

Angels & Recovery Fr. Joe W.

I was born to a family in which my mother and father themselves both came from alcoholic families. They both drank very little, having seen the destructive impact of alcohol up close. You'd think I would have learned.

I never drank until I went away to seminary and found the joys of feast days. It was love at first sight. Many years later now, I can look back at those days and marvel that no one saw what was coming. Or, at least, no one said anything to me. And that was part of the problem. We mostly kept things to ourselves in those days, protecting our own and other people's privacy unless it really impinged upon productivity or our own space.

Frankly, over years of formation and priestly life, I had ample opportunities to come clean with myself and with those who might have been helpful. I'd like to think I would have come clean if I had seen the problem straight-on. But, I didn't of course. For me, that's the part of addiction that is "cunning, baffling, and powerful." Even with the best of intentions, regular prayer, daily Mass, introspection, psychotherapy, spiritual direction, and supervision by "competent authorities" no one saw what was happening, least of all me. I just didn't see it.

I knew that bad choices and negative consequences were happening. I knew I wasn't the model religious. But, I thought the problem was *moral* ("I'm bad.") or *existential* ("I'm defective."), and so I just kept trying harder to get better. All to no avail. I kept begging God for help, and then fell back into the pit. And, I convinced myself (needed to convince myself) that because my studies were going well, my superiors and professors thought well of me, and my friends and parishoners thought I was "cool," that all would be well.

I didn't SEE. And that's why the turn to recovery was, for me, an awakening. When I came to Guest House, I was at the end of the rope. I could no longer live a life of contradictions, live a lie. I was in hell A hell of my own making, paved with good intentions and no follow through.

Two "angels" came to me at Guest House. One was Jo Holladay, who believed in me from the start and gave me hope. She helped me to see clearly, "It's the booze." That was news to me, and it illuminated so much that had been in the shadows. The second was a parishioner from home who came to visit with a message from prayer: "Joe, you are enough. You do enough." This simple acceptance from him and from God struck a chord in me. With these words, life became so much simpler.

I have come to believe that God send us "angels" on our journeys. They do not always come on our schedule. They do not always come with the message that we want to hear. But, they do come, and like Abraham of old and Joseph, my patron and the father of Jesus, if we invite them in and listen to the message they bring, life will never be the same.

God's three great graces to me have been the gift of life, the spark of faith, and the grace of recovery. I know that I would not still have the first two graces without the third. It has made my life and ministry today possible. "Yes, my Lord!"

I want to encourage my brothers and sisters in recovery - men and women religious, and priests - to continue the journey. For those hesitating to explore recovery, or those living in turmoil and unsure of what to do, reach out to someone you trust and come clean. Let the sunlight in, and trust that God will send an angel to you. For those in leadership, I call on you to remember that acceptance and hope can be the catalysts for very good things. Apply them wisely.

