

The Clergy person and the Fifth Step

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SUMMARY. Individuals making their Fifth Step will often turn to members of the clergy to listen to their stories. In this article, the Rev. Mark A. Latcovich discusses the dynamics of the Fifth Step in the 12-Step way of life, how individuals can choose a clergy person wisely, the role of the clergy person in the Fifth Step process, and the hoped-for effects of a good Fifth Step. [*Single or multiple copies of this article are available from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-342-9678, 9:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m. (EST).*]

Step 5: "Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs" (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1981 p. 55)

One afternoon, when I was locking up the doors of the church after Sunday liturgy, a well-dressed man approached me in the church vestibule. He introduced himself and seemed rather anxious

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to talk with me. I invited him into my office. Once seated, he asked me if I was familiar with the Fifth Step of the Twelve Step Program in Alcoholics Anonymous (A. A.). "Not exactly," I replied. While I was familiar with the Twelve Steps of A. A., I really was not familiar with the specificity of the individual steps. Despite my unfamiliarity, however, he was ready to share those events in his life that weighed heavy on him. With firm conviction he persisted; "Reverend, could you give me the time that I need to tell my story? Help me make the Fifth Step? I want to confess a few things about my life that I am not too proud of!"

This scenario depicts my introduction to A. A.'s Fifth Step. As a clergyperson, this experience introduced me to another dimension of ministry that demonstrates the workings of nature and grace in a process that has liberated thousands of men and women. The purpose of this chapter is to offer some reflections on the nature and purpose of the Fifth Step within the A. A. program. Special consideration will be given to the pastoral and therapeutic role the clergyperson may play in assisting an individual in recovery through this process. While the Fifth Step does not necessarily require the presence of an ordained minister, it does require an individual who plays the particular role of *soulfriend*. A soulfriend serves as a spiritual teacher, mentor and guide, who elicits and invites a response to openness, support, and direction when individuals genuinely desire to discern and acknowledge their change of heart (Sellner, 1990).

THE DYNAMICS, POSITION AND FUNCTION OF THE FIFTH STEP IN THE A.A. PROCESS

In December of 1938, when Bill Wilson developed A.A.'s Twelve Steps, he developed a process of personal growth and recovery that was influenced in part by many Christian women and men who connected the dynamics of the small sharing groups with some of the principles inherent in Christian spirituality (Blumberg, 1977). Wilson's principles suggested that people could change their lives even when they found themselves at rock bottom. Reflecting on his own experience as an alcoholic, Wilson attributed his recovery process to the dynamic interaction of several components,

namely, group support, personal introspection, and the interpersonal sharing of one's life story with others. Wilson synthesized this process into various steps that could in fact change an individual's direction and life course. His experience with The Oxford Group gave him the social support, affirmation and motivation he needed to overcome his destructive life path. However, the internal process of admitting that the pursuit of alcohol had dominated his life and had affected his relationships with others and with himself, required a change of heart. This internal reorientation, self-forgiveness and self-responsibility seemed to require the use of a special faculty within the person. In theological language this faculty is defined simply as the dynamics of conversion. This introspective process identifies the process of internal reorientation in three interrelated steps: *repentance* (the need to surrender one's sins and failings to God); *confession* (the need to admit one's faults and failings to the community and seek guidance); and *reconciliation* (making restitution for wrongs and accepting the forgiveness of God and others) as the process that leads to a fresh start and new life. The Fourth and Fifth Steps are important aspects of the alcoholic's recovery through the Twelve Step Process. These two Steps enable people to go through a process and experience that will enable them to take an honest look at who they are and then admit the truth of their inventory to self, God, and another human being (Keller, 1966: p. 121). The interconnectedness of Steps Four and Five reflect these dynamics of conversion taking the individual through this three-fold process.

Step Four is described in Alcoholics Anonymous' *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* (1981) as a "vigorous and painstaking effort" (p. 42) to engage in a personal self-inventory. This inventory explores past actions, motives and conduct of the alcoholic. Usually, the A. A. sponsor assists the individual in this particular step by sharing his or her own story of past justifications and excuses for drinking.

For most of us, self-justification was the maker of excuses; excuses, of course, for drinking, and for all kinds of crazy and damaging conduct. . . . We had to drink because times were hard and times were good. We had to drink because at home

we were smothered with love or got none at all. We had to drink because at work we were great successes or dismal failures. . . . 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 were harboring grudges and planned revenge for such defeats, we were really beating ourselves with the club of anger we had intended to use on others. (pp. 46-47)

The self-inventory required in the Fourth Step helps persons identify negative and destructive behaviors and take responsibility for the effects they had on themselves and others. The honesty and accountability of this self-inventory is a process of personal repentance before oneself and God as we understand Him. The Fourth Step prepares the individual for the Fifth Step's confessional dimension: *sharing their life story with another*.

The Fifth Step is the telling of one's life story, a self-confession, and an opportunity for casting out one's mistakes, failures, and anxieties by telling another person. In this way those feelings and past deeds can lose their control over the person (Sellner, 1981). This step completes the inventory of the Fourth Step and allows the individual to connect with a spiritual mentor who can positively influence the person's own life story. The difficult side of this step is that it is "an ego deflator." Consequently, many A. A. members experience an intense fear and reluctance to do this step (A.A. 1981). On the other hand, the positive side is that this step allows alcoholics to understand God's grace and the spiritual dynamics in their lives on an emotional and spiritual level. The weight of the past can be lifted as the naming of past events releases emotional and psychological pain. When persons must deal with painful moments of self-knowledge and great remorse over past failures, they often feel an overpowering desire for clear discernment of what God may be calling them to do with their lives (Sellner, 1990). This is where the role of the clergy person provides an essential service in helping individuals feel the grace of reconciliation and experience insight into new and fresh directives for their lives.

MAKING A REFERRAL- CHOOSING A CLERGYPERSON

Most individuals who choose to make the Fifth Step with a clergy person will usually check out on their own which clergy person they will ask to facilitate this step. There are, however, times when they will ask a clinician or counselor for a clergy referral. First of all, clinicians need to consider the individual's religious preference. They may want to call around a general area to determine which clergy have knowledge of A. A.'s Fifth Step or a reputation for assisting in Fifth Step work. There often are professional and clergy A. A. groups that may provide clergy who can relate first-hand experience with this process, although clergy need not be members of A. A. in order to facilitate the Fifth Step process. Qualities that clergy should have are an openness to the process and comfort with persons recovering from substance abuse. If they were ordained from an accredited seminary or institution, they would have received some clinical and pastoral training in such matters. Most clergy are able to deal with people from every background and way of life. However, like any other professional group, some clergy persons may not be comfortable or knowledgeable about A. A. Therefore, before a referral is suggested or made, it might be important to consider the disposition and needs of the person being referred. Sex, age, background, sexual orientation, and religious tradition are important variables that need to be weighed in making a Fifth Step referral. For example, a person who drank because of an abusive relationship with a father or husband, may benefit more from a woman minister than a man. Likewise, an older individual may not feel comfortable making the Fifth Step with a minister who may be the same age as his/her son or daughter. Gay or lesbian persons may find homophobic clergypersons can provide neither the acceptance nor the environment necessary for a successful Fifth Step. A morally rigid pastor without any experience with A. A. may do more harm than good if he or she reacts with fire and brimstone assertions and sermons on the evils of drinking and drunkenness. Most individuals ready to make the Fifth Step need a clergy person who can mediate for them a helpful image of God and society that are ready to welcome their change of heart and growth in sobriety.

THE ROLE OF THE CLERGYPERSON IN THE FIFTH STEP

The role of the clergyperson in the Fifth Step process is to facilitate the individual's self-reporting. This term is preferable to self-confession because of the negative connotations the term confession might have for the individual such as admitting to a crime or sin. A self-report is a term that is neutral in meaning: it implies a sharing of experiences in a value-free context. The sense of remorse, guilt and even feelings of sin are often a part of their story. Telling one's story to God, oneself and another person is done in the context of a self-report. Often individuals will see the clergyperson as a representative of God and view their verbalization of their self-report to the minister as a way of talking to God (or their Higher Power) and to another person at the same time. Obviously, the articulation of their "story" is primarily a self-report that they need to hear above all else. It is a way of taking control again of their life by admitting it aloud, sharing it with another, as a means of self-disclosure. This self-disclosure is a subjective account and a report of those issues and insights gained from their personal inventory (Step Four). Therefore, the self-report is a process that initiates a dynamic for reconciliation and healing. Persons making a self-report are often nervous and afraid because they are exposing their state of mind which may include low self-esteem, feelings of estrangement, and feelings that the listener will view them as the worst person in the world.

Creating a Safe Environment for the Self-Report

The clergyperson's role during the self-report is to give the individual assurance by his or her non-verbal and verbal language. Nods indicating that the listener hears what people are sharing are appropriate and needed responses. They need to feel that the listener believes in them. People making the Fifth Step may be sharing a difficult or embarrassing situation about which they are ashamed. The clergyperson does well to remind them that "all of us are human" and cannot be perfect.

The Nature of Self-Reporting- Sharing a Story

Self-reporting has been defined as a process of self-censoring which is selective, discriminating, judgmental, and subjected to internal and external influences (Rambo and Reh, 1992). This self-reporting process reflects subjects' own experiences and their reaction to these experiences, with all of their self-judgments, fears, and mistakes. The clergy person must allow the person to report these events from the frame of the person's own state of mind. Persons must be encouraged to tell their stories without any comments or judgments from the listener. Appropriate responses by the clergy person will encourage self-reporters to continue in a positive manner and will allow them the opportunity to talk freely and frankly without fear of judgment. The process of self-reporting is quite emotional and may require moments of silence on the part of the person making the Fifth Step. The clergy person must allow the individual to use that silence. He or she should not encourage the client to hurry through this process. If the minister reflects his or her "comfortableness" with silent periods, then the Fifth Steppers will be more apt to use those times productively to reflect, refocus or react emotionally to the part of the story they are trying to articulate. Self-reporting allows people to tell their story within a framework that encourages them to name in a reflective way the internal and external influences of their lives that have led them to hit rock bottom and have brought them back to life. The listener's role needs to encourage the individual with positive strokes. During painful moments or following a period of silence, the listener may want to summarize the person's thoughts prior to that silence. A verbal response accentuating the person's positive points and strengths will be helpful. Oftentimes people will focus on the negative aspects of their life stories, highlighting their weaknesses. The clergy person needs to remind them about the positive choices they have made while remaining sober, especially the choice they are making at this moment to do this particular step.

Personal Guilt and Self-Judgment

At times when individuals make their self-reports, they may color their narratives with self-judgments, personal condemna-

tions, or feelings of guilt. Usually people are critical of their past behavior. Derogatory language and self-effacing remarks indicate that they are highly judgmental of their past actions. The clergy-person may need to intervene during these comments and remind people that they are being too hard on themselves. The helper must remind people that their behavior and feelings about “who they are” may be based on their previous use of alcohol or drugs or on past negative experiences, but that no matter what they may have done in the past, the present can be used for changes and new growth. The presence of God and their honesty with themselves in relating their personal stories grants a provisional grace and new opportunity for their growth. The listener may need to interrupt and remind people that they are being “too critical of themselves.” Usually, people appreciate the observation and continue with a lighter spirit. If storytellers can see the humor of their situation in retrospect, they may realize that they are “moving along” through the process.

The individual taking the Fifth Step may need to be reminded that these Twelve Steps are meant to be a positive process. The process reflected in the Fifth Step is merely an honest sharing of a life’s story. While a person may not currently like himself or herself while accounting the story, the person needs to recognize that this image of self can and will change as the journey through the Twelve Steps continues. Being gentle with one’s self during the Fifth Step process is an important and positive quality the clergyperson will want to continually remind people of, especially when they seem to feel guilty and ashamed of past actions. When the listener senses that someone may be feeling embarrassed or ashamed of a particular part of the story, a simple touch assuring the person to move forward in spite of negative feelings, is an appropriate gesture. A touch tells the person that the listener hears what is being said and can identify with the pain the person is experiencing in this process. A touch comforts and tells the person, “It’s O.K. to feel that way.”

Negative Self-Images

Individuals may begin to condemn themselves and divert from their story. This is usually the case when a person’s self-image is poor or even shattered. People may lack self-worth and self-confi-

dence. Thus, they may be bogged down in the negative feelings that they experience during their self-report. The clergyperson may need to verbally reassure them that their participation in this process, however difficult it may be, suggests that they believe they can change. They need to be reminded that their goodness and worth can be revitalized in time. Their progression through the steps and recovery will help them discover that their self-esteem and “at easeness” with who they are will come only as they move through the Twelve Step process (Royce, 1987). The process is taking each step, one day at a time.

While all of us must be accountable for our behavior, one’s failings and personal mistakes do not make one less of a person. People’s personal dignity remains intact even though they subjectively doubt their dignity. The clergyperson must help people to make their self-report within a positive perspective. It is the minister’s role to continually remind people that they are good and capable of change, growth and self-forgiveness. The clergyperson’s genuine belief in them just as they are will be their greatest source of help during this process. People need to feel that the clergyperson understands just how bad their situation may have been for them. Negative feelings need to be shared and accepted before positive ones can fill their place (Royce, 1985).

New Images of God

Since the Fifth Step includes an “admittance to God,” it may be important for the clergyperson to ask about the self-reporter’s image of God. A condemning, punishing, harsh, uncompromising, rigid and strict God who “is making a list and checking it twice” will make the Fifth Step all the more difficult for the person. When an individual is angry at God or senses God as “unapproachable or unforgiving,” the process of reconciliation will be somewhat stifled. The clergyperson may need to re-present who God is. The use of the Hebrew or Christian Scriptures may provide a reference of God’s mercy, compassion, forgiveness and power to save. The clergyperson’s own belief and relationship with God will genuinely help the individual feel at home in God’s presence. Re-imagining God for the person making the Fifth Step will enable the individual to also be less judgmental and condemning of him/her-

self. One practical way of accomplishing this shift in images of God is to offer to pray with the person. The clergyperson may pray with the person or ask the individual to pray in his or her own words, using everyday language. It may be appropriate for the minister to join in the person's prayer, thereby reminding the person of God's mercy and forgiveness.

Hoped-for Effects of a Good Fifth Step

At the completion of people's self-reports, they may be exhausted physically. They may be drained emotionally. A comment often made by many who have completed the Fifth Step is, "I feel like a great weight has been lifted from me." People feel cleansed. The telling of their story before God, self and others renews their hope in themselves that their life of sobriety can be a true way of life. The Fifth Step often allows them to chalk up a positive mark in their growth chart. People's honesty, dissatisfaction with their previous behavior, and ability to report both the negative and positive elements of their life with its influences (internal and external), failures and successes provide the dynamic that enables the Fifth Step to complete its specific task—reconciliation with self and others, renewed hope, and dedication to personal change and growth. The minister must now allow people to dedicate themselves to this new process of personal growth. Issues that may have been raised in the Fifth Step process may now need to be considered in some detail. The clergyperson may invite the person to rejoin his or her church in order to become a part of a faith community. In cases where the denomination of the person making the Fifth Step is Roman Catholic, Anglican, or Orthodox, sacramental absolution may be the appropriate ritual the clergyperson uses to conclude the session. However, it must be noted that the Fifth Step should not be seen as a sacramental confession. The Fifth Step stands on its own merits and must be seen as a subjective story that belongs to the individual. If the person asks to receive sacramental absolution and penance, the clergyperson needs to distinguish between the brief celebration of the rite with scripture, the laying on of hands, and the words of forgiveness and the conclusion of the Fifth Step. The person's need for forgiveness and healing is an ongoing process that many churches celebrate frequently within a person's life of faith. The Fifth Step is one important step that enables the individual to

move through a process of recovery that continues to be a source of support for continued sobriety and growth.

CONCLUSION

I remember when the well-dressed man left my office some two hours later. He had literally changed before my eyes. His stress lines, and rigid muscular configurations had literally changed. His tears had cleaned him in a way no other medicine can. As he left my office, I remember embracing him and congratulating him on his new beginning. I guess, in retrospect, those were appropriate words. His smile and firm grip indicated to me that they were accepted. He thanked me with his eyes filled with a new glimmer of hope. The quickness and spiritedness in his walk back to his car indicated to me that the person who drove into the parking lot was not the same person who was now leaving to go home.

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