

SISTER IGNATIA AND HUMILITY

Ignatia knew that alcoholics who did not admit their addiction had very little chance of acquiring such humility. And without humility and its strengthening peace of mind, alcoholics would always seek relief in the next round of drinks. Thus, because she well knew how insidious the alcohol obsession really was, Ignatia treated all sufferers alike, regardless of their vocation or position in life.

For some, her demand for the humility to admit alcoholism seemed humiliating. Perhaps that was precisely her point. Without the humility to admit to alcoholism, could anyone acquire the honesty needed to change?

On one well-remembered occasion in the late 1950s, Sister Ursula Stepsis, then Charity Hospital's administrator, summoned Sister Ignatia to her office. Ignatia arrived to find an out-of-town bishop, intoxicated and pleading for help.

Passing through town on his way to a convention, he had indulged a little too freely and found himself now under the weather. The bishop had heard of Sister Ignatia and Rosary Hall through recovering priest graduates. He hoped that Sister Ignatia could spare him a few days and help him overcome his "drinking problem," a more palatable term to him than alcoholism.

Unimpressed with his rank as well as his sincerity, Sister Ignatia explained the Rosary Hall program, the A.A. outlook, and A.A.'s rules. She stressed that to become a patient, the inebriated bishop had to be willing to do as directed and be treated like everyone else if he was serious about getting well. "I'm ready for the cure," he said.

However, Ignatia always tested preadmission sincerity. Before admitting him to the Hall, she asked the quaking bishop for his Roman collar and his breviary (prayer book) for safekeeping. When he balked at her directives, she explained that he would wear the same pajamas as the other patients and

reminded him that Rosary Hall would provide reading materials that would adequately challenge his spiritual skills. As he resisted her directives, Ignatia told him politely but firmly that his bed was needed for an alcoholic who wanted to recover, not just dry out. When he refused to comply with the rules, Ignatia refused to admit him to Rosary Hall. Insulted, he left for a nearby hotel.

When the other sisters at the hospital later learned of the incident, many were incensed at Ignatia's "irreverence." Like most Catholics, they did not yet understand the serious implications of enabling alcoholism to continue unchallenged among the clergy. Ignatia's sisters in religion felt that she should have made allowances for the bishop's high ecclesiastical office that would have spared his dignity and prevented his humiliation. Others could not comprehend her audacity in presuming to dictate episcopal behavior. Most would have provided the bishop with comfortable overnight accommodations so that he could discreetly sleep off the drinking escapade and continue on his journey, retaining the secret of his alcoholism and, consequently, his right to drink.

Ignatia, however, knew that such "Christian" charity had all too often cost priests and bishops their lives.

"Sister Ignatia: Angel of Alcoholics Anonymous" (pp. 206-207)