

### Aiding the addicted

Finding ways to support the recovery of people whose lives are touched by addiction is not only the church's responsibility, but also an opportunity for renewal. See pages 10 and 11.



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## Journey back to God begins with '12 steps'

By Lee Strong  
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — Ten years ago, Betty M. realized her life was out of control one night as she stood holding a carving knife over the body of her drunken husband.

After 27 years of marriage to Ed, an active alcoholic, Betty hit bottom — the point at which she recognized she needed help — that night in January, 1980. The couple's youngest child had committed suicide just the month before, and Betty had been depressed for weeks.

She had almost decided to kill herself when her husband, Ed, staggered home drunk and passed out on the couch.

"I took a carving knife and stood over him," Betty recalls. "Then I said, 'God help me,' and I put the knife away and called a friend."

The friend recommended that Betty go to Al-Anon, a program for people whose lives have been affected by another person's addiction to alcohol. Betty is still attending Al-Anon meetings, and maintains that finding the program saved her life — and her soul.

Al-Anon is one of a number of groups that employ the 12 Steps to Recovery — a spiritual program the founders of Alcoholics Anonymous developed in the 1930s to help alcoholics battle their addiction.

The 12 steps force people to admit that they have a problem over which they are powerless and that their lives have become unmanageable (Step 1); that only a higher power can restore them to sanity (Step 2); and, based on these realizations, that they must turn their will and lives over to that higher power (Step 3). The remaining steps guide people through a process of maintenance and of examining their characters, making changes when necessary.

Along with other aspects of the AA program, the 12 steps have proven so successful over the years that AA now can be found in 141 nations and, according to figures from the organization's national headquarters in New York City, has a worldwide membership of 1,793,834.

Al-Anon, created in the early 1950s to coincide with AA, likewise has spread to 101 countries and comprises more than 30,000 groups.

Meanwhile, the basic AA format, including the 12 steps and the principle of anonymity (which requires that people be called by their first names only), has become the basis for a number of other groups dealing with addictive behaviors. In the Rochester area alone, these programs, loosely called 12-step programs, include not only AA and Al-Anon, but also Alateen, Gamblers Anonymous, Overeaters Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, and even Sexoholics Anonymous.

And the number of such programs has grown dramatically in recent years, noted Dr. Frank Riessman, director of the National Self Help Clearing House in New

York City.

"The 12-step approach is one of the most effective ways to deal with addiction," said Dr. Riessman, who added that the spiritual dimension of the program is an important component of its effectiveness.

"I think that very often the people are overpowered by trying to deal with something all the time," Dr. Riessman explained. "By turning it over to someone else, it's a relief; it's a release."

Cathy Saresky, associate director for clinical services at the Catholic Family Center's Restart Substance Abuse Program, suggested that the growth of such programs is a symptom not only of the greater understanding of addiction, but of contemporary life as well.

"I think people have learned to cope with life by being involved with compulsive behavior," Saresky said. "If we don't have a balance in our lives — if we don't have a means to cope with the pressure in our lives — we turn to compulsive behaviors."

AA member Steven noted, for example, that he used alcohol as a kind of medication.

"I didn't want to look at the feelings I had inside me,"

Steven said. "I didn't want to look at the things that were making me drink."

"Sometimes you're as powerless over the way that that you act as the other person is over the alcohol," noted Karen, an Al-Anon member. "(The 12 steps) force you to look at the things that block you from being the person God intended you to be."

In fact, the 12 steps are such an effective means for looking at one's life and behavior, that they have even become the basis of a retreat offered at Rochester's Cenacle Center for Spiritual Renewal.

"I think in one way or another every one of us is in a journey of recovery or needs to be," observed Sister Margaret Mayk, rc, the center's retreat coordinator. "I think that's a basic part of Christianity. The 12 steps give you a spiritually rooted process by which to come to wholeness."

"They call us to put God back into our lives as the source out of which every good would flow," she continued. "They call us to look at our lives daily and be on an evaluative process so that we can maintain the health that we've discovered through the earlier steps."

Sister Mayk said the Cenacle began offering programs focusing on the 12 steps at the request of those who participate in the center's retreats. Among such programs are an annual six-week Lenten series, two weekend retreats each year, and a group that meets at the Cenacle on the first Monday of every month.

One of the presenters at those retreats is Deacon Greg Doyle, director of Matt Talbot Ministries, Inc. Deacon Doyle

**'What I learned is that God never left me, even at the worst times. I was just too sick to see Him. The steps led me back to Him.'**

**Betty M.**

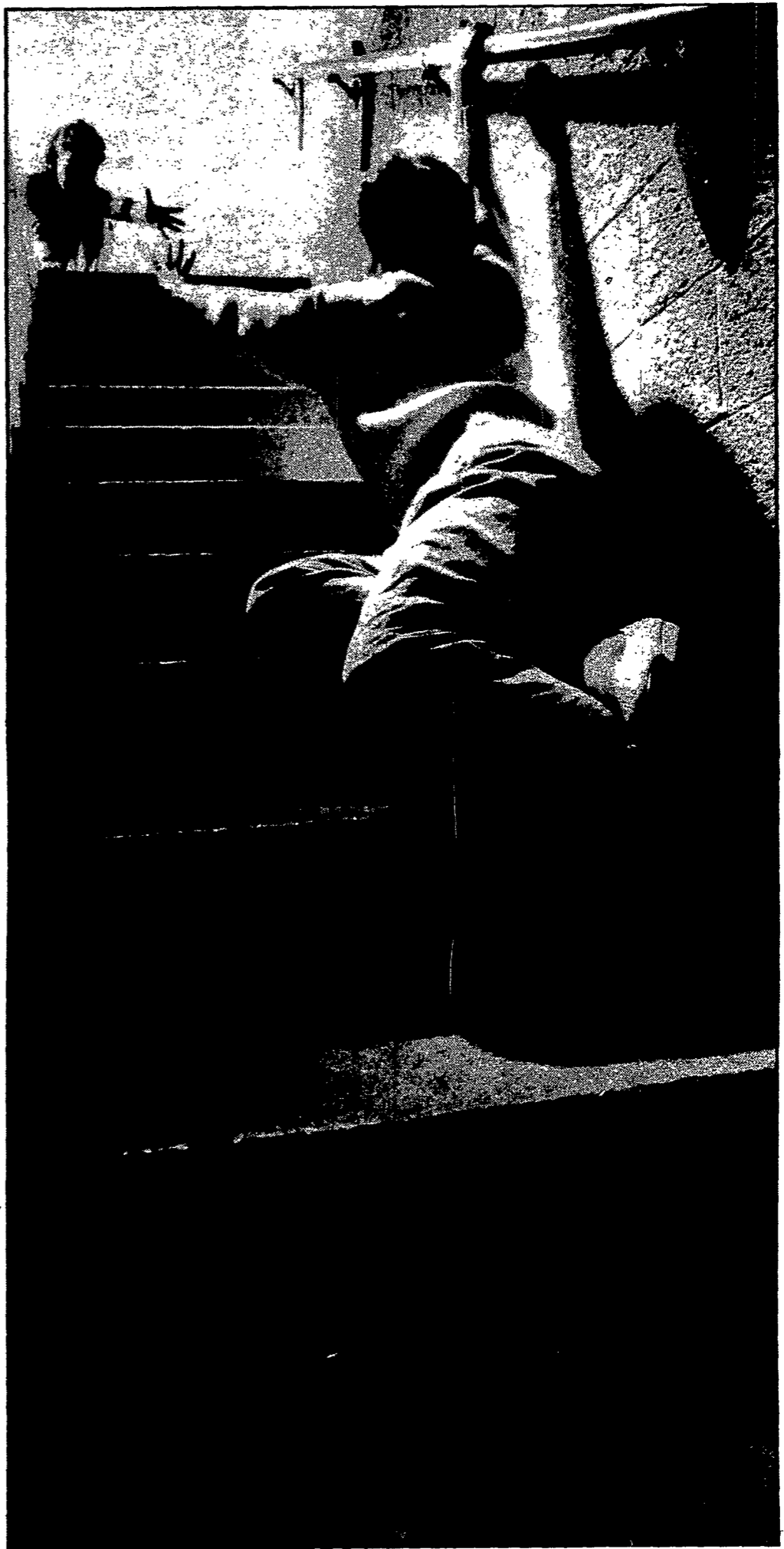


Photo-illustration by Babette G. Augustin/Staff photographer

discovered the 12 steps on his own, having come from an alcoholic family. He quickly realized their spiritual content.

"I think the 12 steps can be seen in the spirituality of every major religion and in any authentic spiritual writing," Deacon Doyle said. "I say that because (the 12-step program) talks about identifying character defects and then dealing with them appropriately. It calls you to be centered and prayerful."

Deacon Doyle became even more involved with the 12 steps during his diaconal field assignment at St. August-

tine's Parish in Rochester in 1981. He created a group for alcoholics, named after Matt Talbot, an Irish working man who battled his alcoholism through prayer.

But as alcohol-treatment programs became more available, Deacon Doyle recalled, the program expanded to take in people dealing with other kinds of dysfunction in their lives. The deacon soon reached a conclusion.

"The 12 steps apply to everyone," he declared. "It fits in with what you

**Continued on page 2**