The Disease That Respects No Vocation

By John Dash

This happens all the time: a diminutive, trimly cut woman strides to the head of the group. She is wearing a nubbly knitted dress and a chic, mannish haircut designed for a fashionable misattention at the mirror.

On her breast a silver cross hangs suspended on a white silk ribbon.

"I'm Sister Katherine," she announces, "and I'm an alcoholic."

That, or something close to it, happened only last week at the Cenacle when 25 alcoholics gathered for a "Serenity Weekend," a time of fellowship, mutual support and prayer on the road of recovery.

Sister Katherine, a Religious of the Cenacle, is a "born alcoholic," whose speech betrays her New England home and whose energy belies the fact she was "overseas" during World War II.

And, as she readily volunteers, had her first drink "straight from the bottle and blacked out."

"I was an alcoholic just waiting for the first bottle to happen," she said in an interview shortly before the opening of the Serenity Weekend.

For the past 15 years, Sister Katherine has pursued a ministry with Alcoholics Anonymous, of which the Serenity Weekend program is a part.

It was during her duty as a nurse in Second General Hospital during WWII that she began drinking in earnest, she said. And during that time, "I always drank too much."

Following a classic pattern, after several years of such behavior, she "hit bottom," and tried to commit suicide by taking an overdose of pills.

During that time, she related, she came to an encounter with the Roman Catholic Church, was attracted to it, and began instructions. Five years later, however, she hit bottom again, and in her blackout period, again attempted suicide.

It was then that, "at the bottom of the horrors," the grace for both conversion and for dedicating her life as a woman religious welled up within her.

But the basic problem of the alcoholism was not solved, she said. She attributes her sobriety in the religious habit to being "fooled by not being served alcohol." Then, after seven years in religious life, Sister Katherine fell ill and was put on a medication.

At that point there was an immediate personality change — and it was then that, through AA, she was finally able to pursue her recovery from the disease.

"Alcoholism is a very blinding disease," she said last week, blinding in three ways: physically, mentally and spiritually.

"The only treatment is no alcohol, absolutely no alcohol."

The physical aspect of alcoholism "is not falling down drunk but the compulsion to take another drink and then another. The mental is the obsession to drink more. The spiritual is not the loss of the ability to pray, but the willingness to settle for less," she said.

Hesitant to make blanket observations on alcoholism among clergy and religious, Sister Katherine did say that "by the very nature of religious life, it's very easy to get into private drinking and to get into trouble."

An added difficulty, she said, may be that pride in one's vocation, coupled with a sense that alcoholism is a "moral problem," which it is not, keeps clerics and religious from seeking AA.

"A priest died last year because he wouldn't seek help," she said.

"I don't know any statistics on the prevalence (of alcoholism among clergy and religious), but I do know that it is not out in the open," as it is becoming among the laity, she said.

For anyone, layman, religious, cleric, who has a problem with alcohol, the first step is to contact Alcoholics Anonymous, she said.

In Rochester, AA can be reached by calling (716) 232-6720.

Several years ago, Sister Katherine, writing in "Encounter," encouraged her sisters in the Cenacle in ministry to alcoholics. "Really to know and understand the disease of alcoholism, attend many AA meetings ... To understand how and why alcoholism is a family disease, attend some Al-Anon meetings."

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Stephen Goebert, president of the Newark Kiwanis Club, and Norman Brust of the Newark Developmental Center.

Kiwanis Club Gift Will Aid Conference

The Newark Developmental Center has announced a $200 donation from the Newark Kiwanis Club. The donation leads off the fund drive for the International Year of the Disabled Persons (IYDP) conference secheduled for Oct. 23 at the Rowntowner in Newark.

Stephen Goebert, president of the club, stated, "Kiwanians are seeking to involve themselves in projects to better the community, particularly those dealing with handicaps." According to Goebert, the Newark club is one year old, and is the only Kiwanis Club in Wayne County. There are over 8,000 Kiwanis Clubs worldwide.

The IYDP Conference will include a series of workshops and tours. One of the conference's aims will be to advise local businessmen and merchants of the funding available to aid them in making their buildings more accessible to handicapped individuals.

Marvin Decker, chairman of the Wayne County Board of Supervisors, and Harry Halldow, supervisor of the Town of Williamson, are honorary co-chairman of the event. Representative Frank Horton (R-NY) will be the keynote luncheon speaker.

The cost of the conference and luncheon is $5. Tickets for the basketball game at 8 p.m., between the Rochester Wheels and area businessmen in the Newark Developmental Center gym, are $2 for adults and $1 for senior citizens and children. For further information contact Newark Developmental Center at 331-1700, ext. 440 or 386.

Business in Diocese

Charles B. Carson III, a graduate of St. John Fisher College, has been named to the newly created post of product development manager at the Genesee Brewing Co., Inc. He most recently served as district sales manager for northeastern Pennsylvania.

Northwest Assembly Oct. 23-24

Msgr. William Shannon, theologian, writer, and teacher at Nazareth College, will give the keynote address at the Northwest Regional Assembly, on Friday and Saturday, Oct. 23-24, at Our Lady of Mercy Church, 600 Denise Road.

Msgr. Shannon has been at the college for nearly 35 years and is chairman of Religious Studies there. He is also chaplain at the Sisters of St. Joseph Motherhouse. His latest book, published last April, is titled "Thomas Merton's Dark Path."

The assembly, which involves 17 parishes and four other institutions, will open at 7:30 p.m. with registration and a welcoming address by the coordinator, Father Louis Vasile of St. Lawrence Church. Following Msgr. Shannon's remarks, Bishop Matthew H. Clark will close the Friday meeting with vespers at 9 p.m.

Saturday will feature seven workshops, from which each participant may choose three. The workshops will begin at 10 a.m. and continue until 2:45 p.m. when Father Vasile will celebrate Mass to close the assembly.

The workshops scheduled include Adult Education, Catechumenate, Divorced-Separated Catholics, Goalsetting for Parish Councils, Parish Renewal Programs, Planning Liturgical Seasons, and Youth Ministry.

Fisher Duo Places 2nd In Tourney

Bob Swartout and Susan Ciccarelli of the University of Rochester defeated Ken Mason and Donna Dedee of St. John Fisher College, 6-2, 6-1, to defend their title in the Rochester Area College Mixed Doubles Tennis Championships last Saturday, Sept. 19, at William Smith & Hobart Colleges, Geneva.

Seven area schools competed including Keuka College, Monroe Community College, Rochester Institute of Technology and Nazareth College.

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