

FATHER

K's

ONE DAY AT
A TIME
FR. C. J.
KELVIN



STORY

AN ALCOHOLIC WHO HAPPENED TO BE A PRIEST

Countless people have been helped to serenity by this humble, dedicated, and grateful man.

The following story is one of simple truth, simple reality and simple intention. I don't pretend to have all the answers. I do this very simply as one alcoholic talking to another.

Mine was a happy childhood and adolescence in the small Minnesota town of Kellogg. I attended twelve years at the public school. I was active in school events such as athletics, speech, debate and drama.

My parents were devout Catholics. Liquor was never served in our house. My father retired from the General Store at age 48. His investments provided a comfortable living for my mother, four boys and two girls. My mother was a school teacher who saw to it that we did well in school. She was a leader in the community and in the Church. She was the Parish organist and president of the Altar Society. She was also secretary to one of the political parties. One man said, "The day Mrs. Keenan died was like the day the banks closed." I was a high school senior when she died at the age of 43. It was a drastic blow to my father and to all of us. However, necessity drew us closer together and we have been a closely knit family to this day. My father was a patient "two parent father" until he died seven years later. He had been Village Recorder for years and was chairman for the Catholic cemetery.

I graduated from high school in 1934. By that time, the Depression had caught up with my father's investments and money was scarce. However, everyone sacrificed for me. and I entered the College of St. Mary's at Winona, Minnesota. I spent three years there and loved it. I was an Honor Student and President of the Junior Class. I acted in several plays and engaged in speech contests. I also was on the inter-mural basketball team.

I first tasted alcohol in my sophomore year, and noted "a warm inside feeling." However, I did not like the taste and alcohol was no problem in college. After three

years at Winona, I spent five years at St. Paul Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota in preparation for the priesthood.

I was ordained in 1942 for the Diocese of Lincoln. At that time, it was often suggested that the newly ordained priests take a five year pledge to abstain from alcohol. My counselor asked me to take the pledge for ten years because I was Irish. I made the ten year promise and kept it. So from 1942 till 1952, I was alcohol free. I was told that many people don't drink much during that stage of life. Everything about my vocation was interesting, and it was a joy to be a priest. I here hasten to add that, after sixty years of service as a priest, it is still a joy. I was on cloud nine until I became a social drinker.

I've been told that an adult male can become an alcoholic in fifteen years. In my case, can see a pattern of social drinking for five years. The next five years meant heavy drinking. During the third five year period, not many days went by that I didn't have some alcohol.

My Bishop called me and asked me to go to Hazelden near Minneapolis, Minnesota for alcohol treatment. I was 49 years old. I knew that I had no problem with alcohol. He called in one of my friends who happened to be in AA. My friend told me "I think you are one of the finest men I know, and I don't want your life ruined by alcohol." That made some impression and reluctantly I agreed to head North.

In 1966, the usual treatment time at Hazelden was three weeks. I was discovered as a person in complete denial. Each "client" was asked to take a test called the MMPI Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory with over 600 questions. It had questions such as "Would you like to go lion hunting in Africa?" I flunked that test!

Among other things, it was supposed to show your anxiety level. My anxiety level was zero. I didn't have a worry in the world! Of course, I did have anxiety, but it was deeply buried.

The psychologist said, "We can't figure you out. You are here because your Bishop insisted on it. If you don't respond to treatment, you will lose everything that you cherish in life. You will have to take the test over!" So I did. Before I took it, I sat down and worried for fifteen minutes. They let me stay!

The three weeks went by, and a lot of my 'classmates' went home. I stayed for six weeks because I couldn't convince them that I had taken the First Step. They reluctantly released me, but with all kinds of misgivings.

They were correct. After three weeks at home, I invited some friends for dinner one Sunday evening. It was not until 8:00PM that I took that first drink. I don't remember anything until the following Wednesday. Oh, I was around, and some people didn't know I was in a blackout. During that time, I did enough stupid things to convince ME that I couldn't handle alcohol.

I took the First Step and agreed to go back to Hazelden. I hit bottom when I resigned my pastorate. At that time, I had lost all that I wanted in life.

I finished three weeks at Hazelden on Jan. 1, 1967. In thirty days I was made pastor of St. James Parish at Mead, Ne. By an odd coincidence, I also taught a "Great Books Course" at Kennedy College in nearby Wahoo, Ne. This was a challenge that helped my sobriety. As time went on I also taught a course in logic! These were happy days. Alcohol did not exist and I was active in AA. After three years, I was appointed pastor of Blessed Sacrament Parish in Lincoln, Ne. As some of you may know, my new church was just across the street from what was to become the Independence Center, a drug/alcohol treatment facility. I continued at this assignment for fifteen years.

Shortly after I came to Lincoln, a Doctor Johnson assumed the job of starting the Independence Center. He had been on staff at Hazelden when I was there. I met him at a civic luncheon, and he said, "I'm going to put you to work." For ten years, I had the

best of all possible worlds, I was pastor of a wonderful parish and I had steady "work". I have no official count but took hundreds of fifth steps at the Independence Center. My cloud nine settled down to earth when I went in out-patient treatment at the Independence Center in 1979. I went back to my parish and did well for five years. At that time, I took three months leave and went to take long term care at Guest House near Detroit, Mi. This is a treatment center for priests only. Once again, I sailed high. As you can see, I was treated with great patience by my Bishops and parishioners. I was one of the first priests to benefit from a new attitude toward priests who were victims of this disease of alcoholism. Now, a priest with this illness is offered treatment. He may not be demoted in any way, and his salary continues through convalescence.

I remained at Blessed Sacrament until 1984. At the age of 67, I took charge of Sacred Heart Parish in Beaver Crossing, Ne. and St. Patrick's in Utica. These years were wonderful-except for a session at Valley Hope in 1986. Later on, in 1989, I had out patient treatment at First Step in Lincoln, Ne.

I retired from the active priesthood in 1995. I now live at Bonacum House with seven retired priests. All my needs are cared for. I also must admit to one more go at treatment during that time.

Again, I am eternally grateful to AA, to treatment, to my Bishops, priests and people. Many good friends are concerned about my relapses and ask "WHY?" I'll try to list the reasons:

1. I am an alcoholic.
2. I have been classified as a person with a very passive temperament.

My basic attitude toward life is summed up in:

EASY DOES IT.

A DAY AT A TIME.

IT WILL ALL WORK OUT.

I think these are great adages, but they do not apply to alcohol. I must be ever vigilant to anything regarding a first drink.

Since 1967, I have been in AA. It would be great to say that I have had 36 years of continuous sobriety. I regret my many falls from grace, but I thank God for the many years of sobriety that have been given to me. In a not so strange way, "my weakness has become my strength." Any success I have had as a pastor is due to the fact that my people see me as a frail human vessel who has known what pain and failure are. I like to feel that many people –alcoholic and non-alcoholic – Protestant and Catholic – have come to me as one who understands. Left to myself and the bottle, I would have died in my fifties. Instead, I have been given 86 years on this earth. The great majority of them have been alcohol free. For that, I am a most grateful priest who happens to be an alcoholic.

