

## *A Commentary on Steps 1, 2, 3 of AA for Catholics*



In memory of the PIONEERS of the twelve-step movement,  
we extend our most profound gratitude and appreciation.  
We are truly blessed.

*Eternal rest grant unto them, O Lord,  
and let perpetual light shine upon them.  
May they rest in peace. Amen.*



He will show you how to create the fellowship you crave.<sup>1</sup>  
*The Big Book*

## Introduction

In the Chapter, *How it Works* from *The Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous*, there is a passage frequently read at twelve-step meetings:

Remember that we deal with alcohol—cunning, baffling, powerful!  
Without help it is too much for us. But there is One who has all power—  
That One is God. May you find Him now! <sup>2</sup>

This message radiates both truth and urgency. Jesus Christ is our God and is eager to lift the burden of alcoholism from our lives. Being part of the Catholic Church is a tremendous blessing, enriched by tradition, sacramental life, and a profound sense of history. Jesus Christ is the head of the body, the Church.<sup>3</sup> Each one of us is a member of the body of Christ. Jesus wants us to be healthy and well, for our sake and the sake of the Church.

If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.<sup>4</sup> Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it (1 Corinthians 12:26-27).<sup>5</sup>

In John 5:6, there is a miracle of tremendous compassion at the pool of Bethesda where Jesus goes to an invalid man and heals him.

Jesus saw the man lying there. He realized that he had been there a long time, and said to him, “Would you like me to make you well?”<sup>6</sup>

Many of us who struggle with alcoholism have endured years of suffering. Like the invalid man, we may feel destined to lead unhappy and troubled lives. However, Jesus offers help, assuring us of healing and restoration. Later in John 5:14, Jesus encounters the same man at the temple. Jesus sees that he is well but cautions him about further sin.

Afterward Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, “See, you are well! Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you.”<sup>7</sup>

Jesus calls us to remain vigilant, mindful of our thoughts and actions, and conscious of their consequences. Mortal sin destroys charity in the heart and breaks our covenant with God, separating us from His sanctifying grace. It is essential to recognize our need for repentance if we fall into sin. The New Covenant, sealed by Christ's blood, offers forgiveness through repentance and the Sacrament of Reconciliation, restoring our relationship with God.

Through the Church, the Sacraments, and His grace, we find hope and strength to persevere, overcome sin, and continue our journey toward recovery.

Since the founding of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) in 1935, Catholics have fully embraced the AA program by participating in the fellowship and in carrying the AA message. Catholics have been pivotal in shaping the fellowship's early development and expansion. Sister Ignatia worked hand in hand with Dr Bob, establishing themselves as pioneers in the hospital treatment of alcoholism. Their contributions were vital to AA's success and evolution.<sup>8</sup> Fr. Ed Dowling played a crucial role as Bill Wilson's spiritual advisor and friend for 20 years, until Father's death in 1961.<sup>9</sup>

Today's technology enables us, as Catholics, to connect online and share the wisdom of the twelve-step program. Together, we can discuss the pain of addiction that arises from self-will running rampant and celebrate the victory of sobriety, which we receive through the grace of our Lord, Jesus Christ. In gratitude, we not only support each other in recovery but also help nurture our faith.

The commentary's purpose is to support Catholics struggling with alcoholism. It serves as a preliminary guide for the Catholic fellowship on its spiritual journey toward recovery. The information discussed and presented in our briefings and case studies is drawn from *Scripture*, *The Catechism*, and *The Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous*. While *Hey Catholics Online* does not speak for Alcoholics Anonymous, we believe that steps one, two, and three are foundational to the AA program and provide the necessary footing for all subsequent steps. As recovering Catholics, we strive to continue the legacy of Bill W and the pioneers of Alcoholics Anonymous by passing on the message of recovery. We hold in our prayers and in our hearts those who have supported AA over the years, particularly Sister Ignatia and Father Ed. Additionally, Bill W reminds us in *A Vision for You* from *The Big Book* that we are human, and our ultimate dependence will always be on God.

We realize we know only a little. God will constantly disclose more to you and to us.<sup>10</sup>

We continue to seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit to lead us, as we always have. We now begin, *A Commentary on Steps 1, 2, 3 of AA for Catholics*.



## Step 1

*We admitted that we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.*

### Briefing: Step One

1. We learned that we had to fully concede to our innermost selves that we were alcoholics. This is the first step in recovery. We alcoholics are men and women who have lost the ability to control our drinking.<sup>11</sup>
2. All of us felt at times that we were regaining control, but such intervals—usually brief—were inevitably followed by still less control, which led in time to pitiful and incomprehensible demoralization.<sup>12</sup>
3. The idea that somehow, someday he will control and enjoy his drinking is the great obsession of every abnormal drinker. The persistence of this *illusion* is astonishing. Many pursue it into the gates of insanity and death.<sup>13</sup>
4. We know that no real alcoholic ever recovered control.<sup>14</sup>
5. (Alcoholism is a) progressive illness. Over any considerable period we get worse, never better.<sup>15</sup>

## Commentary: Step One

*We admitted that we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.*

Step one is a personal milestone and the beginning of recovery from alcoholism. Once we become honest with ourselves, we can learn what it means to take step one.

1. We learned that we had to fully concede to our innermost selves that we were alcoholics. This is the first step in recovery. We alcoholics are men and women who have lost the ability to control our drinking.

We may ask ourselves, “How could someone lose their ability to drink,” or say, “Why me?” We need to take a step back and look at the world we live in. Alcohol's influence on our culture and social interactions is deeply ingrained. It has been part of society for millennia. The other aspect of alcohol is that it's a drug. Alcohol is a depressant that slows down the central nervous system, which can lead to feelings of relaxation, confidence, and lowered inhibitions. *The Catechism* and Church tradition offer specific insights into why we are prone to sin and addiction, primarily through the concepts of Original Sin and concupiscence.

*As a result of original sin, human nature is weakened in its powers; subject to ignorance, suffering, and the domination of death; and inclined to sin. (This inclination is called “concupiscence.”)<sup>16</sup>*

Considering our world, our culture, and our fallen state, it's not surprising some of us became alcoholics. The start of recovery begins when we recognize that something about our drinking is problematic. If we continue to question our actions and behavior, we may finally come to admit that we have lost the ability to drink. We noticed that once we started drinking, we wanted more. We realized our lives were difficult to manage due to our drinking, and we needed to stop. This is step one.

Those who understand alcoholism know how cunning, baffling, and powerful it is. Someone could be clean and sober for months, thinking they had their drinking problem under control, only to have a relapse followed by feelings of hopelessness. St Paul's dilemma in Romans 7:15 is very much our dilemma.

*What I do, I do not understand. For I do not do what I want, but I do what I hate.<sup>17</sup>*

2. All of us felt at times that we were regaining control, but such intervals—usually brief—were inevitably followed by still less control, which led in time to pitiful and incomprehensible demoralization.

We were living a double life, being dishonest with ourselves and everyone around us, including God. We were on a self-destructive path, and eventually, we hit rock bottom. Shame, guilt, remorse, loneliness, anger, and fear were just a few of the emotions that surfaced. We were sick—physically, emotionally, and spiritually. We wanted to stop our drinking, but our attempts never lasted.

As time goes on, many of us find ourselves justifying our actions, holding onto our addiction, and downplaying its impact. We struggle to admit that our lives have become unmanageable. This denial blinds us to the mental, emotional, and spiritual issues that emerge as addiction progresses. *The Big Book* acknowledges individuals who refuse to accept their defeat, a situation that can be both confusing and disheartening.

3. The idea that somehow, someday he will control and enjoy his drinking is the great obsession of every abnormal drinker. The persistence of this *illusion* is astonishing. Many pursue it into the gates of insanity and death.

Many of us have struggled with alcoholism for years, developing self-deceptive beliefs such as thinking we could control our drinking. To avoid criticism and emotional distress, we became defensive and withdrawn, relying on strong defense mechanisms to shield ourselves from shame and despair. Unfortunately, we maintained these illusions well into recovery.

Selfishness—self-centeredness! That, we think, is the root of our troubles. Driven by a hundred forms of fear, self-delusion, self-seeking, and self-pity, we step on the toes of our fellows and they retaliate. Sometimes they hurt us, seemingly without provocation, but we invariably find that at some time in the past we have made decisions based on self which later placed us in a position to be hurt. So our troubles, we think, are basically of our own making. They arise out of ourselves, and the alcoholic is an extreme example of self-will run riot, though he usually doesn't think so.<sup>18</sup>

If we can acknowledge our wrongs and accept the truth about our addiction, we must express gratitude to the Holy Spirit for our change of heart. This realization is a significant hurdle for any alcoholic to overcome; it marks both a breakthrough and a triumph.

An alcoholic in recovery must adopt and forever live the adage, one day at a time. Regardless of the years of sobriety and regardless of how successful someone becomes; the alcoholic will never be able to drink again. As we read in *The Big Book*:

4. We know that no real alcoholic ever recovered control.

The good news is that acceptance of our alcoholism is the key to a happy and joyous freedom we could otherwise never have known:

Nothing, absolutely nothing happens in God's world by mistake. Until I could accept my alcoholism, I could not stay sober; unless I accept life completely on life's terms, I cannot be happy. I need to concentrate not so much on what needs to be changed in the world as on what needs to be changed in me and in my attitudes.<sup>19</sup>

Our alcoholism doesn't stand still. It progressively worsens.

5. (Alcoholism is a) progressive illness. Over any considerable period we get worse, never better.

Take some time to reflect on bullet five, knowing our addiction gets worse over time. Imagine what our future looks like if we continue to drink.

*The Big Book* shares stories of individuals who lost their homes, families, jobs, and sanity to alcoholism. St Paul teaches that our struggle with sin is ongoing. Evil always remains near and will attempt to undermine our efforts toward sobriety and a better life. In Romans 7:21-23, St Paul describes our struggle this way:

*So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.<sup>20</sup>*

St Paul addresses this predicament in the next two verses, Romans 7:24-25.

*Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin.<sup>21</sup>*

*The Big Book* presents “three pertinent ideas” essential to beginning the recovery journey from addiction. These ideas highlight the importance of a spiritual solution to physical and mental challenges. *The Big Book* then states, “when the spiritual malady is overcome, we straighten out mentally and physically.”<sup>22</sup> The three pertinent ideas for recovery are:

- (a) That we were alcoholic and could not manage our own lives.
- (b) That probably no human power could have relieved our alcoholism.
- (c) That God could and would if He were sought.<sup>23</sup>

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Before examining Bill W's case study, it is important to consider his background and the specific challenges he has encountered.

Bill and his wife, Lois, enjoyed prosperity in the 1920s, but the Great Depression left Bill struggling to find work. The story takes place in 1932, several years before Bill achieved sobriety, during a period marked by disappointment and missed opportunities. He recently lost an important job due to his drinking, and both he and Lois are mourning the loss of Lois's mother. They also experience the loss of their home due to a mortgage sale. Despite his resolve to stop drinking, Bill cannot understand why he continues to drink. The story begins with Bill waking up after a drinking episode.

## Case Study: An Excerpt of Bill W's Story

I woke up. This had to be stopped. I saw I could not take so much as one drink. I was through forever. Before then, I had written lots of sweet promises, but my wife happily observed that this time I meant business. And so I did.

Shortly afterward I came home drunk. There had been no fight. Where had been my high resolve? I simply didn't know. It hadn't even come to mind. Someone had pushed a drink my way, and I had taken it. Was I crazy? I began to wonder, for such an appalling lack of perspective seemed near being just that.

Renewing my resolve, I tried again. Some time passed and confidence began to be replaced by cocksureness. I could laugh at the gin mills. Now I had what it takes! One day I walked into a café to telephone. In no time I was beating on the bar asking myself how it happened. As the whiskey rose to my head I told myself I would manage better next time, but I might as well get good and drunk then. And I did.

The remorse, horror and hopelessness of the next morning are unforgettable. The courage to do battle was not there. My brain raced uncontrollably and there was a terrible sense of impending calamity. [*Bill continues to describe his misery and ends with...*] should I kill myself?<sup>24</sup>

## Commentary: An Excerpt of Bill W's Story

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Bill demonstrates an increased awareness of his struggle with alcohol. He recognizes that he cannot consume even a single drink. He pledges abstinence and assures both himself and Lois of his resolve. However, this commitment ultimately results in further disappointment.

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Bill is correct in knowing that, as an alcoholic, he cannot take so much as one drink. AA literature emphasizes that self-knowledge alone will not keep an alcoholic sober. In the chapter "*More About Alcoholism*" from *The Big Book*, it firmly states:

But the actual or potential alcoholic, with hardly an exception, will be absolutely unable to stop drinking on the basis of self-knowledge.<sup>25</sup>

Bill's inability to stay away from alcohol and to stop drinking remains a mystery to him. He questions his sanity—was I crazy? When he fails on the next attempt, he deludes himself, thinking, "I would manage better the next time." Yet, reality hits him the next day.

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Bill's emotional pain is evident as he experiences deep remorse and anxiety about his future. Examining Bill W's story reveals that this challenging period represents both his lowest point and a pivotal turning point. Reaching rock bottom often initiates the recovery process, as the pain can motivate individuals to reassess their lives and pursue positive change.

## Review: Step One

1. Bill W is ready to take step one. He knows alcohol is destroying his life, yet there are times he can't resist it. He made countless attempts to stop drinking, but the drug is too cunning, baffling, and powerful. He said from the beginning, "This had to be stopped."
2. Bill accepts defeat and wants to end the cycle of addiction. He knows he is powerless over alcohol and that his life is unmanageable. Any newcomer coming into the program must do the same and accept their alcoholism.
3. Anyone struggling with alcohol and is willing to listen, ask questions, or seek help with their drinking needs to be commended and respected for their courage.
4. Newcomers to AA are limited in understanding addiction and have few recovery tools. They may lack confidence in their ability to stay sober—and rightfully so. They lost their ability to control their drinking.
5. In 1932, if Bill W were approached by a member of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and introduced to the twelve-step program, he would likely have accepted the invitation to join. He would probably have recognized himself as an alcoholic and been open to seeking further help by going to step two.
6. We know we have no other option but to stop. Once we accept our alcoholism, we become honest regarding triggers that put our sobriety in jeopardy. We do everything in our own power to stop. To restate the first bullet: If the newcomer knows, in their most innermost self (their heart and mind), that they are an alcoholic, then they have taken the first step.
7. Dom Lorenzo Scupoli, author of *The Spiritual Combat*, holds that a true **spiritual warrior** is not someone who never experiences failure but rather someone who gets back up with even greater trust in God. This mindset is essential for us Catholics to embrace as we embark on our recovery journey. To move forward in recovery, we go to step two.



## Step 2

*Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.*

### Briefing: Step Two

Before we delve into AA literature, let's take a moment to consider what the second step is stating. Members of AA often refer to "a Higher Power" or "a God of my understanding" to describe "a Power greater than ourselves." However, when we hear these terms at meetings, they often lack depth and clarity. Discussions about God can feel uninspiring and restrictive, especially given God's crucial role in our recovery.

The term "sanity" in the latter part of step two is often misunderstood or misrepresented. For those of us in recovery, it is essential to have a clear and consistent understanding of what "sane" and "insane" mean. Without this clarity, and without a meaningful relationship with God, we may miss the true purpose of step two.

- "Sane" refers to a mental state in which a person is rational, capable of reasoning, and generally aligned with reality.
- In contrast, "insane" describes a mental state where someone holds beliefs or perceptions that are irrational and inconsistent with reality. Their thoughts, feelings, or actions may lack logic or reason.
- AA literature provides insights and examples of both sane and insane thinking and behavior. We can deepen our understanding of these concepts by learning from those in recovery and witnessing their experience, strength, and hope.
- A significant benefit of being part of the Catholic community is that it allows us to discuss God and our Catholic faith openly and with ease.

## Commentary: Step Two

In our addiction, we were blinded to the gifts of the Holy Spirit: wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord. By embracing these gifts and seeking guidance, we can gain strength and power as we strive for freedom from the bondage of alcoholism. The Holy Spirit will assist us in discerning God's will and help cultivate a purity of heart. Before we continue with the commentary, let's pause for a moment to say a prayer from Psalm 143:10.

*Teach me to do your will, for you are my God. May your kind spirit guide me on ground that is level.*<sup>26</sup>

The three knowledge items listed below are excerpts from *The Big Book*. They provide insight into the nature of alcoholism and will guide us through step two.

### Knowledge item one: The Problem

We know that while the alcoholic keeps away from drink as he may do for months or years, he reacts much like other men. We are equally positive that once he takes any alcohol whatever into his system, something happens, both in the bodily and mental sense, which makes it virtually impossible for him to stop. The experience of any alcoholic will abundantly confirm that. These observations would be academic and pointless if our friend never took the first drink thereby setting the terrible cycle in motion. Therefore, the main problem of the alcoholic centers in his mind, rather than in his body.<sup>27</sup>

- Knowledge item one connects the first drink to our thinking and behavior:
  - ♦ When someone with alcoholism stops drinking, they usually stop having alcohol-related problems. Most people think and behave naturally when they are sober.
- To describe it another way:
  - ♦ The issue arises when the alcoholic takes the first drink, as this initiates the cycle of addiction, and the phenomenon of craving develops.<sup>28</sup>
- The problem:
  - ♦ We come to understand that the key problem for an alcoholic is alcohol. The solution seems straightforward: avoid alcohol and don't take the first drink.
- The bigger problem:
  - ♦ We acknowledge that alcohol is at the core of our addiction, and despite our commitment to sobriety, relapse is common. At their first meeting, Bill W observed that Dr Bob's struggle with alcoholism appeared persistent and without hope for recovery.

*He had a desperate desire to stop, but saw no way out, for he had earnestly tried many avenues of escape. Painfully aware of being somehow abnormal, the man did not fully realize what it meant to be alcoholic.*<sup>29</sup>

## *Knowledge item two: Insidious Insanity / Subtle Insanity*

The following narrative recounts a momentous event in the history of Alcoholics Anonymous. In 1935, Bill W was on a business trip to Akron, Ohio, and was staying at the Mayflower Hotel. He had learned that sharing his struggles helped others and kept him from taking the first drink. As he waited in the hotel lobby, he saw a church directory and thought that someone from a local church could help him find another alcoholic to talk to. It had been six months since his last drinking spree.

.... Still physically weak and sober for only a few months, he saw that his predicament was dangerous. He wanted so much to talk with someone, but whom? One dismal afternoon he paced a hotel lobby wondering how his bill was to be paid. At one end of the room stood a glass covered directory of local churches. Down the lobby a door opened into an attractive bar. He could see the gay crowd inside. In there he would find companionship and release. Unless he took some drinks, he might not have the courage to scrape an acquaintance, and would have a lonely weekend. Of course, he couldn't drink, but why not sit hopefully at a table, a bottle of ginger ale before him? Then after all, had he not been sober six months now? Perhaps he could handle, say, three drinks—no more! Fear gripped him. He was on thin ice. Again it was the old, insidious insanity—that first drink. With a shiver, he turned away and walked down the lobby to the church directory. Music and gay chatter still floated to him from the bar. But what about his responsibilities—his family and the men who would die because they would not know how to get well, ah—yes, those other alcoholics? There must be many such in this town. He would phone a clergyman. His sanity returned, and he thanked God.<sup>30</sup>

### *Commentary: Insidious Insanity*

**Bill W's interior landscape:** Bill recognized from the outset that he was in a risky situation—he was on thin ice. He knows he must stay away from alcohol. He feels physically weak because of previous bouts of drinking and is under significant stress. He is facing financial difficulties and is unsure whether he has the funds to pay for the hotel. Bill thinks he could make a friend at the bar and feel less lonely. He longs for the chance to talk to another alcoholic.

Please reread the preceding passage from Bill W's story and focus on how he weighs his decision between **entering the bar** and **consulting the church directory**.

We see Bill waffling or going back and forth, trying to decide on what to do:

1. His desire to “examine the church directory and make a phone call” is being responsible and rational.
2. “Going into the bar” would be irresponsible and risky. If Bill went into the bar, he would not be thinking of the potential consequences. For an alcoholic, on thin ice, this choice is irrational.

Bill reached a turning point position that demands a decisive choice. *We stood at the turning point.*<sup>31</sup>

*Waffling between rational and irrational thinking, and standing at the turning point, is characteristic of step two.*

If the waffling continues, it may give rise to further temptation to drink. Bill recognizes and acknowledges his mind shifting: insidious insanity—that first drink. *Insidious means: proceeding in a gradual, subtle way, but with harmful effects.*

The chapter titled *The Doctor's Opinion* in *The Big Book* provides insight into the experiences of Bill and other individuals with alcoholism as they attempt to maintain sobriety.

They are restless, irritable and discontented, unless they can again experience the sense of ease and comfort which comes at once by taking a few drinks...<sup>32</sup>

Sometimes the desire to drink can be strong enough that a person experiences little to no waffling. If the urge to drink overtakes one's thoughts, it could lead to the phenomenon of craving, making it virtually impossible to stop drinking once it starts.

*When tempted, a shift in one's mind toward wanting the first drink is a move toward insane thinking and is characteristic of step two.*

**Bill W stood at the turning point:** With a shiver, he turned away and walked down the lobby to the church directory. (Bill) would phone a clergyman. His sanity returned, and he thanked God. Bill's decision to return to the church directory saved him from insane thinking and the craving phenomenon. His decision would also become historic. The next day, Bill W met Dr Bob for the first time.

In these circumstances, we know the alcoholic is vulnerable and is experiencing temptation, while waffling between being rational and irrational. The temptations for the first drink creep in—insidious insanity. All this happens before taking the first drink and can happen very quickly. This situation is difficult, but the battle doesn't end here—it gets worse! There is another issue the alcoholic needs to address.

### *Knowledge item three: Memory Lapse*

*The fact is that most alcoholics, for reasons yet obscure, have lost the power of choice in drink. Our so-called will power becomes practically non-existent. We are unable at certain times to bring into our consciousness with sufficient force the memory of the suffering and humiliation of even a week or a month ago. We are without defense against the first drink.*

The almost certain consequences that follow taking even a glass of beer do not crowd into the mind to deter us. If these thoughts occur, they are hazy and readily supplanted with the old threadbare idea that this time we shall handle ourselves like other people. There is a complete failure of the kind of defense that keeps one from putting his hand on a hot stove.

The alcoholic may say to himself in the most casual way, "It won't burn me this time, so here's how!" Or perhaps he doesn't think at all. How often have some of us begun to drink in this nonchalant way, and after the third or fourth, pounded on the bar and said to ourselves, "For God's sake, how did I ever get started again?" Only to have that thought supplanted by "Well, I'll stop with the sixth drink." Or "What's the use anyhow?"<sup>33</sup>

## Commentary: Memory Lapse

The craving for the first drink carries a built-in euphoria that overrides rational thinking. We experience a memory lapse that prevents us from recalling any previous binges or sprees. If our thinking shifts from sane, rational thinking to insane, irrational thinking, various memory and behavioral traits become apparent.

- Our desire for the first drink increases—all of this can happen in an instant.
- Our willpower becomes practically non-existent, leaving us vulnerable to temptations. In addition to drinking, we may become susceptible to other vices such as overeating, gambling, or excessive social media use.
- Our self-knowledge and knowing the truth about our addiction evaporate. We don't remember the suffering, humiliation, shame, the hangover, and the cries from our loved ones. We don't recall the phenomenon of craving or the devastating consequences of our alcoholism. If rational thoughts do occur, they are hazy, weak, and easily dismissed.

*Our inability to remember the pain and consequences of any previous relapse, along with having the desire for the first drink, is characteristic of step two.*

*Our willpower and self-knowledge dissipate during a memory lapse, which is characteristic of step two.*

Having a memory lapse when battling for sobriety is a significant disadvantage and a huge problem for recovering alcoholics. Our courage and desire for sobriety fade away. Our past victories over alcohol seem meaningless. It would help tremendously if we could remember the misery of our past relapses along with the remorse, suffering, and shame.

Alcohol use and related memory lapses will impair our conscience, leading to spiritual decline and moral blindness. Consequently, we may struggle to recognize wrongdoing, its consequences, and the truth. If we lose our sanity, we become like lost sheep—alone and susceptible to the wolves.

## Case Study: Fred's Story

Fred is an accountant who previously accepted his alcoholism and was helped by Bill W. He got sober but left AA (the early program at the time) due to his work and traveling. He had a relapse and came back to AA. His story is recorded in *The Big Book*.

[*Bill W wanted Fred to tell us his story*] "I was much impressed with what you fellows said about alcoholism, but I frankly did not believe it would be possible for me to drink again. I somewhat appreciated your ideas about *the subtle insanity which precedes the first drink*, but I was confident it could not happen to me after what I had learned. I reasoned I was not so far advanced as most of you fellows, that I had been usually successful in licking my other personal problems, that I would therefore be successful where you men failed. I felt I had every right to be self-confident, that it would be only a matter of exercising my will-power and keeping on guard." In this frame of mind, I went about my business and for a time all was well. I had no trouble refusing drinks,

and began to wonder if I had not been making too hard work of a simple matter.

One day I went to Washington to present some accounting evidence to a government bureau. I had been out of town before during this particular dry spell, so there was nothing new about that. Physically, I felt fine. Neither did I have any pressing problems or worries. My business came off well, I was pleased and knew my partners would be too. It was the end of a perfect day, not a cloud on the horizon. "I went to my hotel and leisurely dressed for dinner. *As I crossed the threshold of the dining room, the thought came to mind it would be nice to have couple of cocktails with dinner. That was all. Nothing more. I ordered a cocktail and my meal.* Then I ordered another cocktail. After dinner I decided to take a walk. When I returned to the hotel it struck me a highball would be fine before going to bed, so I stepped into the bar and had one. I remember having several more that night and plenty next morning. I have a shadowy recollection of being in an airplane bound for New York, of finding a friendly taxicab driver at the landing field instead of my wife. The driver escorted me about for several days. I know little of where I went, or what I said and did. Then came the hospital with unbearable mental and physical suffering. "As soon as I regained my ability to think, I went carefully over that evening in Washington. *Not only had I been off guard, I had made no fight whatever against that first drink. This time I had not thought of the consequences at all.* I had commenced to drink as carelessly as though the cocktails were ginger ale. I now remembered what my alcoholic friends had told me, how they prophesied that if I had an alcoholic mind, the time and place would come—I would drink again. They had said that though I did raise a defense, it would one day give way before some trivial reason for having a drink. Well, just that did happen and more, for what I had learned of alcoholism did not occur to me at all. I knew from that moment that I had an alcoholic mind. I saw that will-power and self-knowledge would not help in those strange mental blank spots. I had never been able to understand people who said that a problem had them hopelessly defeated. I knew then. It was a crushing blow.<sup>34</sup>

### Commentary: Fred's Story

The case study of Fred's Story illustrates the characteristics of steps one and two and highlights essential facts about alcoholism.

We found that Fred was well-informed about his alcoholism and had completed step one. He recognized he could not take the first drink and believed he would not drink again.

He was aware and remembered the discussion on the subtle insanity which precedes the first drink.

Fred reported that the weather was ideal, his work was successful, and the firm expressed satisfaction with his performance. This experience contrasted sharply with that of Bill W at the Mayflower Hotel, who was "on thin ice." When Fred crossed the threshold of the dining room, we could say he was calm and composed. Once again, here is how Fred describes how it went: *As I crossed the threshold of the dining room, the thought came to mind it would be nice to have couple of cocktails with dinner. That was all. Nothing more. I ordered a cocktail and my meal.*

This is how the *insidious, insane* thinking in our alcoholic mind works:

- In Fred’s case, there was no waffling from being rational to irrational. Fred thought he would have a couple of cocktails and went straight to insane thinking.
- Once Fred entered the dining room, he experienced a “strange mental blank spot” (memory lapse) where willpower and self-knowledge would not help. He had no defense against the first drink. Fred’s previous struggles with alcoholism or his inability to drink never crossed his mind. He had no memory of past guilt, self-hatred, remorse, emptiness, or pain due to drinking. Fred’s commitment to sobriety dissipates immediately, and he fails to consider the potential consequences of his actions. Once Fred had the first drink, the phenomenon of craving asserted control and demanded more and more of the drug.
- We are left with some thoughts and questions:
  - ♦ Did Fred's success, the relaxed atmosphere, or fond dining memories trigger his urge to drink?
  - ♦ Did Fred's elevated state of mind trigger the phenomenon of craving, much as Pavlov's classical conditioning experiment showed that "ringing the bell" causes a dog to salivate?
  - ♦ Once Fred entered the dining room, we learn that his thinking was irrational and that he had no defense against the first drink.

In a short time after the cocktail, Fred ended up in the hospital with unbearable mental and physical suffering—a pitiful and incomprehensible demoralization.

What should Fred have done differently before entering the dining room?

- Later in his story, Fred renewed a commitment to spiritual principles and a program of action (twelve-steps) outlined to him by Bill W and other recovering alcoholics.
- In Fred’s words, he said, “...the moment I made up my mind to go through with the process, I had a curious feeling that my alcoholic condition was relieved, as in fact it proved to be”.<sup>35</sup>

When we stand at the turning point, we turn to our Shepherd and ask for help. We ask Jesus to keep us sane and to help us stay in reality.

We are not cured of alcoholism. What we really have is a daily reprieve contingent on the maintenance of our spiritual condition. Every day is a day when we must carry the vision of God’s will into all of our activities. “How can I best serve Thee—Thy will (not mine) be done.” These are thoughts which must go with us constantly. We can exercise our will power along this line all we wish. It is the proper use of the will.<sup>36</sup>

Without help it is too much for us. But there is One who has all power—that One is God. May you find Him now! Half measures availed us nothing. We stood at the turning point. We asked His protection and care with complete abandon.<sup>37</sup>

## Dear Catholics,

The suggestions in the commentary aim to support Catholics dealing with alcoholism. When you attend AA (Alcoholics Anonymous) meetings at [heycatholics.com](http://heycatholics.com), feel free to embrace your Catholicism. In regular twelve-step meetings, we typically refrain from discussing religious and faith-based topics. At these meetings, when we share our experience, strength, and hope, we are encouraged to express our Catholic faith and our reliance on God. We continue to seek guidance from the Holy Spirit in our thoughts and prayers.

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## Step Two and Prayer

*Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.*

As Catholics, we can personalize the step to say:

- *Jesus can restore me to sanity.*

In moments of temptation, we must respond promptly and align our will with God's. Prayer is essential, and immediate action is necessary. The second step can serve as both a prayer and a plea.

- *Please, Jesus, restore me to sanity.*
- *Please, Jesus, help me stay sane, so I don't take the first drink.*

The following prayer is the *Step Two Prayer*, inspired by *The Big Book*:

- *GOD, I'm standing at the turning point right now. Give me your protection and care as I abandon myself to you and give up my old ways and my old ideas just for today. AMEN*

*The Jesus Prayer* cultivates a spirit of humility and dependence on God, which naturally leads to a more profound sense of gratitude for His presence and provision in one's life. *The Jesus Prayer*, in conjunction with any of the step two prayers, further instills humility and appreciation.

- *Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.*

We endured years of suffering, longing for a better life, but we were weighed down by negative forces stemming from drinking, irrational thinking, shame, anger, isolation, and other burdens. Step Two offers a beacon of hope. In this pivotal step, we invite Jesus to restore our sanity. With a clear and renewed mind, we find the strength to break free from the grip of alcoholism. Filled with gratitude in our hearts, just as Bill W did at the Mayflower Hotel, we lift our voices in thanks and praise to God.

## Step Two and Catholicism

Step two is the battleground for spiritual warfare. Satan knows our vulnerabilities. There is good reason why we say alcohol is *cunning, baffling, powerful*. The evil one is even more *cunning, baffling, powerful*. When we stand at the turning point, satan will attack us because of our weakness. At the turning point, we submit to the Lord who brings us back into reality, away from the shackles of temptation and addiction.

*So submit yourselves to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you (James 4:7).<sup>38</sup>*

### A Spiritual Battle

Replacing gluttony with lust or greed does not free us from the illusion that we are managing our lives or that we are progressing in our recovery from addiction.

*Sin creates a proclivity to sin; it engenders vice by repetition of the same acts. This results in perverse inclinations which cloud conscience and corrupt judgment of good and evil. Thus sin tends to reproduce itself and reinforce itself, but it cannot destroy the moral sense at its root.<sup>39</sup>*

Sexual lust, a drug and a deadly sin, will send us on a lonely, self-destructive path. If you find yourself struggling with sexual temptation, pornography, or explicit content on social media, consider reading and reflecting on *A Commentary on Steps 1, 2, 3 of SA for Catholics*, published by *Hey Catholics Online*.

When we recognize the illness of alcoholism, it is essential to remain vigilant and prepared for the spiritual battles. In recovery, we cultivate honesty about the triggers that threaten our sobriety. We exercise caution regarding specific people, places, situations, or times of day that may present drinking opportunities or evoke memories of drinking. We entrust to the Lord our shame, fear, resentment, excitement, and other emotions that could prompt the urge to drink. Historically, the seven deadly sins—pride, greed, wrath, envy, lust, gluttony, and sloth—have undermined humanity by fostering further immoral behavior. Our personal struggle can initiate a cycle involving any of these sins, which in turn may reignite the desire to drink. As we pursue virtue, we find that God and the Church offer genuine hope, healing, and lasting strength for every spiritual battle through the Sacraments and His grace. These divine gifts guide us toward true freedom.

*Baptism confers on its recipient the grace of purification from all sins. But the baptized must continue to struggle against concupiscence of the flesh and disordered desires. With God's grace He will prevail.<sup>40</sup>*

Battling with prayer reflects the spiritual challenges we encounter. While prayer is essential for recovery, maintaining consistency and expressing our thoughts can sometimes be difficult. Distraction and complacency are common obstacles. Choosing to confront these challenges demonstrates spiritual growth rather than failure.

*The Catechism of the Catholic Church* characterizes prayer as a "battle" against our own inclinations and the temptations that divert us away from God. By recognizing and facing these struggles, we engage in this ongoing spiritual battle and move closer to God.

## The Battle of Prayer

Prayer is both a gift of grace and a determined response on our part. It always presupposes effort. The great figures of prayer of the Old Covenant before Christ, as well as the Mother of God, the saints, and he himself, all teach us this: prayer is a battle. Against whom? Against ourselves and against the wiles of the tempter who does all he can to turn man away from prayer, away from union with God. We pray as we live, because we live as we pray. If we do not want to act habitually according to the Spirit of Christ, neither can we pray habitually in his name. The "spiritual battle" of the Christian's new life is inseparable from the battle of prayer.<sup>41</sup>

Our recovery and healing from alcoholism involves purifying the heart and practicing temperance. Something unfortunate may happen, as it did to Fred in the dining room. If so, we bring our failings to Jesus. We acknowledge our wrongs, repent, reconcile with God through confession, do penance, and make necessary amends. With God's grace, we persevere in the **spiritual battle**, renewed in humility and confidence. We are blessed. We are ready to take step two! We now go to step three.



## Step 3

*Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.*

We can personalize step three to say:

- *Made a decision to turn my will and my life over to the care of Our Lord Jesus Christ.*

When we have a rational, sober mindset, we are equipped to make informed decisions. We are in a spirit of gratitude and want to connect with God and others. We join the human race. We become active in the Church. God calls us to be in communion with Him and with one another. By attending AA meetings, we express our thoughts and feelings through open and honest conversations. Bill W learned early in his recovery that he needed another alcoholic to talk to. In his search, he found Dr Bob.

The verse Matthew 18:20, *For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst,*<sup>42</sup> encourages us not to be "lone Catholics," but to participate in a community of prayer. It is well-documented that when Bill W and Dr Bob met to discuss alcoholism and the future of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), they read scripture and prayed together. Through these meetings, Bill and Dr Bob formed the first AA group, and the twelve-step movement began.

## Step Three and Faith

While on our journey in Alcoholics Anonymous, recovery is essential and non-negotiable. We cannot settle for complacency or a lukewarm commitment to our faith. We fully embrace the Church to live out our faith according to God's will. Those who wish to preserve their lives must take up their Cross and follow Jesus Christ. Our faith calls us to do His will and surrender to Him, resisting all temptations of drinking. Failing to do so can lead to our downfall. If we relapse, we pick up our Cross, seek help and direction from the Holy Spirit, express sorrow for our sins, and go to confession. To further strengthen our faith, we attend Mass, receive the Eucharist, practice fasting, and maintain a devoted prayer life. We are under His care. As our faith strengthens, we will achieve greater stability in our lives and gain **victory over sin**.

## Summary Step 3

In Matthew 16:24-25: *Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone wants to come after Me, he must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it."*<sup>43</sup>

- If we experience a temptation to sin, *at the turning point*, we deny ourselves and offer thanks and praise to Jesus for his saving grace.
- If we fall short, we approach the confessional with contrite hearts, expressing gratitude to the Lord for His mercy and forgiveness.
- We continue to bear our Cross and follow Jesus, the head of the Church. *We are under His care.*

We are ready to take step three!

God Bless



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<sup>1</sup> Bill Wilson, *Alcoholics Anonymous: The story of how many thousands of men and women have recovered from alcoholism (3rd ed.)*, (Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1976), 164.

<sup>2</sup> Wilson, AA, pp 58, 59

<sup>3</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994), 792.

<sup>4</sup> "Corinthians 12", Bible Hub, ESV, accessed May 19, 2025, <https://biblehub.com/catholic/>, [https://biblehub.com/esv/1\\_corinthians/12.htm](https://biblehub.com/esv/1_corinthians/12.htm)

<sup>5</sup> "Corinthians 12", Bible Hub, ESV, accessed May 19, 2025, <https://biblehub.com/catholic/>, [https://biblehub.com/esv/1\\_corinthians/12.htm](https://biblehub.com/esv/1_corinthians/12.htm)

<sup>6</sup> "John 5", Bible, ESV, accessed May 19, 2025, <https://biblehub.com/catholic/john/5-6.htm>

<sup>7</sup> "John 5", Bible, ESV, accessed May 19, 2025, <https://biblehub.com/catholic/john/5-14.htm>

<sup>8</sup> Mary Darrah, *Sister Ignatia: Angel of Alcoholics Anonymous (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.)*, Hazelden, 2001

<sup>9</sup> Dawn Goldstein, *Father Ed: The Story of Bill W's Spiritual Sponsor*, Orbis Books, 2022

<sup>10</sup> Wilson, AA, 36

<sup>11</sup> Wilson, AA, 30

<sup>12</sup> Wilson, AA, 30

<sup>13</sup> Wilson, AA, 30

<sup>14</sup> Wilson, AA, 30

<sup>15</sup> Wilson, AA, 39

<sup>16</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994), 418.

<sup>17</sup> "Romans 7", Bible, NAB, accessed May 11, 2025, <https://biblehub.com/catholic/romans/7-15.htm>

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- <sup>18</sup> Wilson, AA, 62
- <sup>19</sup> Wilson, AA, 449
- <sup>20</sup> “Romans 7”, Bible, ESV, accessed March 9, 2026, <https://biblehub.com/esv/romans/7.htm>
- <sup>21</sup> “Romans 7”, Bible, ESV, accessed March 9, 2026, <https://biblehub.com/esv/romans/7.htm>
- <sup>22</sup> Wilson, AA, 64
- <sup>23</sup> Wilson, AA, 60
- <sup>24</sup> Wilson, AA, 5
- <sup>25</sup> Wilson, AA, 39
- <sup>26</sup> “Psalm 143”, Bible, NAB, accessed June 5, 2025, <https://biblehub.com/catholic/psalms/143-10.htm>
- <sup>27</sup> Wilson, AA, pp 22, 23
- <sup>28</sup> Wilson, AA, pp xxxvi, xxxviii
- <sup>29</sup> Wilson, AA, 155
- <sup>30</sup> Wilson, AA, 154
- <sup>31</sup> Wilson, AA, 59
- <sup>32</sup> Wilson, AA, xxvi-xxvii
- <sup>33</sup> Wilson, AA, 24
- <sup>34</sup> Wilson, AA, pp 40,42
- <sup>35</sup> Wilson, AA, 42
- <sup>36</sup> Wilson, AA, 85
- <sup>37</sup> Wilson, AA, 59
- <sup>38</sup> “James 4”, Bible, NAB, access May 18, 2025, <https://biblehub.com/catholic/james/4-7.htm>
- <sup>39</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church, (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994), 1865.
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