

June 1960

To Father Ed — Godspeed!

By Bill W.

EARLY Sunday morning, April 3rd, Father Edward Dowling died peacefully in his sleep. The place was Memphis, Tennessee. Cheerfully unmindful of his ebbing health, he had been visiting one of his "Cana"* groups. Never was there a gayer evening than in the hours before. He would have wanted to take his leave of us in just that way. This was one of the most gentle souls and finest friends we AAs may ever know. He left a heritage of inspiration and grace which will be with us always.

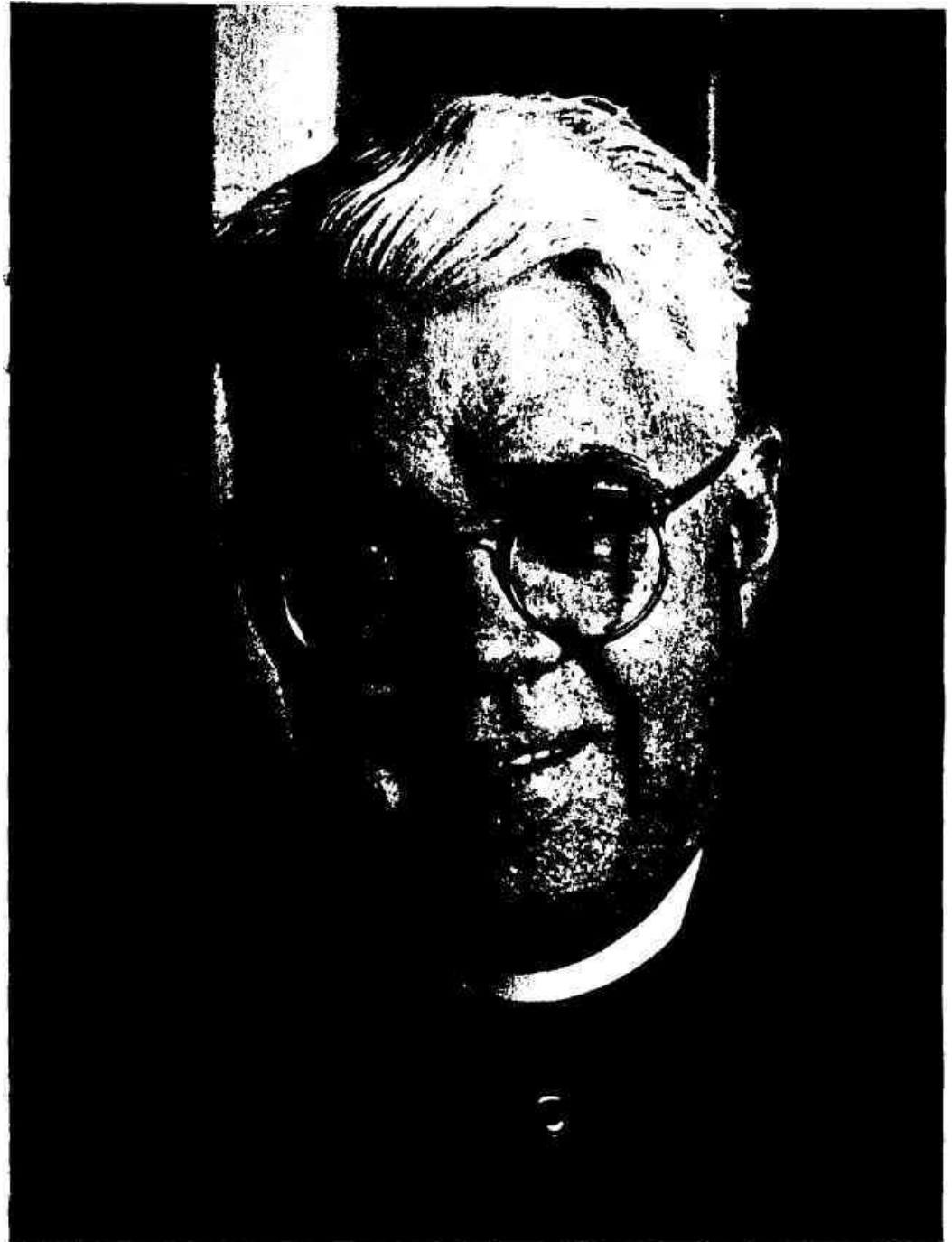
Father Ed had planned to be at our 1960 Long Beach Convention, come July. This prospect, now to be unfulfilled, brings a moving recollection of his appearance at AA's St.

Louis International Convention of 1955. It seems altogether fitting that I repeat the introduction I then made of him, together with an account of the unforgettable impression he left upon me the very first time we met—a fragment of history recorded years afterward in *AA Comes of Age*:

"With deep joy, I present to you Father Ed Dowling who lives at the Jesuit House right here in St. Louis. Father Ed, knowing whence comes his strength, is definitely allergic to praise. Nonetheless I think that certain facts about him should be put into our record—facts that new generations of AAs ought to hear, read, and know.

"Father Ed helped to start the first

*A favorite undertaking which he founded, Father Ed's Cana groups are dedicated, under Church auspices, to the solution of difficult family problems through the practice of AA's Twelve Steps.



AA group in this town; he was the first clergyman of his faith to note the surprising resemblance between the spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius (founder of the Jesuit order) and the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. As a result, he was quick to write in 1940 the first Catholic recommendation of AA of which we have any knowledge.

"Since then, his labor for us has been a prodigy. Not only have his recommendations been heard worldwide, but he has himself worked at AA and for AA. Travels, AA meetings, wise and tender counsel—these works of his can be measured in thousands of miles and thousands of hours.

"In my entire acquaintance, our friend Father Ed is the only one from whom I have never heard a resentful word and of whom I have never heard a single criticism. In my own life he has been a friend, adviser, great example, and the source of more inspiration than I can say.

"Father Ed is made of the stuff of the saints."

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"A great cheer of welcome greeted Father Ed Dowling as, indifferent to his grievous lameness, he made his way to the lectern. Father Dowling of the Jesuit order in St. Louis is intimately known to AAs for a thousand miles and more around. Many in the Convention audience remembered with gratitude his ministry to their spiritual needs. St. Louis old-timers recalled how he helped start their

group; it had turned out to be largely Protestant, but this fazed him not a bit. Some of us could remember his first piece about us in *The Queen's Work*, the Sodality's magazine. He had been the first to note how closely in principle AA's Twelve Steps paralleled a part of the Exercises of St. Ignatius, a basic spiritual discipline of the Jesuit order. He had boldly written in effect to all alcoholics and especially to those of his own faith: 'Folks, AA is good. Come and get it.' And this they certainly had done. His first written words were the beginning of a wonderfully benign influence in favor of our fellowship, the total of which no one will ever be able to compute.

"Father Ed's talk to us at the Convention that Sunday morning flashed with humor and deep insight. As he spoke, the memory of his first appearance in my own life came back to me as fresh as though it were yesterday: One wintry night in 1940 in AA's Old Twenty-Fourth Street Club in New York I had gone to bed at about ten o'clock with a severe dose of self-pity and my imaginary ulcer. Lois was out somewhere. Hail and sleet beat on the tin roof over my head; it was a wild night. The Club was deserted except for old Tom, the retired fireman, that diamond in the rough lately salvaged from Rockland asylum. The front doorbell clanged, and a moment later Tom pushed open my bedroom door. 'Some bum,' said he, 'from St. Louis is down there and wants to see

you.' 'Oh, Lord!', I said. 'Not another one! And at this time of night. Oh, well, bring him up.'

"I heard labored steps on the stairs. Then, balanced precariously on his cane, he came into the room, carrying a battered black hat that was shapeless as a cabbage leaf and plastered with sleet. He lowered himself into my solitary chair, and when he opened his overcoat I saw his clerical collar. He brushed back a shock of white hair and looked at me through the most remarkable pair of eyes I have ever seen. We talked about a lot of things, and my spirits kept on rising, and presently I began to realize that this man radiated a grace that filled the room with a sense of presence. I felt this with great intensity; it was a moving and mysterious experience. In years since I have seen much of this great friend, and whether I was in joy or in pain he

always brought to me the same sense of grace and the presence of God. My case is no exception. Many who meet Father Ed experience this touch of the eternal. It is no wonder that he was able to fill all of us there in the Kiel Auditorium with his inimitable spirit on that wonderful Sunday morning."

Everyone then present will remember this famous quote from Father Ed's St. Louis talk:

"There is a negative approach from agnosticism. This was the approach of Peter the Apostle. 'Lord, to whom shall we go?' I doubt if there is anybody in this hall who really ever sought sobriety. I think we were trying to get away from drunkenness. I don't think we should despise the negative. I have a feeling that if I ever find myself in Heaven, it will be from backing away from Hell." (End)

Just before his death, Father Ed had completed the article he wrote for AA TODAY, the twenty-fifth anniversary commemorative book prepared by the Grapevine. The article will appear in the book under the title, "AA's Steps for the Underprivileged Non-AA."—THE EDITORS.