

Women of the Church Study

Month 19 Week 1

Sister Mary Ignatia Gavin

Bridget Della Mary Gavin was one of three children born to a farmer in County Mayo, Ireland. In 1896, the Gavins immigrated to Cleveland, Ohio. Bridget graduated from Catholic schools, studied music, and taught music. Although she considered becoming a nun, her mother was opposed to it. She dated and was even briefly engaged, but the call to religious life prevailed. In 1914, she joined the Sisters of Charity of St. Augustine, a community that ran schools and hospitals statewide. She took the name of Ignatia, after St. Ignatius of Loyola, who developed the spiritual exercises.

For many years, Sister Ignatia taught music in Cleveland schools until she suffered a physical and mental breakdown. When she recovered, she transferred to hospital ministry. She was appointed the admitting office at St. Thomas Hospital in Akron in 1928. There she got to know Dr. Robert Holbrook Smith, who, after a bout with alcoholism, had been removed from the rosters of Akron's more prestigious hospitals.

Beginning in 1934, Sister Ignatia began privately ministering to alcoholics with the help of a young intern, Dr. Thomas Scuderi. She tried to treat alcoholics from both a medical and pastoral standpoint, then an uncharted field. Sister Ignatia worked with Dr. Bob to help admit alcoholics into St. Thomas Hospital in Akron, Ohio, starting in 1939. She surmounted obstacles to personally care for thousands of alcoholics over the next several decades, both in Akron and later at St. Vincent Charity Hospital in Cleveland. Beloved by all who were associated with or helped by her, she was commonly referred to as the "Angel of Alcoholics Anonymous."

At a time when chronic alcoholics were routinely sent to mental asylums, Sister Ignatia realized that they needed a healing beyond what medicine could provide." Back in 1935, Smith and Bill Wilson, a New York stockbroker, had founded Alcoholics Anonymous as a program of moral and spiritual regeneration. Working with them, Ignatia began the first hospital treatment center for alcoholics, which one historian calls "a model for many chemical treatment programs in the United States." Ignatia had a great devotion to the spiritual teachings of St. Ignatius Loyola, founder of the Jesuits, particularly his notion of "love through action." She found a strong parallel between the saint's writings and AA's Twelve Steps.

Although slight and frail in appearance, her biographer Mary Darrah notes, "A knowing intensity of expression all at once overcame her otherwise fragile features." Darrah further adds: "AA's angel was a strong, empathetic woman who extracted goodness from every situation and resolved to leave the world a little better than she found it. Ignatia had all the charisma of an Irish ... soul friend, so she easily folded the troubled into her heart". But hers was a "tough love" that required total abstinence from alcohol and drugs, acknowledgement of one's dependence on a higher power, commitment to the AA program, and outreach to those still suffering.

In 1952, Ignatia opened Rosary Hill Solarium in Cleveland, where she worked for 14 years. During her lifetime, an estimated 15,000 alcoholics came under her care. As a result of her ministry, one author notes, "the alcoholics' world changed." At the time of her death in 1966, one commentator said: "If the Catholic Church doesn't canonize her, the Protestants will make her a saint." The Sisters poured more than 6,000 cups of coffee at her wake.

<https://aleteia.org/2017/09/22/sister-ignatia-the-catholic-nun-behind-alcoholics-anonymous/>
https://www.aa.org/pages/en_us/sister-mary-ignatia-1889-1966

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Month 19 Week 2

Sister Mary Ignatia Gavin

Reflections

--Sister Mary Ignatia and her co-founders developed unique strategies for admitting and treating persons with alcoholism to the hospital before this was acceptable. They definitely thought “outside the box” in order to do this and it reaped amazing benefits!

When have I thought “outside the box”, especially to help another?

When have I been afraid to do this and why?

Sister Mary Ignatia provided persons she served with dignity and a sense of hope, thereby dispelling shame and hopelessness and helping them change and move forward in their lives.

How do/can I help give others a sense of dignity and hope?—especially others who may be different from me, or even offensive in some way?

How can I give up shame in my own life and build on my own sense of dignity to move forward?

--Sister May Ignatia herself experienced a difficulty time, a “nervous breakdown”. She knew the experience of hitting “rock bottom” and needing to change to live a healthier life style. She made changes for a “full restoration of mind, body and spirit”. (WAU October 2020). This insight, along with her empathy and compassion, was the catalyst for her new passion in working with persons with alcoholism.

What experiences have I had that seemed difficult, but ended up giving me new insights, or allowing me to move forward in some area of my life?

How can I begin to see and incorporate this principle into my life now? How can I help support and encourage others to do the same?

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Month 19 Week 3

Sister Mary Ignatia

Devotions/Prayers

The Complete Serenity Prayer

This is the unabridged Serenity Prayer, written by Reinhold Niebuhr (1892–1971)
often used in AA:

God, give us grace to accept with serenity
the things that cannot be changed,
Courage to change the things
which should be changed,
and the Wisdom to distinguish
the one from the other.
Living one day at a time,
Enjoying one moment at a time,
Accepting hardship as a pathway to peace,
Taking, as Jesus did,
This sinful world as it is,
Not as I would have it,
Trusting that You will make all things right,
If I surrender to Your will,
So that I may be reasonably happy in this life,
And supremely happy with You forever in the next.
Amen.

The steps and their principles are:

Honesty: After many years of denial, recovery can begin with one simple admission of being powerless over alcohol or any other drug a person is addicted to. Their friends and family may also use this step to admit their loved one has an addiction.

Faith: Before a higher power can begin to operate, you must first believe that it can. Someone with an addiction accepts that there is a higher power to help them heal.

Surrender: You can change your self-destructive decisions by recognizing that you alone cannot recover; with help from your higher power, you can.

Soul searching: The person in recovery must identify their problems and get a clear picture of how their behavior affected themselves and others around them.

Integrity: Step 5 provides great opportunity for growth. The person in recovery must admit their wrongs in front of their higher power and another person.

Acceptance: The key to Step 6 is acceptance—accepting character defects exactly as they are and becoming entirely willing to let them go.

Humility: The spiritual focus of Step 7 is humility, or asking a higher power to do something that cannot be done by self-will or mere determination.

Willingness: This step involves making a list of those you harmed before coming into recovery.

Forgiveness: Making amends may seem challenging, but for those serious about recovery, it can be a great way to start healing your relationships.

Maintenance: Nobody likes to admit to being wrong. But it is a necessary step in order to maintain spiritual progress in recovery.

Making contact: The purpose of Step 11 is to discover the plan your higher power has for your life.

Service: The person in recovery must carry the message to others and put the principles of the program into practice in every area of their life.

<https://www.verywellmind.com/the-twelve-steps-63284>

AA's 12-Step approach follows a set of guidelines designed as "steps" toward recovery, and members can revisit these steps at any time. The 12 Steps are:

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

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

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

Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.

Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.

Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.

Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.

Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.

Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.

Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.

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.

Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these Steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

<https://www.alcohol.org/alcoholics-anonymous/>

These steps can be and have been adapted for use in recovery in many other areas/ aspects of life.

See information from Celebrate recovery for a list of the 12 steps and their biblical comparisons!

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Month 19 Week 4

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Practical Applications

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--Sr. Mary Ignatia was called the Angel of Alcoholics. She is not as well-known as the two other founders of AA as she gave all the credit for her work to God and the sisters of her community.

Think of someone you would call an “angel” of a worthy cause. Find a way to show the person appreciation for his/her work. Think of ways you might be able to model some of the characteristics of Sister Ignatia, or the angel you have identified.

--Review the 12 step program followed by AA. Choose one of the 12 steps you feel is pertinent to something in your life. Research related Biblical principles. Make your best effort to complete this step in your life. Journal about your experience.

--Read or resource and learn something about addiction (alcohol or other) that you did not know. Determine a way you might use this information with others, whether that be with someone struggling with addiction or with helping others understand addiction. Journal about your experience.