

**A. William McVey**

Adler–Aquinas Institute  
Manitou Springs, CO, USA

## **A SPIRITUAL PHILOSOPHY OF RECOVERY: AQUINAS AND ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS**

### **Spiritual but Not Religious**

I had been educated in college, seminary and graduate school in philosophy and theology. Much of my education had been in the philosophy and theology of Thomas Aquinas who was a medieval philosopher and theologian of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. As the years evolved, I moved steadily away from a life in the Church and became a business person. I became less and less interested in philosophy, theology and spiritual discipline. Instead, I became dedicated to building a career and acquiring an image as a successful business person. I did achieve some career accomplishments for a time, but eventually alcohol began to destroy my marriage, family and career. Also, I had turned into a hardened person who lost any real relationship with God who, in my early life, had been essential to my existence.

I had, as we say in A.A.,<sup>1</sup> hit bottom. I came to A.A., and I was willing to listen and follow the program. I found a sponsor, studied and applied the steps, went to meetings unfailingly, and formed close A.A. friendships. Even after a number of years, I still do all these practices,

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<sup>1</sup> The abbreviation A.A. refers to the Alcoholics Anonymous.

and I have returned to a God of my understanding. The return to a God of my understanding has also involved a return to the spiritual and moral teachings of Thomas Aquinas. The renowned Catholic author G.K. Chesterton spoke of God as the “Hound of Heaven.” It is a metaphor that describes a loving God who is constantly pursuing us throughout life. It is a barking that we cannot ignore. In my life, I have heard the hound of heaven, but in my spiritual journey I have likewise heard the hound of Thomas Aquinas. I have heard this baying from the pages of two of the greatest spiritual books written, i.e. *The Twelve Steps* and *The Twelve Traditions of A.A. and the Big Book of Alcoholic Anonymous*. It was a combination of these works, many meetings, A.A. friends, prayer and meditation that brought about this essay.

Why did I begin to return to Thomas as I sat in A.A. meetings, lived the A.A. program and sponsored and counseled recovering alcoholics and addicts? I think that I can bring it down to one issue. People in recovery, especially persons with years of sobriety, are extremely serious about their spiritual life. To a person, they would say, “A.A. taught me the difference between religion and spirituality.” They would express this idea in various ways like, “I am spiritual but not religious.” I became intrigued by these statements because as I grew by means of 12 step recovery I experienced the burning desire to return to Christ and sacramental worship. There were many individuals who, after some time, would leave A.A. and return to a church denomination. Unfortunately, for most of these individuals, it was a short time before alcoholic behavior would return. I was puzzled by this rejection of organized religion because in my mind I was beginning to discover a beauty in Western Christianity that I had always sensed.

I sensed that I had been right in my early seminary days. In my opinion, my professors had missed the vital importance of Thomistic Psychology. In those days of manual Thomism I did not understand the power of Thomistic psychology until I later discovered Robert Brennan’s description: “The subject matter of psychology properly con-

ceived is man—his nature, and his powers, habits, and acts.”<sup>2</sup> Eventually, it was in reading Peter Redpath, *The Moral Wisdom of St. Thomas*, that it struck me what I had sensed unconsciously and eventually consciously over the years, i.e., the essential relation of ethics to a power psychology: “To us the reality of ethics rests upon the reality of a power psychology . . . how moral activity can belong to human beings, how can it be a human activity, unless it issues from a power psychology.”<sup>3</sup>

If there is a relation between ethics and a power psychology, then there is also a relation between moral philosophy and a moral psychology. This hunch that moral philosophy and psychology are really a synthesis that should be deeply and broadly explored in Thomas started in A.A. by asking what individuals mean when they say, “I am spiritual and not religious.” Even more important than this question I began to wonder just why they were making this statement so emphatically and with an expression of emancipation from traditional religion.

It was a perplexing issue because, even from my early days of recovery, I realized that A.A. is a program of spiritual and moral recovery. Steps one to three in A.A. are about the acceptance of a higher power. A.A. insists that recovery programs are not the place for atheists or highly skeptical, cynical or neutral agnostics. It demands in the early steps that the recovering individual comes to a personal definition of God. The definition must not be an abstract definition of God; rather it must be defined as an experiential dynamic power in the life of the person recovering. It is a God greater than the self, and the recovering individual must admit that he/she is unable to recover without the power of their God. I had a sponsor in my early days of recovery who would give common sense spiritual wisdom like, “Look there is a God and you’re not Him,” or another favorite was, “There is a God and your

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Edward Brennan, O.P., *Thomistic Psychology. A Philosophical Analysis of the Nature of Man* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1941), 47.

<sup>3</sup> Peter A. Redpath, *The Moral Wisdom of St. Thomas. An Introduction* (University Press of America, 1983), 15.

rear end isn't big enough for his throne.” The first three steps of A.A. are about discovering an all-powerful God who is beyond the skull of our brain. Most important, the discovery and acceptance must be of a powerful God to whom the recovering person is willing to turn over his/her life:

- Step One: We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.
- Step Two: Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore it to sanity.
- Step Three: Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.

Maybe this is why A.A. people begin to say that they are spiritual and not religious because there are no altar calls, no confessions of faith, and no testimonies—just a quiet willingness to completely turn their life over to the care of God in all matters and trust a loving, personal God. This God is defined in a wide variety of expressions from pantheists, to Buddhists, to the all-sovereign Christian God, but the bottom line is that it is a personal relationship with a higher power (God) who can and will heal if He is sought. It is a spiritual journey that is culminated in Step 11: “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.”<sup>4</sup> It is an intense and daily belief in the healing power of God. It is a fundamental stated belief that it is the experience of those who follow the steps that God can and will heal if He is sought. The emphasis is strongly on the “sought” because healing is understood as a daily reprieve from addiction by the power of God. It seems for A.A. spiritual and not religious types that being spiritual means an individual experiences and maintains through prayer and meditation a personal healing relationship with God. Thus, the question arises: Does not traditional

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<sup>4</sup> *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* (The A.A. Grapevine Inc. and Alcoholic Anonymous Publishing Services). Hereafter cited as TT.

religion bring healing to the sick and the suffering? How is A.A. spirituality different from traditional religion?

### **A Spirituality of Healing**

A.A. is centered on a specific type of spiritual healing and method as a response to the addiction to alcohol. It is, therefore, seen by A.A. as comprised of three components: It is a physical, mental and spiritual obsession. The alcoholic/addict believes that he/she had become insane, and it is this relationship with a personal God that overcomes their state of insanity, "Came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity." A person in recovery has to admit that they had lost their mind. This loss of mind, therefore, demands a method of spirituality where God is sought on a daily basis through prayer, meditation and examination of conscience so that a person may be healed from an insane obsession.

It is possible that we have a form of spirituality a little too intense for traditional religion. For example, most people who practice traditional religion would not perceive themselves as insane or having lost their minds. For example, they would not see their addiction to material possessions, social prestige or control of others as a physical, mental and spiritual obsession. Perhaps, it is seen as somewhat of a moral weakness, but it is not insanity. Most practitioners and ministers of traditional religion would see themselves as having moral blemishes, but they would not have major defects of character requiring spiritual healing. Religious people will ask for prayers from physical healing, but seldom does a person ask for prayers because they are losing their mind or suffering from mental obsessions.

It is in the first three steps of A.A. that we get the meaning of "I am spiritual, but not religious." It means I have a spirituality grounded on a dynamic relationship with an all-loving, healing God. The spirituality is often expressed in this common A.A. aphorism: "Religion is for people who are afraid of hell, and spirituality is for people who have

been there.” It became clear to me in A.A. that I had to seriously reexamine the Thomistic view of power. It is the Thomistic concept of power that is the foundation of 12 step recovery. “This power, we might today call a force, and everything other than God exists by means of a force which St. Thomas calls its-act-of-existing (esse), which is not a self-containing act.”<sup>5</sup> In A.A. spirituality it is stated there is a God and I am not Him. It means I receive the force, the power, the will to heal because I have found my soul.

A.A. is most important to study in this age of skepticism and atheism because many of the individuals who come into A.A. want nothing to do with religion. It is important to note that individuals do not come to A.A., as a rule, because they are interested in becoming more self-actualized. They have not come because they have gained some introspective knowledge after watching the Doctor Phil show. They come because they are seriously hurting and usually in an intellectual and emotional state of being totally demoralized. The shrewd and manipulative alcoholic has for years played many mind games to convince himself, family, employers and professionals that he/she is not an alcoholic. When they come to A.A., they have hit some type of a bottom ranging from a low to a high. Finally, they have run out of options, and they come to A.A.

### **Good Orderly Direction (GOD)**

From the beginning of the A.A. program, people are told it is a spiritual program, and they must begin to work the steps. Often, even in a broken human condition, they will proclaim: “Ok, but I want you to know that I do not want to believe in God or religion.” The response of a knowledgeable A.A. sponsor is: “Look, your way has not been working, and you must work through the first three steps. You must define a relationship with a higher power that you know as God. This is not a program for atheists. It is a program of Get God or Get Drunk.” On

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<sup>5</sup> Redpath, 20.

many occasions, the disbeliever is told to pray a cry of hope from a heart of agonizing pain: “Oh, God if you exist let me feel something. Despite the state of your belief pray the serenity prayer daily and frequently and make a decision to begin to put good orderly direction into your life.” After a few months of dedication to the first three steps, the disbelief and skepticism disappears and the recovering individual turns his/her will and life over to God as he/she understands Him.

I remember the day when I was sitting in a lecture by Father James V. Schall at the American Conference of Catholic Philosophers. He was giving a paper on the eminent Thomist philosopher Étienne Gilson. It was a marvelous presentation on the nature of the mystery of being created by God in a state of freedom. We are created as a free person by God because it is only by the exercise of free choice for God that we demonstrate our love. However, our freedom also means that as earthly free human beings we will always know suffering. It is the suffering that is an integral part of the free journey with God. Father Schall then said it is primarily in accepting our humanity and in the midst of our freedom and suffering that we still turn to God in loving obedience. Schall held that we do not initially come to God by means of a clear decision of the intellect; rather, we come to God through a life of virtue. It is as we live virtuously that God becomes more vivid and dynamic. It was then that tears came. They were tears of finally understanding. I had learned experientially at A.A. what the Thomist Father Schall was presenting. I, like other recovering alcoholics, had come to God because in the midst of suffering and the need for healing I decided to become virtuous. I decided to live as a good person. I wanted God, so I engaged in a life style of good orderly direction and God became personal and a dynamic force. This is A.A. spirituality, and I think it is rather Thomistic.

I want to suggest when A.A. individuals state that they are spiritual but not religious, they are attempting to articulate a Spirituality of Healing. It is the addicted brain and body that must be healed by the

powers of the soul. It is with a Spirituality of Healing that it becomes glaringly apparent that spirituality and morality cannot be separated. A.A. starts the journey to recovery in the first three steps that leads to a mystical awareness of a dynamic and powerful personal God. The path of the healing process requires more than a spiritual awareness; it demands that the powers of the soul are activated. Spiritual awareness means that a person has experienced God's loving compassion and knows although he/she is an imperfect being, they must begin to lead a good life. In Thomistic morality, the alcoholic must go from a life of vicious behavior to a life of virtuous behavior. Morality takes on a new expression when it is situated within the context of spiritual healing. It is a method of more than of not being a bad person; it is more than a morality driven by rules, duty, fear of punishment, etc. Thomistic morality, like a Spirituality of Healing, is a moral psychology of healing and human flourishing. I can remember the night I hit my bottom. I was lying in a jail cell after a DUI. I knew I was losing my wife and family and my career was quickly going downhill. I prayed an agonizing prayer of shame and fear, and God spoke to me very simply in a gentle, sad tone, "I gave you so much. Are you ready?" I had to answer that I was ready to be spiritually healed and stop acting like a non-person. A non-person is when an individual is unable to enter into true bonds of harmonious relationships with others. A.A. literature speaks of

Our twisted relationships with family, friends and society at large that many of us suffered the most. We have been especially stupid and stubborn about them. The primary fact that we fail to recognize is our total inability to form a true partnership with another human being . . . we have not sought to be one in a family, to be a friend among friends, to be a worker among workers, to be a useful member of society.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> TT, 53.

## Living in Harmony

Living in social harmony with others is essential to spiritual, moral and mental health. Aquinas explains the virtue of justice as being concerned with social harmony, i.e., friendship, concord, gratitude, affection, humanity and benevolence as being the parts of justice. Living in spiritual and moral harmony with others means living by the virtue of justice and the habit of friendship.<sup>7</sup> The alcoholic knows that a spirituality of healing demands meticulous attention to the virtue of justice in order to return to a life of social harmony and friendship.

Though in some cases we cannot make restitution at all, and in some cases action ought to be deferred, we should nevertheless make an accurate and really exhaustive survey of our past life as it affected other people. In many instances, we shall find that though the harm done others has not been great, the emotional harm we have done ourselves has. Very deep, sometimes quite forgotten, damaging emotional conflicts persist below the level of consciousness. At the time of these occurrences, they may actually have given our emotions violent twists which have since disclosed our personalities and altered our lives for the worse.<sup>8</sup>

Therefore, it is the requirement of A.A.'s step eight: "Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all."

There is a crucial lesson for traditional religion to learn from sincere practitioners of A.A. spirituality but not religious types. It is a spirituality based on a relationship with a highly personal and powerful God and "prayer and meditation are an essential means of conscious contact with God."<sup>9</sup> Living in social harmony with others is essential in a Spirituality of Healing. A.A. makes clear that being spiritual means that an individual is able to live in loving harmony with others. We see

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<sup>7</sup> Simon G. Harak, *Virtuous Passions: The Formation of Christian Character* (Eugene Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1993), 81–90.

<sup>8</sup> TT, 79–80.

<sup>9</sup> TT, 96.

this spiritual principle of social harmony emphatically established in step 11 that introduces the recovering alcoholic to the ideal of spiritual-social harmony in the prayer of St. Francis: “Lord, make me a channel of thy peace that where there is discord, I may bring harmony.”

It is in learning to live in spiritual harmony with God and others that is critical to spiritual healing, and I suggest it is a Thomistic metaphysical principle of order. It goes back to the spiritual sponsor directing the unbeliever who is searching for a personal dynamic God, to when the seeker is instructed to begin by pursuing good orderly direction in their life. Simon G. Harack, S.J., explains that Thomas begins with the general observation “that in all things there are to be found two sorts of perfection, one by which the thing subsist in itself, the other by which it is ordered to other things . . . proportionate to itself.” In Thomistic thinking, Harak elaborates, “[c]reatures are constitutively interrelational. That is to say, what makes a creature to be what it is—what constitutes it—is relationships. Second, the creature increases its perfection—its distinctness and its relatedness—as the creature returns closer to God, who is perfect love. That is the final cause (telos) of creation and of each creature.”<sup>10</sup> Harak argues it is fundamental to Aquinas teaching that a creature is ‘ordered’ to other creatures. That is, creatures are drawn to approach (attracted to) others of their kind. It means that certain others are proportionate to a person. It is a goodness of fit; we could say, it is not a twisted relationship. For this proportionality, Thomas uses several words to express fitting, congruent, proper, apt, inclined, and disposed toward, congruent and connatural.

The Thomistic principle is that

each creature is drawn, is moved by God, through all others of creation. All the movement that we see in the world finds its origin in the call of God to final consummation. Movement toward that greater love (approach) necessarily means movement away from (avoiding) others which would be unfitting for the crea-

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<sup>10</sup> Harak, 81–91.

ture's God supported existence. Thomas saw that movement of approach and avoidance as characterizing all creation, even inanimate things.<sup>11</sup>

The spiritual principle of all creation being drawn to God is similar to Charles Sanders Peirce's "Neglected Argument for the Reality of God." The movement of the soul to God Peirce calls a reverie; it is pure play. It is a lively exercise of one's powers. It is either

a form of esthetic contemplation, or that of distant castle building (whether in Spain or within one's own moral training) . . . I will call it "Musement," . . . Enter your skiff of Musement, push off into the lake of thought, and leave the breath of heaven to swell your sail. With your eyes open, awake to what is about or within you, and open conversation with yourself, for such is all meditation.<sup>12</sup>

I have found over the years as a recovering alcoholic with others that this concept of Musement describes somewhat the spiritual journey of recovery. It is a sense of a pull, a force, a power that gently and steadily leads the recovering individual to have a sense of fitting in joyfully and in harmony with life. It is best described in the following chapter of an anonymous recovering alcoholic taken from *Came to Believe, The Spiritual Adventure of A.A. as Experienced by Individual Members*, called "This Spirit Touch."

At some time, perhaps in a more moderate way, nearly everyone has experienced this spirit touch of God—the fleeting feeling of insight, love, joy, and "The world is right." Once, I thought that only unusual circumstances made these moments possible. Actually, I now think, they are forecasts of what one can have if one is willing to take the time and make the effort. Peace, joy and love can be sought through quiet thinking and honest prayer. The wholeness, the new awareness that is produced affects one's rela-

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<sup>11</sup> Id., 58.

<sup>12</sup> Charles Sanders Peirce, *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings*, Vol. 2 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 436–437.

tionships with God and man to a degree greater than would seem in ordinary life. The clamor of now is reduced; understanding is increased. Feelings become something to explore, rather than to suppress. These moments are not the ends in themselves, but calm, restful, glorious depths. There is a joining of inner forces with outer forces. The Power greater than ourselves puts us in tune with the world. Of course, there are times when the instrument is out of key, then we have insatiable desire to find the key again.

Undoubtedly, this way of life is different for each person, because each person becomes his true self in relation to others, as well as to himself. Everything becomes filled with purpose, whether it is small or large, ugly or beautiful. In the life of the spirit, there is no small, there is no ugly. Paradoxically, inwardness increases the importance of other people and one's surroundings. All five senses are more alert. The feeling is one of completeness.<sup>13</sup>

### **Spiritual and Moral Integration**

A.A. spirituality of healing is a healing process that occurs by means of a steady and disciplined design over a life time. In Benedictine spirituality, there is an aphorism: "You keep the rule and the rule will keep you." In A.A. it is a matter of: "You keep the steps, and the steps will keep you." A.A. spirituality of healing is very much a life of spiritual and moral habit. It is matter of engaging in spiritual and moral exercises on a daily basis. It is a commitment to a lifetime pursuit of good orderly direction and the conscious understanding of God's will. In the early stages of growth the individual is instructed of the necessity to confront their moral defects of character.

Now let's ponder the need for a list of the more glaring personality defects all of us have to varying degrees. To those having religious training, such a list would set forth serious violations of

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<sup>13</sup> *Came To Believe: The Spiritual Adventure of A.A. as Experienced by Individual Members* (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc., 1973), 65.

moral principles . . . to avoid falling into confusion over the names these defects should be called, let's take a universally recognized list of major human failings—the Seven Deadly sins of pride, greed, lust, anger, gluttony, envy, sloth. It is not only by accident that pride heads the procession. For pride, leading to self-justification, and always spurred by conscious or unconscious fears, is the basic breeder of most human difficulties, the chief block to true progress. Pride lures us into making demands upon ourselves or upon others which cannot be met without perverting or misusing our God-given instincts. When the satisfaction of our instincts for sex, security and society becomes the sole object of our lives, then pride steps in to justify our excesses.<sup>14</sup>

Given the awareness of the destructive force of pride, A.A.'s spirituality of healing focuses the individual's attention to the need for the development of the habit of humility. "Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings." As a matter of fact, step seven stresses "the attainment of greater humility is the foundational principle of each A.A.'s Twelve Steps. For without humility, no alcoholic can stay sober at all."<sup>15</sup> This is the bold assertion of the A.A. philosophy that only road to spiritual healing is by means of the virtuous habit of humility.

We must place the attention given to the deadly sin of pride and the development of the virtuous habit of humility as similar to Aquinas concept of the person as attracted to live in harmony with God, others and self. Furthermore, it is Aquinas who also addresses the issue of proper harmony from the holistic perspective of the union of soul and body. Consequently, in Thomistic psychology reason, will, and affective virtues require emotional control. Especially, pertaining to a spirituality of healing Thomas Ryan points out the importance of Aquinas teaching on the virtue of misericordia which he suggests expresses three words in English, i.e., compassion, pity and mercy: "Misericordia

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<sup>14</sup> TT, 48.

<sup>15</sup> TT, 70.

as compassion denotes being so affected that one moves to alleviate the distress of another.” For Aquinas virtue of compassion reveals the other oriented and interpersonal character of the human character. Ryan explains: “Compassion as a felt evaluation is fitting to our humanity and hence normative. To be sad at another’s gifts and success or to take pleasure in another’s plight indicates defective self-esteem. One’s moral character is flawed.”<sup>16</sup> He suggests Aquinas sees compassion in the context of friendship and devoted love through identification with the plight of the other.

A spirituality of healing is a process of the continuous integration of intellect, will and emotion. Mental healing, as is clear in the case of A.A. recovery, is a spirituality of attraction to proper social harmony by means of the virtuous habits of prudence, justice and humility. These virtuous habits, however, require over time that supreme attention is given to the individual’s affective powers as well as intellect and will.

But in A.A. we slowly learned that something had to be done about our vengeful resentments, self-pity, and unwarranted pride. We had to see that every time we played the big shot, we turned people against us. We had to see that when we harbored grudges and planned revenge for such defeats, we were really beating ourselves with the club of anger we had intended to use on others. We learned that if we were seriously disturbed, our first need was to quiet that disturbance, regardless of who or what we thought caused it.

To see how erratic emotions victimized us often took a long time. We could perceive them quickly in others, but only slowly in ourselves. First of all, we had to admit that we had many of these defects, even though such disclosures were painful and humiliating.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Tom Ryan, “Aquinas on Compassion: Has He Something to Offer Today,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 75:2 (2010): 162.

<sup>17</sup> TT, 47.

## Moving to Emotional Prudence

In terms of the alcoholic living in social harmony, he/she is described as having a twisted and toxic moral character. As a result, the process of recovery is a spiritual healing of all the faculties of the soul, i.e., intellect, will and emotions. In a process of spiritual healing, moral and emotional examination of the subjective experiences of irascible emotions of fear and anger are a basic requirement of the early and continuous life stages of spiritual healing. It is the combination of pride justified by unconscious fears that leads to self-justification and the justification of moral excesses.

All these failings generate fear, a soul-sickness in its own right. The fear, in turn, generates more character defects. Unreasonable fear that our instincts will not be satisfied drives us to covet the possessions of others, to lust for sex and power, to become angry when our instinctive demands are threatened, to be envious when the ambitions of others seem to be realized while ours are not. We eat, drink, and grab for more of everything than we need, fearing we shall never have enough. And with genuine alarm at the prospect of work, we stay lazy. We loaf and procrastinate, or at best work grudgingly and under half steam. These fears are the termites that ceaselessly devour the foundations of whatever sort of life we try to build.<sup>18</sup>

This passage from TT is worthy of careful attention from the perspective of Thomistic Psychology and a Spirituality of Healing. First, we look at the irascible emotion of fear. Aquinas gives much attention to the irascible emotions of fear and anger especially when intentional objects are evil. He emphasizes that evils of one kind or another are more defining of the irascible emotions than goods. In terms of spiritual healing, it means that anger in often cunning and baffling ways draws us from a life of true spiritual and moral harmony with evil appearing as good and pleasurable. A.A. spiritual healing requires the naming and

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<sup>18</sup> TT, 49.

taming of the irascible emotion of anger. Second, the naming and taming of anger is so important because of the modes of expressions it assumes in the life of the alcoholic, namely as resentment and self-pity. "Resentment is the 'number one' offender. It destroys alcoholics more than anything else. From it stems all forms of spiritual disease, for we have been not only mentally and physically ill, we have been spiritually sick." It is, therefore, a necessary element of the healing that a complete moral inventory is taken. A crucial element of this spiritual healing exercise is the naming and taming of resentments.

In dealing with resentments, we set them on paper. We listed people, institutions or principles with whom we were angry. We asked ourselves why we were angry. In most cases we found that our self-esteem, our pocketbooks, our ambitions, our personal relationships (including sex) were hurt or threatened. So we were sore. We were burned up.<sup>19</sup>

Third, as Aquinas was aware, as is any effective therapist, emotions always are a part of an integrated embodied system. We are moved to moral decisions by means of the interaction of our rational, will and sense appetites always interacting by means of practical reasoning. When there is a movement toward an arduous intentional object, anger and fear are linked together spontaneously. A.A. uses two aphorisms to describe the nature a maladjusted fear that leads to an increase in the intensity of anger. They are: "Forget Everything and Run" and "False Evidence Appearing as Real."

In Thomistic thinking and A.A. spirituality, anger is readily ignitable because it is aroused when a person senses an issue of injustice. The alcoholic who suffers from a mental, physical and spiritual illness has not acquired the necessary moral virtues and habits that allow him/her to tame anger. When a person lacks the spiritual and moral acumen to respond to anger, it leads to entering into moods of resentment and self-pity. The anger is gradually intensified the longer the

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<sup>19</sup> Id.

individual broods over the cause of the anger. This brooding is enflamed by the emotion of fear; consequently the individual misreads the causes and solutions of the anger. In turn, the growing resentment leads the alcoholic to avoid the proper acts of a good moral character that allows him/her to live in harmony with God, others and self.

A.A. spirituality of healing, as we see, is a way of recovering from alcoholism by following well defined spiritual and moral exercises, the 12 steps of recovery. It is the exercise of these steps that touches the soul of the recovering individual and leads to a transformation of moral character. The transformation has started by a determined commitment to spiritual and moral exercises that calls for trust and patience. This program of spiritual healing begins with calling for the disciple to live by the principles of A.A. and to abstain from alcohol one day at a time. The power to resist alcohol and experience a transformation of character is generated from a higher power and a discovery of the powers of the soul that leads to a spiritual movement towards a lifestyle of virtuous habit. It is, simultaneously, accepted that the daily reprieve from alcohol is dependent on the spiritual and moral condition of the person in need of recovery.

This process of continuous moral healing is most contingent on the exercise of the virtue of prudence. It is the virtue of prudence that is essential to the recovering alcoholic's state of serenity and emotional sobriety. The virtue of prudence is presented to the alcoholic as the key to a life of harmony with God, others and self. Josef Pieper, the Thomistic ethicist, describes prudence as the foundation for the other cardinal virtues, i.e., justice, temperance and courage. It is what the ancients called the "auriga virtuous," meaning the charioteer of the other virtues. It is prudence that directs all other virtues. Prudence often has a negative connotation, like being a prude or a coward. It is really the opposite because prudence means doing the right thing out of conviction.

For example, many a young person joins the military in order to serve their country because they make a prudent decision to serve. It is simply the right thing to do. In a sense, prudence is synonymous with wisdom. Prudence is really wisdom that is activated. Prudence does not belong only to contemplative monks; rather, God expects every human being to exercise the virtue of prudence.

It is a virtue that must be practiced by everyone, young and old, male and female, rich and poor, the schooled and the non-schooled and especially the recovering alcoholic. David speaks clearly about the general calling of prudence in Psalm 119:100: "I understand more than the aged, for I keep the precepts." According to the Proverbs, prudence cries out on the streets and the marketplace: "How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple? How long will scoffers delight in scoffing and fools hate knowledge?" (Proverbs 1:22)

Prudence is the acquired attitude and habit of doing the next right thing on a daily basis. It is the filtering virtue, the Divine illumination that uses the practical talent of our mind to discern our true good in every circumstance. Prudence is the ability to measure short-term gain against long-term gain. It looks at the destination of the recovering alcoholic in terms of the spiritual promises of a better life and appraises the present. It is the Divine illumination that is implanted in us from prayer, meditation, reflection and a reborn conscience that guides the recovering alcoholic by means of the three R's of human decision-making.

Prudence is about making the right judgment as to the right thing to do, at the right time, and in the right way. Let us say, for example, a recovering alcoholic is as a manager and is unhappy with the work of an employee. As a matter of fact, he has received serious customer complaints and pressure to do something about it. He has an obligation to speak with the employee, but he has learned from practicing the steps that he must conduct his corrective conference with moral prudence. He must follow the three R's: the right thing, at the right time and the right

way. Therefore, before he meets with the employee, he must pray for guidance so that he will be sure of the issue; as a rule he will pray the marvelous prayer for proper and fitting moral character, the serenity prayer: “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can and the willingness to know the difference.” He will find a private time to correct without public embarrassment, and he will be most careful how he conducts the corrective conversation. If he follows the 3R’s, then he will act with Divine illumination. The recovering alcoholic has learned to manage self and others by means of the habit of emotional prudence.

Prudence requires that before we make a decision, we seek counsel. We pray that God will lead us to right counsel where we gather the information and advice necessary to making a prudent decision that leads to proper action (the next right thing to do). We are exhorted in Proverbs 15:22: “Without counsel plans go wrong, but with many advisers they succeed.” God wants us to have people in our life who will give us good counsel.

It is for this reason that God wants us to live in A.A. spiritual communities to help each other with prudent counsel. It does not mean that the alcoholic wants friends who will always agree with them; rather, they want friends who will give them insightful and true counsel. As they struggle to live a prudent life, then they become a living example of Isaiah 62: “You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of the Lord.” It is for this reason that step one reads: “We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.” In the *Twelve Traditions of A.A.* it asserts: “Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends upon A.A. unity.” It is often said at A.A. meetings: “This is a ‘we’ program. We are in this together. It is for this reason that in A.A. alcoholics sponsor each other on the road to spiritual recovery, and it is also why recovering alcoholics continue going to meetings for the spiritual counsel of friends.

This process of continuous moral healing is most contingent on the exercise of the virtue of prudence. It is the virtue of prudence that is essential to the recovering alcoholic's state of serenity and emotional sobriety. The virtue of prudence is presented to the alcoholic as the key to a life of harmony with God, others and self. Josef Pieper, the Thomistic ethicist writes:

There is no technique of the good, no technique of perfection. Casuistry, on the contrary, carried to excess, substitute techniques and prescriptions for the infinite suppleness which the virtue of prudence must retain in the face of the complexities of life . . . The man who does good follows the lines of an architectural plan which has not been conceived by himself and which he does not understand as a whole, nor all its parts. This architectural plan is revealed from moment to moment. In each case he sees only a tiny segment of it, as through a narrow crack. Never, so long as he is in the state of being on the way, will the concrete architectural plan of his own self become visible to him in its rounded and final shape. Paul Claudel defines conscience—which as we have said is in a certain sense equivalent to prudence itself—as the patient beacon which does not delineate the future, but only the immediate.<sup>20</sup>

The 12 steps are not healing or mental health techniques. They are a call to a disciplined life seeking conscious contact with a personal and healing God on a daily basis and living by a lifestyle of virtuous habits. A.A. offers, as Pieper suggests, a new architectural plan for living. It is lived with the support of a friendship of other recovering alcoholics who are pursuing a similar plan of daily and concrete action. In the main text of recovery Alcoholic Anonymous we discover A.A.'s concept of prudence as it is applied to spiritual healing.

As we go through the day we pause when agitated or doubtful, and ask for the right thought or action. We constantly remind

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<sup>20</sup> Josef Pieper, *The Cardinal Virtues: Prudence, Justice, Fortitude, Temperance* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1964), 30.

ourselves we are no longer running the show, humbly saying to ourselves many times each day “Thy will be done.” We are then in much less danger of excitement, fear, anger, worry, and self-pity or foolish decisions. We become more efficient. We do not tire so easily, for we are not burning up foolishly as we did when we were trying to arrange life to suit ourselves.

It works—it really does.

We alcoholics are undisciplined. So we let God discipline us in the simple way we have just outlined. But this is not all. There is action and more action. “Faith without works is dead.”<sup>21</sup>

### **The Miracle of the Second Nature**

I began this essay addressing the issue of sincere A.A. seekers who hold that they are spiritual but not religious. Personally, I have found this not the case, and over the years I have known others in A.A. who think the same way. There are many in A.A. who have blended A.A. recovery spirituality with a religious tradition. This fused spirituality is most identifiable in A.A. individuals with long term recovery. It appears as these individuals experience a desire to return to religious worship, devotion and study. In other words, they are both spiritual and religious. The reason A.A. spirituality and religion are linked is because by definition a virtuous person is both spiritual and moral.

I have a dear friend Manny who is a fellow A.A. spiritual companion who has many years in the program. He is active in A.A. and very active in his church. He is a person who lives the way of A.A., yet practices traditional religious worship, devotion and piety. When I share my spiritual journey with Manny, as a companion in A.A., I have a passionate sense of a more complete spiritual life. I believe that many in A.A. have come to worship, study and pray to God in their own particular religious tradition.

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<sup>21</sup> *Alcoholics Anonymous*, Fourth Edition (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc., 2001), 87–88.

Manny has an expression that touches my heart when he says: “Bill, it is sad that so many people never stay in the program long enough to discover the miracle of the steps.” I think the miracle of A.A. starts when the recovering alcoholic realizes the difference in believing in God and believing in a healing God that God can and will if He is sought. This seeking of God in A.A. begins with a profound change of willingness:

Practicing Step three is like the opening of a door which to all appearances is still closed and locked. All we need is the key, and the decision to swing the door open. There is only one key, and it is called willingness. Once unlocked by willingness, the door opens almost of itself, and looking through it. We shall see a pathway beside which the inscription reads: This is the way to faith that works.<sup>22</sup>

A person comes to A.A. because his/her efforts at exercising willpower to control their drinking have been time and time again a demoralizing failure. Many alcoholics are confused at the failure of willpower because in many of life challenges their willpower has led to success. Except with their drinking, their exercise of the will to control their drinking has proven inadequate. Perhaps they have gone for medical and psychological help or into a rehabilitation program where it is not an issue of understanding the will. In most non-spiritual methods of alcohol treatment there is no comprehensive understanding of the will. Modern psychology studies choices, theory and motivation, but it does not examine the nature of the will and its relationship to moral character.

Unfortunately, the suffering alcoholic for years has been under the delusion of self-control by means of a false understanding of willpower. This false understanding of willpower is best called ‘willfulness’. The renowned existential psychiatrist Leslie H. Farber refers to

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<sup>22</sup> TT, 34.

the present age as existing in an addicted state of human willfulness as opposed to an understanding of the will as a faculty of a person's soul.

Nietzsche, I believe, was not as interested in theological argument about the disappearance of the divine will in our lives as he was in the consequences of its disappearances. Today, the evidence is in. Out of disbelief we have impudently assumed that all life is now subject to our own will. And the disasters that have come from willing what cannot be willed have not at all brought us to some modesty about our presumptions. Instead, we turned to chemicals, which seem to enhance our willful strivings. It was only a question of time before man, in his desperation, would locate divinity in drugs and on that artificial rock build his church.<sup>23</sup>

Prior to A.A. the alcoholic has attempted under pressure to exercise brute willpower unsuccessfully: "The fact is that most alcoholics, for various reasons yet obscure, have lost the power of choice to drink. Our so called willpower becomes practically nonexistent . . . We are without defense against the first drink."<sup>24</sup> Consequently, A.A. does not ask for exercises in brute willpower rather, as stated in step three, it calls for a state of willingness. The reason the alcoholic has been unsuccessful in his/her efforts at brute willpower control is that it was not an exercise of as much as willfulness. This is a critical distinction between willfulness and willingness. Willfulness is an alcoholic's ego driven my way or the highway approach to controlling drinking. It is a willful search for, as is said in A.A., an easier softer way. Aquinas, like A.A., talks about willingness: "Willing is concerned with the end itself . . . for the good man that thing is an object of willing which is truly worthy of being willed . . . those things are agreeable to the habit of virtue that are in fact good because the habit of moral virtue is defined by

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<sup>23</sup> Leslie H. Farber, *The Ways of the Will: Essays Toward a Psychology and Psychopathology of Will* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, Harper & Row Publishers, 1966), 65–67.

<sup>24</sup> *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 29.

what is in accord with right reason.”<sup>25</sup> Willingness begins initially with faith in God and then a willingness to listen to His will and formulate the proper end, i.e., to live a life of complete sobriety by means of following the 12 steps.

For Aquinas, the intellect and the will are faculties of the soul. Being a virtuous person requires willingness to learn to live by virtuous habits.

When we wish to praise someone for good morals, we do not describe him as wise and intelligent, but as sober and mild tempered. We do not praise a man for good morals alone but also for the habit of wisdom. Praise worthy habits are called virtues. Therefore, besides the moral virtues, there are intellectual virtues like wisdom, understanding and some others of this kind.<sup>26</sup>

In terms of Thomistic thinking, intellectual is used in the sense of our power to reason, to work out, to analyze, to synthesize, judge, and estimate. When our reason does not function in accord with reality, we are irrational. Over time, the alcoholic loses his/her ability to judge reality, and reasoning becomes consistently irrational; it is referred to by the A.A. aphorism as “stinking thinking.” The Thomistic intellect is not instinct; rather, it is the intuitive mind that directly perceives truths independently of any reasoning process. It is an intuitive willing and disposition to goodness. A spiritual mind is a contemplative mind that receives its knowledge from sources such as nature, the arts, and faith and directly from God. This intuitive mind (the intellect) comes to life in A.A. when the alcoholic enters into a spiritual state of willingness.

The A.A. spiritual philosophy of recovery is similar to the Thomistic teaching on a willingness to listen to the desire of the soul to flourish by means of virtuous habits. Aquinas sees the soul as possessing both natural and supernatural dispositions to the theological virtues

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<sup>25</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. C. J. Litzinger, O.P. (Notre Dame, Indiana: Dumb Ox Books, 1993), Book 3, Lecture I, n. 382.

<sup>26</sup> *Id.*, Lecture XX, n. 243.

of faith, hope and charity and the moral virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance.

Frequently, I have heard it boldly proclaimed at A.A. meetings: “This is a program of action. You cannot think your way into sobriety. A.A. is not a head trip!” Meaning, a recovering alcoholic must learn how to act virtuously. A.A., like Aquinas, is well aware that it is not easy to develop the habit of acting virtuously. Recovery requires a willingness to live by the intellectual virtues of faith, hope and charity on a daily basis interacting with God and others by means of the moral virtues. Aquinas expresses similar disdain for philosophizing without action.

The false opinions of certain persons who do not perform works of virtues but, by taking refuge in discussions of virtues think they can become virtuous by philosophizing . . . so those who listen to the warnings of moral philosophers and do not heed them will never have a well-regulated soul.<sup>27</sup>

Recovery depends on the formation of an empowering spiritual and moral character that allows an alcoholic to achieve sobriety one day at a time. Therefore, the alcoholic develops a daily practice of morning and evening prayers, seeking counsel and examination of conscience. It is not easy; yet eventually the newly formed habits of spiritual and virtuous living become a type of second nature, yet never taken for granted. I think the arrival of this second nature of virtuous living is what recovering alcoholics mean by waiting for the miracle to happen.

### **Spiritual and Religious**

A Thomistic spiritual philosophy of recovery is about the absolute necessity of continuously recovering our powers of intellect and will by conscious contact with a loving God. This awareness of God, as A.A. stresses, is for the purpose of healing a fallen nature. Grace is

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<sup>27</sup> Id., Lecture IV, n. 288.

given to us so that we are always able to recover the basic longing of our soul for goodness. Being spiritual requires that we develop the powers of recovery with the proper end and means. A.A. and a Thomistic spirituality of recovery make the end and means clear. We get sober to please God and do His will (the end), and we achieve this end by dedicating our life to being a person of virtuous habits (means).

We get confused about the difference between religion and spirituality because we are not clear on the proper place of religion in our spiritual life. I found that recovering alcoholics who have followed the spirituality of 12 steps, which I have argued is a life style of faith and virtuous habits, come to an understanding of religion as a completion of their spiritual path. Recovering alcoholics, healed from alcoholism, have a sense of profound gratitude to God that leads to a loving sense of justice to worship God for the gift of sobriety and a new life.

From a Thomistic perspective, the healing power of A.A. is a combination of a faith in a loving God who calls the alcoholic to virtue. Aquinas holds that the practice of religion is a virtue.

A virtue is that which both renders the possessor, as also his good works, good. Hence we must say that every good act comes under virtue. And it is clear to render to another his due there is established a certain fitting proportion and order between them. But order comes under the ratio of measure and species, as St. Augustine establishes. Since, then, it belongs to religion to render to someone, namely God, the honor which is due, it is clear that religion is a virtue.<sup>28</sup>

It is my strong intuition that alcoholics, who diligently practice the 12 steps, develop this second nature moral character. As they progress in the spiritual and moral pursuit of being a virtuous person, a

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<sup>28</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *On Prayer and The Contemplative Life: Commentary by the Very Rev. Hugh Pope, O.P., S.T.M.* (London: Pater Noster Row, 1914), Kindle Edition, Location 455.

desire stirs to render to God in a more manifest manner. It is, for this reason, that Aquinas associates religion as part of justice:

Religion is regarded as a part of Justice, and is distinct from the other parts of justice. Since virtue is ordained to what is good, where there exists some special ratio of good there must be some special corresponding virtue. But the particular good towards which religion is ordained is the showing due honor to God. Honor, however, is due by reason of some Excellency. And to God belongs pre-eminent excellence, since special honor is due to Him; just as we note that in human concerns varying honors are due to the varying excellences of persons; one is the honor of a father, another that of a king, and so on. Hence it is manifest that religion is a special virtue.<sup>29</sup>

For Thomas, religion is a moral virtue; it is the act of the will that comes from a grateful heart that has experienced the gift of faith, and it is the highest of the moral virtues: “In Exodus the commandments which concern religion are put first, as though they were of primary importance. But the order of the commandments is proportioned to the order of the virtues; for the commandments of the Law fall upon the acts of the virtues. Hence religion is chief among the moral virtues.”<sup>30</sup> Aquinas describes religion as the highest of the moral virtues because it keeps us balanced, i.e., we know without God we go astray easily, and this is a critical principle for the recovering alcoholic. Again, it is one of the first spiritual principles that I learned in A.A.: “There is a God and you are not Him.”

## Conclusion

A.A. has saved my life, and it brought me back to the God of my understanding. I am a Trinitarian Christian who never really understood my faith until I began to practice the 12 steps. Along the way I began to

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<sup>29</sup> Id., Location 499.

<sup>30</sup> Id., Location 593.

appreciate the beauty and truth of the philosopher and theologian Thomas Aquinas. I have written this essay to face two issues. One, what do recovering alcoholics mean when they say: "I am spiritual, but not religious." I now believe that it means a person is experiencing spiritual healing in their willingness to trust a loving God who has performed a miracle of recovery from alcoholism in their life. As a result of this experience, they are prepared to live a life of virtuous habit. Two, they have discovered a spiritual second nature of moral character. There are many in A.A. who discover that as God comes into their life and they turn to the path of virtue they rediscover religious worship and devotion is essential to the one day at a time journey. In A.A. I experienced a recovery of faith and a Thomistic spiritual philosophy of recovery.

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**A SPIRITUAL PHILOSOPHY OF RECOVERY:  
AQUINAS AND ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS**

**SUMMARY**

The article is an attempt to formulate a Thomistic spiritual philosophy of recovery. The author faces two issues. One, what do recovering alcoholics mean when they say: "I am spiritual, but not religious?" He comes to the conclusion that it means recovering alcoholics are experiencing spiritual healing in their willingness to trust a loving God who has performed a miracle of recovery from alcoholism in their life. As a result of this experience, they are prepared to live a life of virtuous habit. Two, recovering alcoholics have discovered a spiritual second nature of moral character. The author explains why there are many in A.A. who discover that as God comes into their life and they turn to the path of virtue they rediscover religious worship and devotion is essential to the one day at a time journey.

**KEYWORDS:** alcoholism, anonymous alcoholic, A.A., spirituality, religion, morality, virtue, recovery, God, philosophy, Aquinas, nature, prudence, miracle.