

Matt Talbot

The Catholic Community at Connecticut College • November 15, 2008

Matt Talbot, an Irish laborer born in 1856, became an alcoholic at the age of 12 – when he began working in Dublin’s beer and liquor business as a messenger.

Talbot relied on friends to buy him drinks and even stole to get money for alcohol. He quit drinking in humiliation one night at the age of 28 when no one would buy him a beer at a local pub. With the help of his pastor, Talbot turned to God for help staying sober. His devotions, and a determination to focus his life on others, gave him what he needed.

What does drinking have to do with spirituality? Potentially everything. A spiritual journey is a search for truth – in our relationships with God, ourselves and others. Alcohol instead can be a means of avoidance. Sister Molly Monahan writes, “I knew I was in trouble spiritually – I could pray hardly at all – but I had not connected this condition with my drinking. I thought that I was experiencing the ‘dark night of the soul’ described by the mystics, and reserved for chosen souls called to the higher states of the contemplative life.”



Catholicism sees nothing wrong with responsible drinking. After all, Trappists have beer on major feast days and some monasteries distill liqueurs and ferment wine. The issue is not alcohol but how it is used.



“They talk of my drinking but never my thirst.”

Scottish saying

“People who drink to drown their sorrow should be told that sorrow knows how to swim.”

Anonymous

“One martini is all right. Two are too many, and three are not enough.”

James Thurber

“Fill with mingled cream and amber,
I will drain that glass again.
Such hilarious visions clamber
Through the chamber of my brain.

Quaintest thoughts, queerest fancies
Come to life and fade away.
What I care how time advances;
I am drinking ale today.”

Edgar Allen Poe

“I envy people who drink. ... They know what to blame everything on.”

Oscar Levant

“[Some] Christians have been adept, and remarkably inventive, at interpreting God’s commandments to cover just about anything they don’t approve of. The effect, of course, is to make the surpassingly large God of the scriptures into a petty Cosmic Patrolman. Addictions are not pretty, but fretting over them as exclusively moral issues can be a convenient way of ignoring Jesus’ admonition that it isn’t what we ingest into our bodies that is at the root of our troubles, but what comes out of our hearts and minds.”

Kathleen Norris

Matt Talbot was declared “venerable” in 1975. He is remembered on June 19.

The Twelve Steps

Matt Talbot stopped drinking 50 years before Alcoholics Anonymous was founded, but his program for staying sober was similar to AA's Twelve Steps. The steps are:

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.



"You can't be a real country unless you have a beer and an airline. It helps if you have some kind of football team, or nuclear weapons, but at the very least you need a beer."

Frank Zappa

"Always do sober what you said you'd do drunk. That will teach you to keep your mouth shut."

Ernest Hemingway

"If you are young and you drink a great deal it will spoil your health, slow your mind, make you fat – in other words, turn you into an adult."

P.J. O'Rourke

"Drink moderately, for drunkenness neither keeps a secret nor observes a promise."

Miguel de Cervantes

"Never be too hard on the man who can't give up drink. It's as hard to give up the drink as it is to raise the dead to life again. But both are possible and even easy for Our Lord. We have only to depend on him."

Matt Talbot

Questions for contemplation

1. Like Matt Talbot, each of us has a story about what we were once like, what happened and how we have changed. What's your story? What have you done when you realized you were stumbling?
2. Attitudes toward drinking vary considerably, as the quotes on this sheet suggest. What is yours?
3. If you drink, does it affect your spiritual life – your ability to be honest with yourself, to relate to God and others, to pray, to be engaged in the world?



More information

The Matt Talbot web site: www.matt-talbot.com