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# Twelve-step Spirituality in View of the Sacrament of Reconciliation in the Catholic Church

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## Abstract

### *Twelve-step Spirituality in View of the Sacrament of Reconciliation in the Catholic Church*

This article ventures into the basic principles of the original Twelve-step program by studying its similarity with the dynamics of the Sacrament of Reconciliation in the Catholic Church. It begins with a short presentation of the theological foundation of confession, and continues with the history of AA's Twelve-step recovery program while focusing on the latter's spiritual dimension and that of similar groups. The major analysis is dedicated to demonstrating and discussing the parallels found in the twelve steps content and the Sacrament of Reconciliation; where the twelve steps have their effectiveness written within themselves, the Sacrament of Reconciliation also requires a progression from contrition, an examination of conscience, the confessing sins and satisfaction. In conclusion, the author presents pastoral suggestions meant to facilitate work with believers struggling with various addictions.

**Keywords:** confession, twelve-step programs, addictions, sacrament of reconciliation

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## Abstrakt

### *Duchowość dwunastu kroków w perspektywie sakramentu pojednania w Kościele katolickim*

W tym artykule zagłębiaamy się w podstawowe zasady programu dwunastu kroków, badając jego podobieństwo do dynamiki sakramentu pojednania w Kościele katolickim. Artykuł rozpoczyna się krótką prezentacją teologicznych podstaw spowiedzi i kontynuuje przedstawieniem zarysu historii programu AA opartego na dwunastu krokach. Główna analiza poświęcona jest wykazaniu i omówieniu podobieństw oraz paraleli w treści dwunastu kroków oraz warunków dobrej spowiedzi. Podobnie jak program dwunastu kroków, również sakrament pojednania zaprasza penitenta do przejścia podobnych etapów: aktu skruchy, rachunku sumienia, wyznania grzechów oraz zadośćuczynienia. Na zakończenie autor rozważa wskazania duszpasterskie mające ułatwić pracę z wierzącymi, którzy zmagają się z różnymi nałogami.

**Słowa kluczowe:** spowiedź, programy dwunastu kroków, nałogi, sakrament pojednania

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For centuries, seeking forgiveness and reconciliation has been one of the most important elements of human life. Many spiritual traditions developed particular rituals to help people find peace of heart, traditions that include rites of purification, public confession in the presence of their community, confession explicitly to an official representative of the community, etc.

In the Roman Catholic tradition, people wishing to confess their wrongdoings and obtain forgiveness are invited to see a priest for sacramental absolution. After hearing the confession, the priest prescribes penance in one form or other that helps the person acknowledge the weight of their sins. The final and most important part of the Sacrament of Reconciliation is an explicit and formal absolution from one's sins proclaimed by the priest, a reconciliation that comes as free gift of God's mercy (grace) mediated by the church. Despite the beauty and effectiveness of this sacrament, many faithful today opt instead to see a psychotherapist rather than a priest. This undoubtedly is because it seems more comforting to be reassured that our behavior can better be accounted for psychologically due to our upbringing or to character weaknesses, or perhaps even physiologically from chemical imbalances in our brain, than to acknowledge openly our own transgressions.

Some would say that we cannot get along with our lives without some kind of confession. For many people, psychotherapy serves this function. It seems easier to see a counselor for an emotional problem than a priest for a spiritual one. Perhaps this is due to the fact that the priest directly addresses the moral problem, whereas the counselor explores the psychological and social context in order to uncover why the given problem occurs. Both intend to help people, but the approaches are different. In confession there is a moral evaluation with the accent on one's sins, whereas in counseling, there is an attempt to be morally neutral, focusing more on possible disorders. We can name it a sin-versus-sickness dichotomy. Most probably, we won't be far from the truth if we state that both sin and sickness contribute to dysfunctions in human behavior.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> M. R. McMinn, *Psychology, Theology, and Spirituality in Christian Counseling*, Wheaton 2011, p. 206–207.

In reducing all human problems to psychological and social issues, the human sciences make it more difficult for people to be aware of and reach out to the spiritual riches available through the gift of redemption. The reluctance regarding the usage of the word “sin” is fueled by the desire to liberate people from their moral constraints and instead tend to concentrate simply on relieving symptoms. And yet oftentimes it is only the opportunity to embrace the journey of repentance and change that can bring long-desired peace of mind and heart.<sup>2</sup> Although therapists should seek to relieve excessive and unnecessary burdens of guilt, their role is not to free people from appropriate guilt. Unfortunately, popular psychology seems to promote self-sufficiency while undermining spiritual growth and the need for conversion.<sup>3</sup>

## 1. The Sacrament of Reconciliation: Description

The Sacrament of Reconciliation in the Roman Catholic tradition provides healing through a confrontation with human fragility and transforms it thanks to God’s mercy. In this reconciliation process, human nature is seen as it truly is: containing the natural tension between good and evil. In an existential sense, this sacrament helps people to transform the limits of their lives into a meaningful human existence. This process of healing is composed of several elements that include becoming aware of one’s transgressions, accepting responsibility for one’s wrongdoings, experiencing a sense of guilt, and undertaking some form of amendment of the harm caused. Yet finally and most importantly in the sacrament of reconciliation is the readiness to accept forgiveness as a free gift of God along with faith in the possibility of improvement or even a new beginning.<sup>4</sup>

The Church’s invitation to confess one’s sins has become less and less welcomed among Roman Catholics living in contemporary Western

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2 M. R. McMinn, *Sin and Grace in Christian Counseling: An Integrative Paradigm*, Downers Grove 2008, p. 114.

3 M. R. McMinn, *Psychology, Theology, and Spirituality in Christian Counseling*, p. 230.

4 D. B. Perrin, *The Sacrament of Reconciliation: An Existential Approach*, Lewiston 1998, p. 141-144.

society. Unsurprisingly, the demand for psychotherapy has increased.<sup>5</sup> Despite the contemporary reluctance to avail oneself of this liturgical practice, the Sacrament of Reconciliation does not lose its importance because regular confession invites the believer to confront sins that are easily overlooked in everyday life. In fact, regularly confession can lead to a heightened awareness of sin and in consequence foster greater moral sensitivity. That being said, one possible unfortunate outcome leans in the opposite direction: given that one can always be forgiven can diminish concern about one's sinfulness. However, the healing and formative dimension of penance counters this tendency by letting the believers experience the consequences of their sins. The beauty of the Roman Catholic sacrament is that the burden of guilt is unambiguously lifted through the act of sacramental absolution, which for some people is profoundly liberating.<sup>6</sup>

In no. 1422 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, we read:

Those who approach the sacrament of Penance obtain pardon from God's mercy for the offense committed against him, and are, at the same time, reconciled with the Church which they have wounded by their sins and which by charity, by example, and by prayer labors for their conversion.<sup>7</sup>

This paragraph implicitly points out that confessing one's sins leads to deepening the integrity of one's life. This is what the purpose of the Sacrament of Reconciliation really is: to help believers grow in their humanity and, subsequently, develop a community of persons reconciled by love and charity.<sup>8</sup> The sacrament of reconciliation is neither a technique nor an occasional expression of remorse. Its purpose is to help believers learn to live humbly by admitting their weaknesses before God and the faith community. The sacrament, then, responds to longing rooted deep in human nature to confess one's moral shortcomings as well as the need to seek forgiveness, as mentioned at the outset.

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5 M. R. McMinn, *Psychology, Theology, and Spirituality in Christian Counseling*, p. 204.

6 M. R. McMinn, *Psychology, Theology, and Spirituality in Christian Counseling*, p. 213.

7 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, London 1999, 1422.

8 D. B. Perrin, *The Sacrament of Reconciliation: An Existential Approach*, p. 145.

Celebrated responsibly, the Sacrament of Reconciliation becomes truly a path to holiness.<sup>9</sup>

## 2. The Twelve-Step Program: Description

The origins of twelve-step programs go back to the Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung (1875–1961), who, acknowledging the relentless grip that alcoholism had on individuals, told a wealthy American patient that in his case only a religious conversion might bring about any change.<sup>10</sup> In fact, William James (1842–1910) and Carl Jung’s notions of the role of spiritual experiences in facilitating life transformation and healing guided the development of AA and its twelve steps from the beginning.<sup>11</sup>

Bill Wilson and Dr Bob Smith, the founders of Alcoholics Anonymous in 1930s America which became the prototype of twelve-step fellowship programs, were both alcoholics who struggled to achieve abstinence despite their Christian faith.<sup>12</sup> Henrietta Seiberling was another key contributor to the development of the AA movement. She encouraged the two men whom she was hosting in her home to see the Christian faith as a help toward recovery from alcohol addiction. As a leader in the local branch of an evangelical movement called “the Oxford Group,” inspired by early Christianity and its non-institutional simplicity,<sup>13</sup> “Seiberling devoted herself to praying for her guests’ recovery. She met with them regularly to discuss the importance of private prayer, anonymity, avoidance of external funding sources, and total reliance on God. Over several months, other alcoholics were invited to attend these meetings of

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9 M. R. McMinn, *Psychology, Theology, and Spirituality in Christian Counseling*, p. 233.

10 D. B. Hathaway, M. Dawes, *Addiction and Twelve-Step Spirituality*, in: *Christianity and Psychiatry*, eds. J. R. Peteet, H. S. Moffic, A. Hankir, H. G. Koenig, Cham 2021, p. 149.

11 L. Rodriguez-Morales, “That’s the Spiritual Side of Me”: Men’s Autobiographical Accounts of Recovery in Twelve Step Fellowships, *“Implicit Religion”* 22 (2020) nr 2, p. 165.

12 W. Dossett, *Addiction, Spirituality and 12-Step Programmes*, *“International Social Work”* 56 (2013) nr 3, p. 371; S. Cheever, *My Name is Bill: Bill Wilson—His Life and the Creation of Alcoholics Anonymous*, New York 2004.

13 T. Stafford, *The Hidden Gospel of the 12 Steps*, *“Christianity Today (Washington)”* 35 (1991) nr 8, p. 14–19.

the ‘alcoholic squad of the Oxford Group,’ which later became known as Alcoholics Anonymous.”<sup>14</sup>

Today the General Service Office of AA estimates that there are over 120,000 groups active in more than 170 countries, comprising over 2 million members worldwide.<sup>15</sup> The twelve steps were gradually used in other addition groups similar to those of AA., simply substituting “our addiction” for “alcohol” in step one. As spinoffs of Alcoholics Anonymous, Al-Anon or Al-Anon Family Groups were established in 1951 by Lois Wilson, the wife of the co-founder of AA, in order to help family and friends learn how to cope with the challenges of someone else’s drinking. The twelve steps of Al-Anon are identical to those of AA. Through this program, families and friends of alcoholics find support, empathy, and a release from the isolation that denial of this problem brings to the entire family. They work the steps acknowledging that they too have become affected by alcoholism as a family illness. Other recovery groups based on AA soon began to appear. For example, Narcotics Anonymous, first formed in California in 1953, grew rapidly in the 1970s; Overeaters Anonymous, founded in 1960, provides a similar help for those struggling with nutritional problems such as binge-eating, bulimia and anorexia; Anorexics and Bulimics Anonymous (ABA) was developed in the 1990<sup>s</sup> to provide a more finetuned focus on unhealthy eating practices.<sup>16</sup> One also finds such groups as Gamblers Anonymous (GA)<sup>17</sup> and groups working with sexual compulsions and many other dysfunctional behaviors.<sup>18</sup>

Three key principles of the healing process supported in twelve-step self-help recovery groups are: (1) acceptance, (2) surrender, and (3) active involvement in twelve-step meetings and related activities.<sup>19</sup> Several studies demonstrated that participation in Alcoholics Anonymous twelve-step program are more effective than other treatments of alco-

<sup>14</sup> D. B. Hathaway, M. Dawes, *Addiction and Twelve-Step Spirituality*, p. 149.

<sup>15</sup> Alcoholics Anonymous World Services. A. A. Fact File, New York 2018, [https://orange-nyaa.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/aa\\_fact\\_file.pdf](https://orange-nyaa.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/aa_fact_file.pdf) (22.09.2022).

<sup>16</sup> W. Dossett, *Addiction, Spirituality and 12-Step Programmes*, p. 373.

<sup>17</sup> J. Kelly, W. White, *Broadening the Base of Addiction Mutual-Help Organizations*, “*Journal of Groups in Addiction & Recovery*” 7 (2012) nr 2-4, p. 82-101.

<sup>18</sup> D. B. Hathaway, M. Dawes, *Addiction and Twelve-Step Spirituality*, p. 151.

<sup>19</sup> D. B. Hathaway, M. Dawes, *Addiction and Twelve-Step Spirituality*, p. 148.

hol-related problems<sup>20</sup> because of the engagement with the spiritual values and practices proposed in it.<sup>21</sup>

AA and twelve-step programs became more widely known when Wilson published a book entitled *Alcoholics Anonymous* in 1939. *The Big Book*, as it was called after, presented the twelve-step program based on various Christian traditions, especially those of the Oxford Group:

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol – that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.
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.
7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.
8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
11. 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.
12. 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.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> J. F. Kelly, K. Humphreys, M. Ferri, *Alcoholics Anonymous and Other 12-step Programs for Alcohol Use Disorder*, “Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews” (2020) nr 9, <https://doi.org/10.1002/14651858.CD012880.pub2>.

<sup>21</sup> J. F. Kelly, *Is Alcoholics Anonymous Religious, Spiritual, Neither? Findings from 25 Years of Mechanisms of Behavior Change Research*, “Addiction” 112 (2017), p. 929–936.

<sup>22</sup> M. Gross, *Alcoholics Anonymous: Still Sober After 75 Years*, “American Journal of Public Health” 100 (2010) nr 12, p. 2362.



We will analyze these steps below in regard to the spiritual practices and the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

### 3. The Spiritual Aspect of the Twelve-Step Program

Alcoholics Anonymous is seen by many as a spiritual recovery movement which understands addiction as an illness or an incurable progressive disease of the mind, body, but also spirit. The twelve-step program of recovery focuses on the spiritual aspect,<sup>23</sup> replete with religious themes.<sup>24</sup>

The major requirement to become an AA member is a commitment to abstinence and to working the twelve-step program which is aimed at developing an enhanced awareness of one's personal orientation towards God as expressed in the program. The first element is acceptance (step 2), then surrender (step 3), admission of wrongdoing (step 5), readiness to have God remove character defects followed by (step 6) a humble request that God remove our shortcomings, and finally (step 7) using prayer and meditation as ways of strengthening one's relationship with God (step 11). According to the vision of AA, the first 11 steps should lead to (step 12): a spiritual awakening often described as a new state of consciousness characterized by a "joie de vivre," a reliance on God, and an intentional selflessness.<sup>25</sup>

In the Traditions we find a more precise description of AA's concept of God: "a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience." God is the ultimate authority overseeing the group's journey. Tradition Five explains that the primary function of the group consists in carrying a message of hope to other alcoholics, and of underlining that the ability to recover from one's addiction is a free gift from God.<sup>26</sup> There is a strong spiritual conviction that, as a cornerstone of the program, one must develop a personal relationship with God. The process begins with

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23 M. G. Swora, *The Rhetoric of Transformation in the Healing of Alcoholism: The twelve steps of Alcoholics Anonymous*, "Mental Health, Religion & Culture" 7 (2004), p. 187–209.

24 D. B. Hathaway, M. Dawes, *Addiction and Twelve-Step Spirituality*, p. 150.

25 H. Dermatis, M. Galanter, *The Role of Twelve-Step-Related Spirituality in Addiction Recovery*, "Journal of Religion and Health" 55 (2016) nr 2, p. 511.

26 H. Dermatis, M. Galanter, *The Role of Twelve-Step-Related Spirituality in Addiction Recovery*, "Journal of Religion and Health" 55 (2016) nr 2, p. 511–512.

step 3, which some would express as followings: “God, I offer myself to Thee—to build with me and to do with me as Thou wilt. Relieve me of the bondage of self, that I may better do Thy will. Take away my difficulties, that victory over them may bear witness to those I would help of Thy Power, Thy Love, and Thy Way of life. May I do Thy will always.”<sup>27</sup> One’s investment in this process is viewed as a crucial “spiritual step.”

In many western countries, the concept of recovery from addiction is spontaneously identified with twelve-step programs, often defined as spiritual fellowships. In numerous instances in the *Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous* successful recovery is associated with terms such as “spiritual experience” and “spiritual awakening,” as well as “working twelve steps.”<sup>28</sup> It is true that in the AA tradition, alcoholism has often been referred to as a “spiritual disease.” Spiritual growth, then, is a central focus woven through recovery process. In this context, the twelve steps can be seen as a spiritual path to recovery from addictions.<sup>29</sup>

Spirituality helps participants to be more involved in and active in twelve-step groups. Usually, members who belong to faith communities are better equipped to acknowledge their internal experiences and to persevere when they confront cravings. There is already some evidence that spirituality predicts this type of collaboration of members, which is generally associated with increased twelve-step group involvement.<sup>30</sup>

The most important miracle for AA members is the achievement of sobriety. Viewed from a spiritual perspective, sobriety is considerably more than quitting drinking. Rather, it is the sign of a profound spiritual transformation which takes place within the person which can take years to fully emerge, a transformation that is usually attributed to divine intervention.<sup>31</sup> The spiritual elements of twelve-step programs act as an important counterforce to the egoistic aspects of chronic addiction by directly confronting the denial, rationalizations, and illusion

27 Alcoholics Anonymous, *Alcoholics Anonymous* (3rd ed.), New York 1976, p. 63.

28 M. Galanter, *Spirituality and Recovery in 12-Step Programs: An Empirical Model*, “*Journal of Substance Abuse Treatment*” 33 (2007) nr 3, p. 266.

29 G. J. Connors, K. S. Walitzer, J. S. Tonigan, *Spiritual Change in Recovery*, “*Recent Developments in Alcoholism*” 2008, p. 209.

30 R. H. Moos, *How and Why Twelve-Step Self-Help Groups Are Effective*, “*Recent Developments in Alcoholism*” 2008, p. 406.

31 G. J. Connors, K. S. Walitzer, J. S. Tonigan, *Spiritual Change in Recovery*, p. 215.

of control that underlie the persistence of addictive behavior.<sup>32</sup> Working through twelve steps includes: “working the steps, reading AA core literature, telling one’s story at an AA meeting, having a sponsor/sponsorship. Given the religious connotations of the first two, it is not surprising that many continue to regard spirituality as an essential ingredient in AA’s recipe for personal growth and change.”<sup>33</sup>

Worth noting is that not all twelve-steps groups affirm the spiritual nature of the recovery process. Some criticize twelve-step programs as religious or spiritual. This is probably because, while the beginnings of AA movement are Christian-based, over the years non-religiously-affiliated individuals have joined the movement, many expressing discomfort with the word “God” or even “higher power.” On the other hand, religiously-affiliated members found that the movement did not sufficiently underline the program’s spiritual dimension. Consequently, some groups moved towards a more secular language and others towards more religious content. In this context, a Christian version of the twelve-step program based directly on the Bible was born. For instance, there is a program that conceptualizes the recovery principles in line with the Gospel according to Matthew (5:1–12). This program, called “A Road to Recovery,” proposes eight recovery principles inspired by the Beatitudes to encourage Christians wish to change their problematic behaviors to use the healing elements of the regular twelve-step program as a way of learning to do God’s will.<sup>34</sup>

#### **4. The Sacrament of Reconciliation and the Twelve-Step Program: Comparison**

There are several elements required for a valid sacramental confession: a careful examination of conscience, contrition or repentance, confession of sins, and satisfaction or the carrying out of certain acts of penance

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<sup>32</sup> E. J. Khantzian, J. E. Mack, *Alcoholics Anonymous and contemporary psychodynamic theory*, in: *Recent developments in alcoholism, 7: Growth and Transformation in Workplace Alcoholism Programming*, ed. M. Galanter, New York 1994, p. 78.

<sup>33</sup> D. B. Hathaway, M. Dawes, *Addiction and Twelve-Step Spirituality*, p. 153.

<sup>34</sup> D. B. Hathaway, M. Dawes, *Addiction and Twelve-Step Spirituality*, p. 152, 155.

which the priest imposes to repair the damage caused by sin.<sup>35</sup> While contrition for wrongdoing can lead one to seek forgiveness, a higher motivation for seeking God's forgiveness is the love of God ("perfect contrition"). Nonetheless, if the penitent seeks forgiveness out of simple fear of condemnation (imperfect contrition), the absolution will be granted (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1453). Yet the intent of committing the sin later, without any remorse, invalidates the Sacrament. Finally, one must complete the penance imposed by the priest in a timely manner (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1494).

Taking moral responsibility for one's actions constitutes an important element of the twelve-step program process of recovery. Addiction itself, however, is not seen as "a moral issue," and consequently addicted persons are not considered to be "weak" or "bad" or even "immoral," but rather people suffering from a complex medical condition. That being said, it remains that addiction does have a moral dimension, and this means that one cannot be set free from addictive behavior without first doing a deep housecleaning. To address this moral dimension of addiction, steps 4 to 10 urge recovering addicts to engage in a continuous process of growth in moral self-awareness and responsibility.<sup>36</sup>

Among the most important of twelve-step practices are the identification of past and present wrongdoings, making a personal disclosure (confession) about them "to God, to ourselves, and to another human being" (Steps 4, 5, and 10), and be willing to make amends for these wrongdoings (or sins in the theological understanding: Steps 8, 9, 10). These actions can be instrumental in fostering positive and mutually beneficial social relationships. After undergoing such a transformation—"conversion" in theological language—one is more prone to show respect, honesty, trust, as well acquire an on-going ability to acknowledge and confess past failures.<sup>37</sup> As we can see the process described here is very close to that of sacramental conversion.

No. 14.23 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* reads: "It is called the sacrament of conversion because it makes sacramentally present Jesus'

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<sup>35</sup> *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, vatican.va (21.09.2022).

<sup>36</sup> M. Bullitt-Jonas, *Climate Change, Addiction, and Spiritual Liberation*, "Religions" 12 (2021) nr 709, p. 8.

<sup>37</sup> G. J. Connors, K. S. Walitzer, J. S. Tonigan, *Spiritual Change in Recovery*, p. 216.

call to conversion, the first step in returning to the Father from whom one has strayed by sin.” In fact, some of the early recovery narratives corresponded closely to the parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15 where the renewed fellowship symbolizes the welcoming family.<sup>38</sup> Denzin proposes that such events represent important moments that mark people’s lives by altering their worldviews, dividing their lives into a before-and-after transformation.<sup>39</sup> Some studies suggest that alcoholics who had an experience of spiritual awakening were three times more likely to persevere in abstinence than those who did not.<sup>40</sup>

Christian life is in fact a call to conversion. While recognizing our own human fragility, we dare to believe and to hope that God will make everything new in Christ. We can promote His Kingdom on earth by living the Gospel call to love, reconciliation, and peace.<sup>41</sup> In this perspective we can distinguish a merely “intellectual” from a genuine conversion founded on moral principles, lived in a change of heart (and mind) denoted in the gospel term *metanoia*<sup>42</sup> -as in its own way and language the twelve-step program witnesses. Step 3 and the following steps aim at helping the addicted person move from a self-centered posture to a more other-oriented attitude by mastering overly prominent, grandiose tendencies of the self<sup>43</sup>—according to the Big Book, selfishness/self-centeredness being among one’s greatest shortcomings of an alcoholic: “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>44</sup>

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38 V. Hänninen, A. Koski-Jännes, *Narratives of Recovery from Addictive Behaviours*, “Addiction” 94 (1999), p. 1837–1848.

39 N. Denzin, *Interpretative Biography*, London 1989.

40 L. A. Kaskutas, L. Ammon, K. Delucchi, R. Room, J. Bond, C. Weisner, *Alcoholics Anonymous Careers: Patterns of AA Involvement Five Years after Treatment Entry*, “Alcoholism, Clinical and Experimental Research” 29 (2005) nr 11, p. 1983–1990.

41 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 133.

42 *Leksykon duchowości katolickiej*, red. M. Chmielewski, Lublin–Kraków 2002, p. 568.

43 E. J. Khantzian, J. E. Mack, *Alcoholics Anonymous and contemporary psychodynamic theory*, p. 79.

44 *Alcoholics Anonymous*, *Alcoholics Anonymous* (3rd ed.), p. 62.

Although in line with our contemporary society, the twelve-step program does not use the word, it describes almost all essential elements of “conversion”:

It is a precious moment when an addict listens, grasps the urgency, feels the heat, and makes the decision to choose life. It is a precious moment when an addict admits that their life is unmanageable, that they need help beyond themselves, and that the time has come for decisive action. It is a precious moment when an addict realizes that the old way of life has to die in order for new life to be born.<sup>45</sup>

Steps four to nine describe a general process which is spiritual in nature. Step four pertains to identifying shortcomings that have interfered in one’s life. This is what we call, in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, a careful examination of conscience. An examination of conscience is to be done honestly and thoroughly. All mortal sins must be confessed (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1456). For instance, Ignatius of Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises* are conceived to help participants examine their lives in great detail and thereby become deeply aware of their personal need for conversion in light of past sins.<sup>46</sup>

In step five one is invited to admit one’s wrongdoings to another person and one’s higher power (God), which corresponds to professing one’s sins to the priest in confession. Through its referring to a higher power or God, the twelve-step program invites members to acknowledge preening in self-importance and/or their in wallowing self-pity.<sup>47</sup> The confession (or disclosure) of sins, be it simply from a human or psychological point of view as in the twelve-step tradition, frees one from self-centeredness and facilitates the reconciliation with others. Through such an admission, one looks squarely at the sins of which one is guilty of, takes responsibility for them, and thereby opens oneself again to God and to the communion with others, thereby making a new future possible (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1455).

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45 M. Bullitt-Jonas, *Climate Change, Addiction, and Spiritual Liberation*, p. 12.

46 D. B. Perrin, *Studying Christian Spirituality*, New York 2007, p. 251.

47 E. J. Khantzian, J. E. Mack, *Alcoholics Anonymous and contemporary psychodynamic theory*, p. 78.

Among AA members, humility “amounts to a clear recognition of what and who we really are, followed by a sincere attempt to become what we could be. Therefore, our first practical move toward humility must consist of recognizing our deficiencies.”<sup>48</sup> In a similar way for the sacrament of reconciliation, contrition is primary. Contrition is “sorrow of the soul and detestation for the sin committed, together with the resolution not to sin again” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1451). While the twelve-step program does not explicitly use the term “contrition,” in its own language it nonetheless speaks about very similar attitude of heart.

The next important element in the celebration of the sacrament is a resolution not to commit sin in the future. In twelve-step terminology, this is expressed as a willingness to identify and admit one’s character defects (step 6) and humbly ask one’s higher power (God) to help overcome them (step 7). Steps eight and nine continue the process by presenting the need to repair one’s relationships with others. In Step eight one admits the harm the addiction has caused others; step nine points out the importance of making amends, unless doing so would cause more harm. For instance, one is to reimburse stolen money or make right where one had lied. At times, one must begin forgiving others for the harm others have done to oneself, but often the harm perpetrated is reciprocal.<sup>49</sup> The self-examination associated with “moral inventory” (step 4), “making amends” (step 9), and “carrying the message to others” (step 12) are steps that inspire a real concern for others and an increasing capacity for mature altruism<sup>50</sup> or love of the neighbor, all aspects found as well in the sacrament of reconciliation as noted earlier.

Worth noting here is that the dynamics of step nine are very similar to what is called *penance* in the Sacrament of Reconciliation: “Penance requires [...] the sinner to endure all things willingly, be contrite of heart, confess with the lips, and practice complete humility and fruitful

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48 Alcoholics Anonymous, *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, New York 1981, p. 58.

49 T. Borkman, *The Twelve-Step Recovery Model of AA: A Voluntary Mutual Help Association*, “Recent Developments in Alcoholism” 2008, p. 20–21.

50 E. J. Khantzian, J. E. Mack, *Alcoholics Anonymous and contemporary psychodynamic theory*, p. 79.

satisfaction” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1450).<sup>51</sup> In fact, our sins wrong our neighbors and we are invited to do what is possible to repair the harm done: return stolen goods, restore someone’s reputation, pay compensation for injuries, etc. Already human justice requires as much, indicated expressly in twelve-step program. Christianity affirms that sin also injures sinners themselves and weakens their relationships with God and neighbor. While absolution removes sin, but it does not undo or reverse the consequences of sin. Once forgiven, believers still must strive to regain full spiritual health by making necessary amends for their sins: they are exhorted to “make satisfaction for” or “expiate” their sins which is also called “penance” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1459).

The content of steps eight and nine clearly relates to various dimensions of forgiveness and reconciliation in the theological sense.<sup>52</sup> The final spiritual experience for many members of twelve-step groups is forgiveness, which can be understood in two ways. First, it is forgiveness of others which permits a letting go of anger and a reaching out in compassion. Second, and probably more demanding, it is forgiveness of self. Step five, where one admits “to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs,” brings about the hope that one can be forgiven: “Our moral inventory had persuaded us that all-round forgiveness was desirable, but it was only when we resolutely tackled Step five that we inwardly knew we’d be able to receive forgiveness and give it, too.”<sup>53</sup> In the Christian perspective, forgiveness is a free gift from God and accepting it as such corroborates this statement.

The final fruit for both a believer receiving sacramental absolution and the participant of the twelve-step program is gratitude. From a theological perspective, gratitude represents an awareness or recognition of God’s grace and mercy. In more general terms, grace can be seen as a gift of strength to address a difficult task or life’s challenge. In fact, many participants of twelve-step programs view sobriety as a gift of di-

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51 *Roman Catechism* II, V, 21; cf. Council of Trent (1551): DS 1673.

52 K. E. Hart, *A spiritual interpretation of the 12-steps of Alcoholics Anonymous: From resentment to forgiveness to love*, “*Journal of Ministry in Addiction & Recovery*” 6 (1999) nr 2, p. 25–39.

53 G. J. Connors, K. S. Walitzer, J. S. Tonigan, *Spiritual Change in Recovery*, p. 219.



vine intervention for which they express gratitude on a regular if not daily basis, a gratitude expressed by continuing to work the steps and by living a daily life of sobriety.<sup>54</sup>

## 5. Some Pastoral Reflections

It is interesting to see that the concept of confession so much abandoned in many Christian denominations has found its way into the lives of so many of our contemporaries through the participation in the twelve-step program. It is also gratifying to realize that in the Protestant circles there are voices attesting to the healing potential of the Catholic Sacrament of Reconciliation—what had been considered outdated is now increasingly seen as a benefit contributing to both human and Christian maturity.

Comparing dynamics of the twelve-step program with the elements of sacramental reconciliation brings to the fore the striking similarities they share: both present a journey starting with contrition continuing with an examination of conscience and confessing one's sins, and ending with the enjoinder to make amends. The comparison also surfaces the differences between the two—if the journey is substantially the same, the language used in both points to where they differ. The terms found in the twelve-step program evinces that our contemporaries tend to be allergic to certain religious expressions or concepts such as sin, conversion, prayer, penance, grace, mercy, atonement or restitution; as well, participants in twelve-step programs might vacillate between speaking of "God and "higher power." These differences in language manifest a preference to remain on a more psychological than spiritual level. As a result, the twelve-step program is more comfortable with words and phrases like meditation, wrongdoing or shortcomings, personal inventory, publicly acknowledging and admitting to the higher power, working on character defects and making amends.<sup>55</sup> Nonetheless, implied and assumed in the use of this more "secular" language is a spiritual, faith-rooted dimension of human experience. No matter the language

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<sup>54</sup> G. J. Connors, K. S. Walitzer, J. S. Tonigan, *Spiritual Change in Recovery*, p. 218.

<sup>55</sup> D. B. Hathaway, M. Dawes, *Addiction and Twelve-Step Spirituality*, p. 150.

used, both processes essentially share the Good News to those seeking healing.

In this context, an important question regarding the celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation with addicts can be raised: Why are these celebrations not always successful since they present a very similar dynamic to the twelve-step program? Although not everyone who participates in the twelve-step program is immune from relapsing into addiction, it seems that the twelve-step program is more successful in this regard than the sacramental celebration. This leads to a hypothetical conclusion that Catholics struggling with addictions do not always take their confessions seriously.

How can we help Catholics struggling with addictions to take advantage of the richness of the Sacrament of Reconciliation? Are there any elements in the twelve-step program that could be part of the preparation for a good confession? A major difference here is that individual sacramental confession as generally practiced today does not have the public aspect that is present in AA meetings: admission of addiction before a group of other members. Might an appropriately-adapted liturgy of reconciliation that includes this communitarian dimension be helpful in supporting a more fruitful experience of confession? In any case, both instances, confessing sins and working on character defects, have to be carried out regularly over an extended period of time. In Catholic tradition this currently takes form of confession linked with spiritual direction.

Sometimes confessing sins may be part of the vicious circle of addiction. It happens most probably when addicted persons do not admit that they are powerless in face of their addiction but rely on their own willpower while promising conversion. Here, steps one and two can be an inspiration for a catechesis preparing for a good confession: “We admitted we were powerless over alcohol – that our lives had become unmanageable. We came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.”<sup>56</sup>

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56 M. Gross, *Alcoholics Anonymous: Still Sober After 75 Years*, p. 2362.

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