig. pub. 1939), 64 — “Resentment is the ‘number one’ offender. It destroys more alcoholics than anything else.” Resentment and fear are the central focus of the fourth step, the all-important self-inventory upon which the remaining steps build.


31. Ruth Hock of the New York A.A. office assembled a list of the groups known to New York at that time (there were twenty-seven of them) and published it in A.A. Bulletin #1 (14 November 1940), a copy of which was posted by Bill Lash in AAHistoryLovers Message No. 3673, at http://health.groups.yahoo.com/group/AAHistoryLovers/message/3673 (posted on 4 September 2006).

32. Dohr’s niece Laura later wrote a detailed account. See Neil S. (an Irish Catholic A.A. member from Fishers, Indiana), “History of Indianapolis AA,” http://hindsfoot.org/nindy2.html (posted on May 25,


35. Pfau Prod. Shep. 184-195. In fact, Ralph had actually stopped drinking three or four weeks earlier, when he began reading the A.A. Big Book, see page 191.

36. These two saints stick out because they are the only ones whose names were mentioned with any great prominence or frequency in the
Golden Books. St. Thérèse was referred to especially often — usually as “St. Teresa,” but context makes it clear that it was the nineteenth-century Carmelite from Lisieux who was meant, rather than the earlier sixteenth-century Carmelite, St. Teresa of Ávila.


40. He could have given numerous other quotations from traditional Catholic literature and doctrinal statements. St. Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologica* says that in this world and this life, human beings can be perfect in the sense of not committing mortal sin, but cannot be perfect at the level of venial sins, which all human beings commit. The Council of Vienne in 1311 declared that the proposition “that man in this present life can acquire so great and such a degree of perfection that he will be rendered inwardly sinless, and that he will not be able to advance farther in grace” was to be condemned as a heresy (Denziger §471).

42. Compare 1 John 1:8, 2:4, 4:20 and Romans 3:23.

43. Matthew 4:1-11, Mark 1:13, and Luke 4:1-13; Matthew 26:36-46, Mark 14:32-42, and Luke 22:41-46; see also Hebrews 2:18 “For because he himself has suffered and been tempted, he is able to help those who are tempted.”


46. Contrary to what Fr. Ralph was arguing, it should be noted that *Twenty-Four Hours a Day*, the great spiritual masterpiece by A.A.’s second most published author, Richmond Walker, clearly brought readers down the Illuminative Way and the Unitive Way, leading them into the divine Silence (*Sigê*), and the mystical Quiet (*Hêsychia*) of the Eastern Orthodox contemplative tradition. See Richmond Walker, *Twenty-Four Hours a Day*, compiled by a Member of the Group at Daytona Beach, Fla., rev. ed. (Center City, Minnesota: Hazelden, 1975; orig. pub. 1948).

47. Conversation with Mel B. (Toledo, Ohio) when he came to speak at the Michiana Conference in South Bend, Indiana, on September 15, 2007. In AAHistoryLovers Message 2996, Mel B. says “Fr. Pfau .... didn't seem to think much of Bill W ... and told me (in 1953) that Bill’s spiritual experience in Towns Hospital was not from grace, as grace can come only through the Church,” see http://health.groups.yahoo.com/group/AAHist


50. And also in other places, see e.g. Ralph Pfau, *The Golden Book of Sanity* (Indianapolis: SMT Guild, 1963), 47n.


53. Ralph Pfau (Father John Doe), *The Golden Book of Sanctity* (Indianapolis: SMT Guild, 1964), 12-13. It should be noted that this wordplay unfortunately does not work on the original Greek of the New Testament, where *hagios* means a holy man or saint, and *hagiasmos* means sanctification, but where there is no Greek word from this root which means to give something one’s approval or sanction. There are echoes here of the kind of doctrine which Luther and Calvin drew from St. Augustine and the New Testament, but Ralph was a Catholic, and for him God’s approval came not from merely holding a passive attitude of faith in God’s love and forgiveness, but from making a commitment to action which one carried out to the best of one’s ability. Ralph’s position would have been rejected by Luther and Calvin as “works righteousness.” Episcopalians and Methodists on the other hand (like the Southern...
Methodists who published *The Upper Room*, a major influence on the Big Book and early A.A.) would have agreed with Ralph that “faith without works was dead,” and the Methodists in particular held the synergistic doctrine that people who did not respond to a gift of God’s grace by trying to put it into action to the best of their ability, would not receive the subsequent gifts of grace which they would otherwise have been sent.


56. Ralph Pfau (Father John Doe), *The Golden Book of Sanctity* (Indianapolis: SMT Guild, 1964), 42-43. “Going on to perfection” was the Methodist technical phrase used to describe the dynamic process of continual spiritual growth which was taught in the early A.A. meditational book called *The Upper Room*.


64. As they say on their webpage — [http://www.nccatoday.org/](http://www.nccatoday.org/) (March 2009) — “Fr. Ralph Pfau (1904 - 1967) was the founder of the NCCA. Through his dedication and commitment, many Catholic priests, religious and laypersons found recovery and were restored to the faith family, leading productive and hopeful lives. Ralph Pfau was the first Catholic priest to recover from Alcoholism through AA.” For a more detailed account, see Monsignor William J. Clausen, “Historical Perspective of Father Ralph Pfau and the NCCA,” adapted from his talk by at the 50th anniversary celebration of the NCCA in 1999, see [http://www.nccatoday.org/a-history1.html](http://www.nccatoday.org/a-history1.html) (March 2009).


67. As quoted in Darrah, *Sister Ignatia*, 197
68. Clausen, “Historical Perspective of Father Ralph Pfau and the NCCA.” The name of the group underwent several changes: The phrase “and Related Drug Problems” was added to the NCCA name in 1974, and “Clergy” was changed to “Catholic” in 1988, to indicate that the leadership of the group had long been including women religious and Catholic lay people. Pat Worrell (28 February 2002) said that the 1988 name change was the result of the NCCA receiving a large bequest. Worrell (a Catholic laywoman) was herself made a committee member in 1972 (a post she filled for twelve years), and Sister Therese Golden, OP, was made a member of the board in 1974.

69. AAHistoryLovers (http://health.groups.yahoo.com/group/AAHistoryLovers/messages) Message 347 (from Fiona Dodd <fionadodd@eircom.net>), “The Catholic Contribution to the 12-Step Movement,” by W. Robert Aufill; Message 185 (from <fionadodd@eircom.net>), Bill W. “How the Big Book Was Put Together,” describing how a pre-publication copy of the Big Book was sent to the Catholic Committee on Publications in New York by Morgan R.; and Messages 1705 (from <NMOlson@aol.com>), 5321 (from John Barton <jax760@yahoo.com>), and 5331 (from <bruceken@aol.com>), on Morgan Ryan’s appearance on Gabriel Heatter’s "We the People" radio program on August 29, 1939.


72. Clausen, “Historical Perspective of Father Ralph Pfau and the NCCA.”

73. Archives of the Indianapolis A.A. Intergroup Office.


75. AAHistoryBuffs Message #932 posted on Feb 19, 2002 by Nancy Olson, see http://groups.yahoo.com/group/aahistorybuffs/ (March 2009,
this web group was the predecessor of the AAHistoryLovers). Tex told
this story to me also, at the National Archives Workshop in Chicago in
1999. Nancy was unable to find the date of Bill Wilson’s speech.

76. Bob Pearson, Manuscript of A.A. World History 1985, unpublished,
Chapter 1, “When A.A. ‘Came of Age.’” See also AAHistoryBuffs
Message #932 posted on Feb 19, 2002 by Nancy Olson, see
http://groups.yahoo.com/group/aahistorybuffs/ (March 2009, this web
group was the predecessor of the AAHistoryLovers).

77. Pfau, Prod. 237-238.

78. New York A.A. Archives: Captain Jack S., while traveling in South
America, to Bobbie B. in the Alcoholic Foundation office on March 19,
1949; George S. of Philadelphia to Bill on August 24, 1962. Thanks
to Amy Filiatreau, the New York A.A. Archivist, for discovering the four
letters which I cite in this note and the next.


80. Father Ralph S. Pfau and Al Hirshberg, “A Priest’s Own Story,”
Look, Vol. 22, No. 5 (March 4, 1958): 84-97; and “Out of the Shadows,”
Look, Vol. 22, No. 6 (March 18, 1958): 85-98. Lillian Roth, I’ll Cry
Tomorrow (New York: Frederick Fell, 1954). Lillian first joined A.A. in
1946. New York A.A. Archives: letters from Bill to Dean B.
(Indianapolis) on February 11, 1958; and Bill to George S. (Philadelphia)
on June 2, 1958.

81. Chester E. Kirk Collection of the John Hay Library at Brown
University.

82. Father Ralph Pfau’s obituary, from the Chicago Tribune, Monday,
February 20, 1967, “Father Pfau, Alcoholism Fighter, Dies,” notes he died
of hepatitis. Worrell 27 February 2002 explained how he contracted it.
The Archdiocesan Archives in Indianapolis corroborate his date of death,
and describes his funeral mass and burial.