



# Alcohol Use Disorder: A Spiritual Perspective

by Kathleen Hope Brown, D.Min.

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An integrated spiritual life involves both intellect and emotions, the mind and the heart. The intersection of the two is the “wise mind,” as it is called in dialectical behavioral therapy. An integrated spiritual journey involves joining the rational powers of the mind with the intuitive awareness of the heart, and finding God present in both. Anything less is incomplete.

The Carmelite spiritual tradition sheds important light on the spiritual aspects of recovery from Alcohol Use Disorder (AUD), and it is helpful in spiritual direction. When Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross wrote about the soul, they were not referring to something a person *has*, but to who a person most deeply *is*—their essential nature as an embodied spirit. For John and Teresa, the soul is not a separate aspect of the person, but rather what we see when we look at someone through spiritual eyes.<sup>i</sup> Union with God is not something that is *achieved*, but rather something that is *realized*. It is already

there. It is important for the spiritual director to see the client in that light.

It is also important to acknowledge the very human tendency to seek sources of satisfaction. Our deepest longing is for God, but we do not always realize what that longing really is. We tend to reach for things that we can see, feel, and grasp in order to fill what feels like a void inside us. Gerald May, a psychiatrist writing in the Carmelite tradition, calls these things that we grasp “attachments.” They can become compulsions, and compulsions rob a person of their freedom.<sup>ii</sup>

A person can reach a point where God darkens their awareness, an experience that John of the Cross calls the “dark night.” In that darkness, God takes them where they would not choose to go alone, to fill them with that deeper love for which they long. A person dealing with alcohol addiction can experience this darkness as “hitting bottom.” They realize that they cannot let go of attachments by themselves. Spiritually, this point is not an invitation

to recede into passivity, but an invitation to a very intentional surrender.

*We will never really turn to God in loving openness as long as we are handling things well enough by ourselves. And it is precisely our most powerful addictions that cause us to defeat ourselves, that bring us to the rock bottom realization that we cannot finally master everything. Thus, although in one sense addiction is the enemy of grace, it can also be a powerful channel for the flow of grace. Addiction can be, and often is, the thing that brings us to our knees.<sup>iii</sup>*

While the experience of “hitting bottom” has this important spiritual component, it is not an invitation to spiritualize. Cooperating with God requires humility, honesty, a willingness to accept help in whatever form it is

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# Case Study | Sister Karen

Sister Karen is a highly intelligent, educated, and accomplished woman. She is recognized as an expert and a leader in education and healthcare. She stays so busy and has achieved so much that she seems to have a touch of workaholism as well as a tendency to define herself not by who she is, but by what she does. She is also a self-reliant woman who does not find it easy to ask for or accept help. Doing and giving are easier for her than receiving.

As a young sister, Sister Karen was sexually abused. She confronted the abuse forthrightly, and she did not hide the experience from friends or her sisters in community. She worked with a therapist to deal with the trauma. However, the experience still left her with deep pain, and she became more and more dependent on alcohol to numb the pain. At the encouragement of her community, she enters a treatment program.

In treatment, Sister Karen works extensively with a spiritual integrator in addition to other therapies. Much of her recovery journey is accepting that she

is good, worthy, valued, and loved—not just for what she does, but for who she is. This is quite a challenge for someone who is very sensitive to rejection.

In her prayer life, there is anger at God that she is reluctant to admit fully. She goes through the motions of a prayer life in community, but her private prayer is nearly nonexistent. Sister Karen tends to be very private, not easily sharing the depths of her spiritual life, although it has clearly been very deep at earlier points in her life. Her spiritual integrator tries to point to the grace that is evident in her story, but Sister Karen does not readily do that herself.

Karen's affective experience in prayer has been numbed by alcohol for a long time, and the return of that affective experience takes time. In fact, it is ongoing for Karen. Her spiritual challenge is to focus more on her private, interior prayer, as avoiding it has been a way of keeping her alcohol use compartmentalized and separated from her spiritual life. In that stillness and silence, she can confront the fact that she has been hiding from God. Even

though it is difficult, especially at first, she is willing to keep going through the motions, which speaks to her strength and determination.

When someone lets go of an attachment, something they have been clinging to as a way to cope, they can experience what feels like a an empty space within. Karen's spiritual integrator reminds her that God is there, even in what can feel like a void. This is not to diminish her need for therapy to deal with the trauma, or her need for the support of an Alcoholics Anonymous group. Her spiritual integrator's role is to hold out the light of hope, the light of God's love, and to help her to see that alcoholism does not have to define her. It is not who she is.

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## Case Study *continued*

Over time, Karen becomes more expressive of her emotions. A spiritual life that has been somewhat frozen begins to crack and thaw. She shares that it is difficult to hear positive things about herself apart from her achievements. It is an ongoing challenge to accept and value herself for who she is, not just what she has done. It becomes easier as she comes to believe that God sees her that way.

Friendships formed in treatment remind her that people love and accept her for who she is. She reflects on a comment by another person in the community that alcoholism is a gift for which he is grateful. Karen does not see alcoholism as a gift, but she has found that grace can be experience in its acceptance.

She finds one of the AA prayers especially meaningful:

*God, I offer myself to You, to build with me and to do with me as You will. Relieve me of the bondage of self, that I may better do your will. Take away my difficulties, that victory over them may bear witness to those I would help of your power, your love, and your way of life. AMEN.*

*For confidentiality, reasons, names, identifying data, and other details of treatment have been altered.*

## Spiritual Perspective *continued*

needed, and to find God's grace in that help. Step 3 of Alcoholics Anonymous removes the stigma of surrendering control over one's life. Instead, a person invites a higher power to guide them to a healthier place, with the help of people who support them along the way.

Arriving at this inflection point is a spiritual journey, as well as a psychological and emotional one. Secrecy, isolation, and denial are ways of coping that become familiar for the addicted person, but they are obstacles to reaching the point of surrender. Their prayer life tends to be compartmentalized, if they pray at all. They may be unaccustomed to bringing difficulties, including their difficulties with alcohol, to prayer. This is an attempt to hide from God and others and only increases isolation and loneliness.

A person struggling with AUD is likely to be dealing with guilt and shame, another roadblock in their spiritual life. A spiritual director can remind them that the reality of our humanity is that we are fallen and incomplete. That incompleteness is “the empty side of our longing for God and for love. It is what draws us toward God and one another.”<sup>iv</sup>

Characterizing an addictive substance as an “attachment” does not imply that the addiction is somehow the addict's fault, and it is certainly not intended to add to guilt and shame. Rather, a spiritual director can reinforce the idea that all of us are weak, and any of us can seek satisfaction in ways that are ultimately unsatisfying.

No one can achieve any sort of spiritual perfection alone. God calls us into the future, but we cannot get there on our own. We need God's help and

attempts to hide from God will only get in the way. A spiritual director can invite the client, gently and gradually, to lower these defenses, to be honest with God and others about their struggles, and to listen carefully, in prayer and in the voices of those who support them, for the voice of the Holy Spirit.

### Endnotes

<sup>i</sup>Gerald G. May, M.D., *The Dark Night of the Soul* (Harper Collins, 2005), p. 42.

<sup>ii</sup>Gerald May, M.D., p. 50.

<sup>iii</sup>Gerald G. May, *Addiction and Grace* (Harper Collins, 2007) p. 24

<sup>iv</sup>May, *Addiction and Grace*, p. 34.

*Dr. Kathleen Hope Brown is the coordinator of spiritual formation at Saint Luke Institute.*

## Rev. James E. Garvey, O.Praem., D.Min., Named President and CEO of SLI

Rev. James E. Garvey, O.Praem., D.Min., has been named president and CEO of Saint Luke Institute, effective February 1, 2023.

Fr. Garvey is responsible for guiding the overall strategic direction of Saint Luke Institute (SLI) and its affiliates. "I am honored to join this team and advance SLI's healing mission," he said.

He succeeds Rev. David Songy, O.F.M.Cap., S.T.D., Psy.D. Fr. Songy will serve as president emeritus and continue to work with SLI on education and other initiatives.

"The Board of Directors and I are so pleased Fr. Garvey has accepted this position. His ministry experience and academic background are an excellent fit for Saint Luke's mission of spiritual and psychological healing for priests and religious," Fr. Songy noted.

### About Fr. James E. Garvey, O.Praem., D.Min.

Fr. Garvey is a member of the Norbertine community (Canons Regular of Prémontré) of Daylesford Abbey in

Paoli, Pennsylvania. A board-certified chaplain and trained spiritual director, Fr. Garvey has served as chaplain at several medical facilities and was part of the spirituality staff of a mental health care facility as well as a drug and alcohol treatment center. He directs retreats nationally and is a faculty member at The Catholic University of America, guiding seminarians through their first experiences in ministry.

Fr. Garvey earned a doctor of ministry from The Catholic University of America, a master of divinity and graduate certificate in liturgy from Catholic Theological Union, a graduate certificate in spiritual direction from Fordham University, and a master of arts in theology from Saint Charles Borromeo School of Theological Studies.



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SLI coordinator of spiritual formation Kathleen Hope Brown, D.Min., explores prayer forms from our rich spiritual traditions-Ignatian, Carmelite, Salesian, Benedictine -that can lead us into that stillness and silence.

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