

CASE STUDY: Father Michael

Father Michael, age 47, was a parish priest who had been through several treatment programs to address problematic behaviors. However, he continued to have difficulty in working with his parishioners. He had ambitious plans to help the parish to grow, but was frequently disappointed when the parishioners didn't carry out his plans as he felt they should. The parishioners experienced him as very critical and frequently angry, and this affected their willingness to participate in parish programs. He could easily point out how others' behaviors kept him from being effective as a pastor, but he was slow to realize how his behaviors impacted others. Some parishioners also raised concerns about his use of alcohol. He dismissed their concerns as exaggerated and unreasonable. When he began the residential program at Saint Luke Institute, he grudgingly agreed to attend Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) to see if he identified with the stories of other participants. To his surprise, he found that some of his experiences were very similar to others in the group: he believed that he could stop drinking at any time; indeed, he had stopped briefly several times, but always returned; he justified his increasing alcohol use by saying to himself that his work was so stressful that he needed to relax; and whenever others questioned his drinking, he responded defensively and angrily.

Acceptance is the Key

Once he accepted that he was an alcoholic, Fr. Michael realized that stopping his drinking was just the beginning. He came to see that his whole way of looking at life was a serious problem. He constantly focused on what was wrong about others and what he wanted to change. As the Big Book of AA states, "When I am disturbed, it is because I find some person, place,

thing, or situation—some fact of my life—unacceptable to me, and I can find no serenity until I accept that person, place, thing, or situation as being exactly the way it is supposed to be at this moment. 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."

Fr. Michael's participation in therapy groups in the Saint Luke Institute residential program integrated well with his 12-step work. He learned to implement the 12-step attitudes of honesty, openness and willingness (HOW). Group members told him directly how his anger and criticism kept them from wanting to spend time with him. They held up a mirror in which he could see how these self-defeating behaviors helped to create the problems that he complained about in relationships. They reflected back to him that he presented himself as superior to others. He was able to recognize that this attitude was a defense to hide his low self-esteem and to keep others at arm's length so they would not know how insecure he often felt. When he took the risk to say when he was feeling defensive, others were able to help him discover what he was trying to hide. Fr. Michael also realized that it is impossible to change other people, and he focused on the only person he can change—himself. He grew in openness as he paid attention to the feedback that he received from his therapy groups. He began to notice when his first impulse was to blame others. When he felt this impulse, he asked himself, "What am I doing here; how can I work *with* this person instead of blaming him?" The subsequent changes in his behavior made it possible for him to form several supportive peer relationships in which he could both ask for help and give help to others. These

relationships increased his willingness to continue working on the steps, even when he felt discouraged. He found it especially helpful to work with an AA sponsor with many years of sobriety who helped him to work through the first three steps.

Ongoing Recovery

After he completed the Saint Luke Institute residential program, Fr. Michael continued in one of the Institute's outpatient therapy groups and in AA. He worked with his sponsor on Steps 4–6: 4. "Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves. 5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs. 6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character." As he worked with these steps, members of the group noticed other behavioral changes. When he described current situations, he acknowledged his own feelings and how they affected his actions. He asked more questions to understand what the other person was experiencing, rather than assuming that he knew. He listened when others pointed out that he had unrealistic expectations of himself or others.

As Fr. Michael moved more deeply into his recovery process, his rigid personality patterns that caused problems in his parish ministry began to soften. He became less bound by his "character defects", his spiritual life deepened, and his interpersonal skills grew. He was delighted to find that his parishioners became more willing to work with him. He was beginning to see in his own life some of the promises of his 12-step program and realized that God was doing for him what he could not do for himself.

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