



Father Ed Dowling: Bill Wilson's Sponsor

Glenn F. Chesnut

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The story of Father Ed Dowling, S.J., the Jesuit priest who served for twenty years as sponsor and spiritual guide to Bill Wilson, the co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous.

An icy evening in December 1940 saw the first meeting of two extraordinary spiritual leaders. Father Ed said that the graces he received from meeting Bill Wilson were as great as those he had received from his ordination as a priest, and Bill in turn described encountering the Jesuit as being like a second conversion experience, where he could feel the transcendent presence of God filling the entire room with grace. The good priest taught Wilson about St. Ignatius Loyola's Spiritual Exercises, about the eternal battle between good and evil which the Spanish saint described in that book, and explained the Jesuit understanding of the way we can use our deepest emotions to receive guidance from God while serving on that battlefield. The co-founder of the twelve step movement in turn supplied Father Ed with some of the most valuable tools he possessed for carrying out small group therapy on a wide range of different kinds of troubled people.

Together the two men discussed Poulain's Graces of Interior Prayer and Bill's attempts to make spiritual contact with both spooks and saints, and explored the world of LSD experiences and the teachings of the Catholic, Hindu, and Buddhist mystics in Aldous Huxley's Perennial Philosophy.

And we will see how Father Ed, with his deep social conscience, helped Bill W. turn his book on the Twelve Traditions into a Bill of Rights for the twelve step movement, and how he laid out his own spiritual vision of Alcoholics Anonymous at the A.A. International in St. Louis in 1955.



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