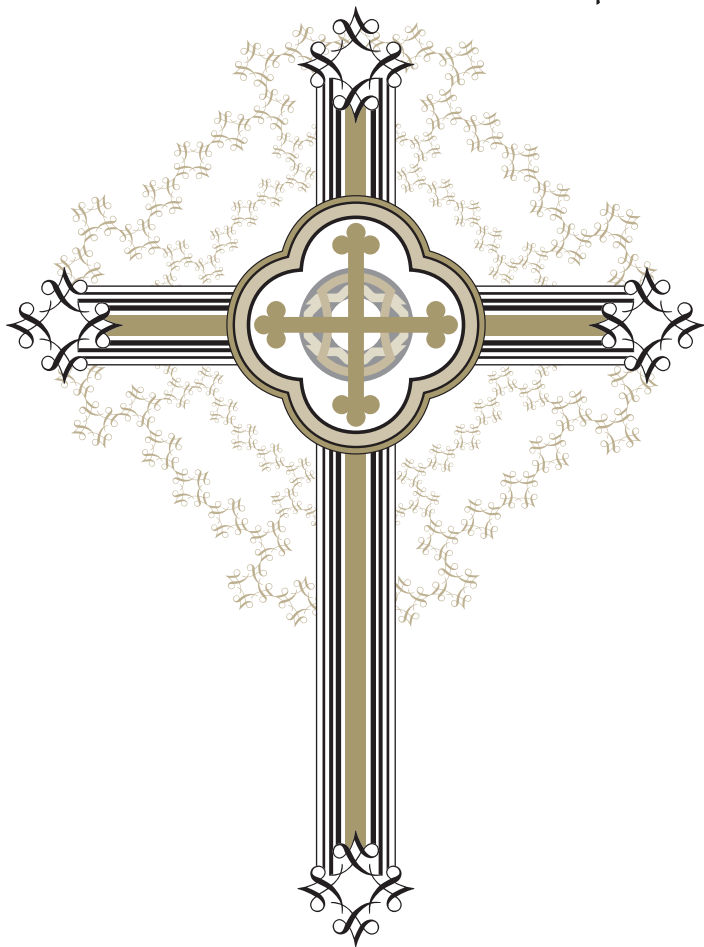


The Stations of the Cross

Fourteen Stations & Twelve Steps



Father Tom H



The Stations of the Cross

Fourteen Stations & Twelve Steps



Written by

Monsignor **T**homas **J.** Harrington

Illustrations & Design

James **A.** **F**lanagan **Jr.**

Introduction to the Stations of the Cross Meditations

The devotion of “The Stations of the Cross,” sometimes called “The Way of the Cross,” has been an element of Christian piety for many centuries. The idea of having a series of “shrines” depicting incidents associated with the journey of Jesus on Good Friday through the streets of Jerusalem to the hill of Calvary outside the city walls, the place of his crucifixion, can be traced to misty origins in Palestine, where Christian pilgrims would visit. In time, sites became available in western Europe affording access to the mysteries of Faith for those unable to travel to the Holy Land.

Franciscan friars, especially since the 14th century, have been vigorous in promoting the devotion of praying the “Stations” and to this day many Catholic people make the recitation of the devotion an integral part of their personal and communal observance of the Season of Lent. All Catholic churches display the fourteen Stations along the walls and it is not unusual for individuals to wander slowly and prayerfully around the church, pausing for prayer at each individual Station. Many devotional aids, prayer books and pamphlets are available to provide commentary on the events portrayed in the Stations.

As people have an opportunity to reflect on one after another of the events which either Scripture or tradition have associated with the painful journey of Jesus to his redemptive and sacrificial death, lives have been enriched by meditation drawn from the Stations.

What is true in a general way for the Christian faithful and any others of good will who may not share the Christian faith in its fullness but who still contemplate the Stations can certainly be true, and perhaps especially so, for those of us who have been graced with the gift of recovery from alcoholism and/or any of the other diseases of addiction.

The following pages contain suggestions for meditation geared especially for those who are both celebrating and striving, on a daily basis, for “recovery.” Ours is a three-fold disease, afflicting us physically, mentally and spiritually. Recovery entails restoration of all three facets in sober living. Perhaps these thoughts will contribute in some modest way to the enrichment of our spiritual lives and add a measure of serenity to our own “journey.”



Abandon yourself to God as you understand God.

Admit your faults to him and to your fellows.

Clear away the wreckage of your past. Give freely of what you find and join us. We shall be with you in the Fellowship of the Spirit, and you will surely meet some of us as you trudge the Road of Happy Destiny.

May God bless you and keep you - until then.

Bill W. - The “Big Book” of AA





Jesus is condemned to death

Though all the Gospel accounts tell us something of the encounter between Jesus of Nazareth and Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, John's version, Chapters 18 and 19, affords us the most fruitful "recovery" meditation.

By this time, the night has passed and Jesus is haggard, beaten and bound by rough rope shackles. He has been dragged from the Sanhedrin, where religious authorities have pronounced judgment on him, to the praetorium of the Roman cohort. "Behold the man," cries the Roman procurator. In some of the Christian communities of the Mediterranean world devotion of great pathos has emerged to the "Santo Christo." In any event, he is a picture of utter powerlessness.

Powerlessness - that stands as our focal point for reflection at this "Station," this step in the journey of Good Friday. Jesus is completely powerless. Consider this: haven't you and I been beaten down by alcohol or whatever else it is that had consumed our ability to choose, to act? At the meetings of our fellowship it is suggested that we "identify" with those who are sharing their experience, strength and hope. We strive not to "compare," lest we conclude that the speaker's journey, foreign to our own, is irrelevant. When we hear of "powerlessness," as mentioned in the First Step, recovery is best served by identifying.

Perhaps you have a recollection of that utter desolation which we sometimes call "the gift of desperation." This is what has impelled many of us to begin the road to recovery. This is ultimate powerlessness, an avenue of identification with Jesus as we contemplate this Station.

Pilate, we hear in John's account, Chapter 19, verses 10 and 11, with all the arrogance of those who wield secular or worldly influence, brashly refers to his own "power" during the dialogue with Jesus. Broken as he is, however, Jesus can point out that Pilate's alleged "power" is, itself, a "gift from above."

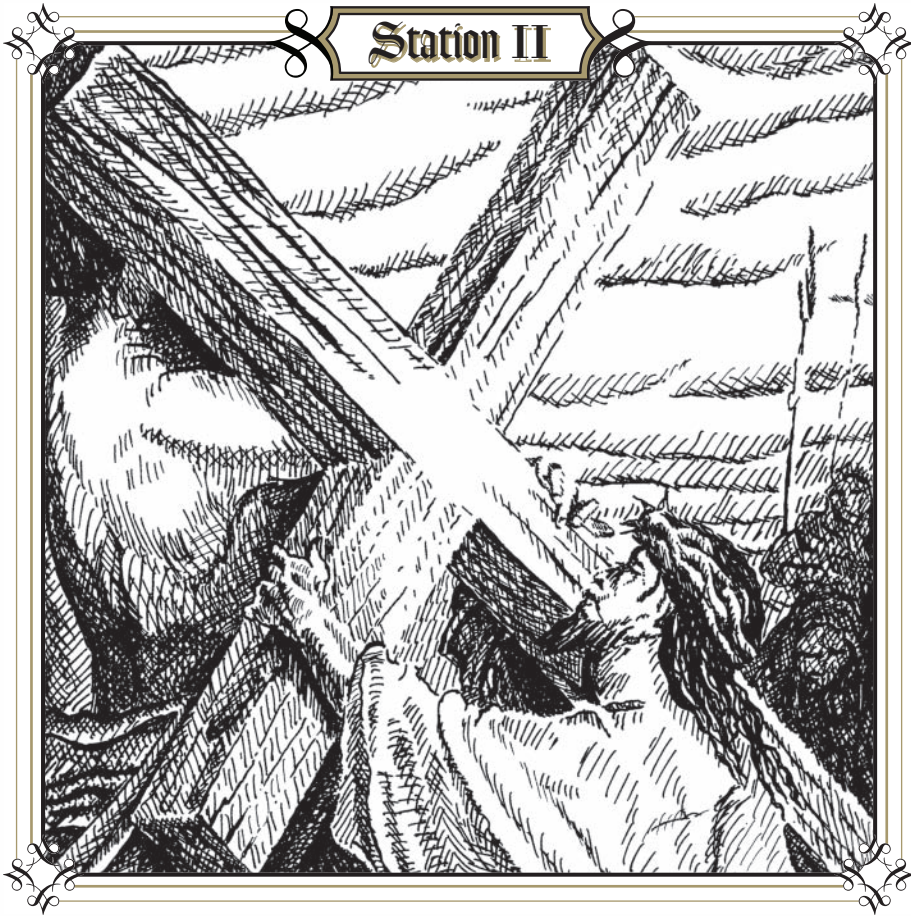
This dialogue with Pilate raises another important issue: truth. Jesus speaks to Pilate, Chapter 18, verse 38f... My mission, he says, is "to testify to the truth." Pilate yawns, "Truth... what's that?"

Here is another important facet of this first meditation. Denial is such a force in our active drinking careers. We shun the truth and often enough we have enablers who do so, too. How many elephants have been in our living rooms.. and for how long? We won't get too far along the journey of recovery if we wallow in denial.

Look at the word picture of the condemned Jesus standing before Pilate. "Powerlessness" and "Truth" are essential elements in our departure from the agony of addiction. But, we still have a long way to go.



Station II



Jesus takes up his cross

The Romans forced those condemned to the excruciating death of crucifixion to carry the rough wood beams forming the cross from the judgment seat to the place where the death sentence was carried out. Condemnation was pronounced by Pilate, the procurator, within the walls of the Holy City of Jerusalem. The place of execution was outside the walls of the city, “Calvary.”

Scholars debate whether it was just the single beam across the top of the configuration where the arms of the crucified were affixed or whether it was the full instrument of torment, shaped somewhat like the letter “T.” Which form Jesus took upon his shoulders is irrelevant for our meditation. The so-called “synoptic” evangelists (Matthew, Chapter 27; Mark, Chapter 15; and Luke, Chapter 29) all allude to this element of the passion.

What is at issue for our meditation is the concept of acceptance. A consequence of our abandonment of “denial” is the recognition of truth, of reality. Sometimes, it is a harsh and burdensome thing to accept the truth.

We know that a couple of shady characters, criminals, accompanied Jesus along the way to Calvary, themselves condemned to the same shameful death of crucifixion. We can well imagine that they resisted the cross and found it heavy and loathsome. “Why me?” they may have complained.

By contrast, Jesus, we are told, humbly accepted his cross, took it up and began the painful journey. Here’s a modeling for alcoholics and addicted people. Haven’t we heard over and over at our meetings the advice to “take life on life’s terms?”

When we introduce ourselves at meetings, these words are so important: “Hi, I’m an alcoholic and my name is Tom.” Remember the first time you said those words. Maybe for you, it was scary to do so. But didn’t you find the lifting of such a great burden with that important gesture of acceptance. Another of the many paradoxes of recovery - with acceptance, our burden is lifted!

In Mark’s account, Chapter 8, verse 34ff, Jesus predicts that his disciples will all, one way or another, some time or other, have to make a choice: “Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross and follow me.”

I remember sitting at a meeting in Washington, D.C., when a fellow so wisely said, “The pain in recovery is rooted in resistance,” and he ground one fist against the other. “Acceptance,” by contrast, generally means “letting go.” We have more to say about this as our journey of meditation continues.

But remember, we treasure the “Serenity Prayer” in our adventure of recovery. It begins with acceptance. In this second Station, Jesus’ journey along the road to Calvary commenced when he accepted the cross upon his shoulders.





Jesus falls for the first time

There is no Scriptural foundation for the tradition of the “falls” (and three are included in the classic devotion of the Stations) which Jesus endured while negotiating the narrow, crowded and largely hostile streets of Jerusalem. If only speculative, the tradition, nonetheless, can certainly be regarded as plausible, given the weakened condition of Jesus and the rough, urgent treatment accorded him by the soldiers. The tradition holds that Jesus struggled back to his feet each time and continued his climb to the hillside beyond the walls of the city, to “Golgotha,” the place of execution, the “place of the skull.”

This first fall of Jesus is placed at the very beginning of the “via dolorosa,” the sorrowful way.

Any of us who have struggled with our recovery can find a very apparent identification with this first fall along the way, for many of us have experienced slips or relapses in our path to recovery, especially in the early days of sobriety.

Bill W., with Doctor Bob one of the founders of the AA fellowship, advises us, in the pages of his celebrated “Red Book,” (As Bill Sees It), not to be overly discouraged: “Drunks always learn the hard way.” Pick yourself up, brush off the dust and dirt and get going again. And this is exactly what Jesus did.

It helps to find ways to identify with Jesus and to copy his actions. I love those wrist bands which the children in our parish school used to slip on. “W.W.J.D.” they read, “What Would Jesus Do.” It’s a powerful “short-hand” for spirituality and I know it has helped me a lot in many, many situations and not all of them related (at least not “directly”) to the adventure of recovery.

Just think of the pain which shot through every nerve in his body as Jesus first stubbed a toe or a foot, then began to lose his precarious balance and went crashing to the stones of the pavement with the heavy beam across his back. I think it likely that he uttered a groan.

Maybe you are like me. After I had begun to “come around” the edges of the AA fellowship, sort of on the periphery, I would apparently need to do some more research and I would tumble. Perhaps that is for the best, for I have often thought that if I had taken just one less drink, I might well still be out there, “suicide on the installment plan.” As it turned out, I had “enough!” But in those early days, I found slips to be extremely painful. You see, by then I knew there was a better way, the AA way. Relapses, it seems to me, are just another clear symptom of the underlying disease of addiction.

The vision offered in the third Station, Jesus falling, painfully to be sure, but then staggering to his feet and continuing on along the way, challenges and, at the same time, encourages those of us who’ve had the misfortune to experience a relapse. There’s much more in store for us as we follow this meditative journey in the footsteps of the Savior.



Station IV



Jesus meets his afflicted mother

This Station is generally introduced with those precise words, including the qualifying adjective “afflicted” applied to Mary. There is no Scriptural basis for the meeting which, tradition asserts, took place in the winding streets and byways of Jerusalem.

We do hear, in John’s account, Chapter 19, verse 25ff., that Mary was present at the foot of the cross on Calvary. Interestingly, both Mark and Matthew identify some of the women who were gathered at that site, they omit mention of Jesus mother, Mary. These Scriptural matters, however, are not at issue in our meditation on this Station.

Instead, let’s consider how alcoholism is a family disease, affecting not simply the addicted person him - or herself, but infecting the lives, in ways physical, emotional and spiritual, of all who are bound by ties of blood and love. Many of us have proclaimed at one time or another, even in the depths of our misery, that we are not hurting anyone but ourselves. How terribly, and typically, self-centered! Untreated and living without recovery, the alcoholic is “toxic.” We tend to take hostages.

When Jesus was but a tiny infant, Mary and Joseph, following the law of the Mosaic code, brought him, the firstborn male, to the temple. In the Catholic devotion of the Rosary, the fourth of the “Joyful Mysteries” celebrates “The Presentation of the Child Jesus in the Temple.”

In that case, we hear in Luke’s account, that an elderly gentleman was inspired to recognize the child as the promised Messiah. This man, Simeon, praised God for the gift of this special encounter. He spoke of the contentious life to which the baby was destined and then he looked at Mary; she would suffer, too, he prophesized: “You, yourself, will be pierced by the sword” (Luke 3:35). He spoke of a metaphor, but a broken heart is so often the reality for those who endure the agony of a loved one’s addiction. Spouses, parents, children, friends, co-workers and those in any other relationship with an active alcoholic are not simply “affected” by the affliction of their significant other, they are heart-broken and sometimes repetitively.

“**I**’m sorry,” are easy words to recite. Part of the life-long process of recovery is to engage in making amends to those whom we have caused to suffer, some of whom having sustained deep, perhaps lasting, damage because of our antics.

The best “amends” can be a life devoted to the challenge of real recovery.

Some things heal. Sometimes, sad to say, things are broken and cannot be put together again. “Humpty Dumpty” may be more than a childish rhyme. The saddest three words in our language may well be these: “It’s too late.”

So, keep a sense of the potential we have to afflict and infect people whom we truly love. Don’t break the hearts of those whom you love.



Station V



Simon of Cyrene helps Jesus to carry the cross

Three evangelists, Matthew, Mark and Luke, all concur in documenting the reality manifest in this Station. Simon, a bystander, was pressed into service by the soldiers and made him assist Jesus, perhaps to carry the cross outright. He seems to have later become a member of one of the first Christian communities, for his children are identified as disciples. Probably he was a stout fellow, a “rube” from the country and not of the city-dwellers, which may explain how he came to the attention of the soldiers.

For or meditation, we can focus on the role which sponsors play in a journey to sobriety and serenity. They lend a hand as we struggle. This is especially helpful in early sobriety, but a good relationship with one or more “sponsors” continues to be a warmly recommended part of our adventure of recovery.

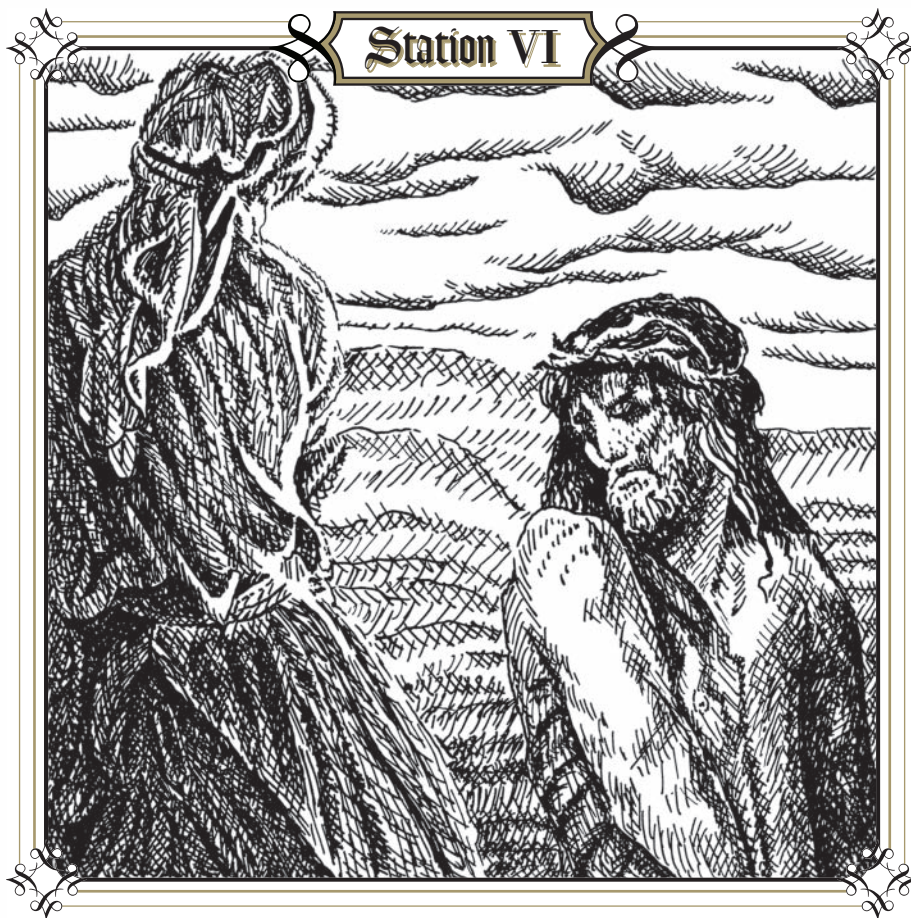
We say it’s “recommended.” No doubt, you’ve heard the word suggestion used, too, in this context. Drunks, for some reason, resist and resist strongly commands or rules. So, we “suggest.” Someone in the fellowship has said, “Hey, these are just suggestions. It’s like when you have a parachute on and jump out of an airplane. It’s suggested that you pull the rip cord.” Generally, we avoid apodictic directions. That is, unless you remember, as I do, some of the old bald-headed talk, but more importantly, they could walk the walk. And, not coincidentally, they knew enough to “carry the message” but not to try to “carry the drunk.” In the latter instance, they could be jeopardizing their own sobriety.

Simon of Cyrene, then, is a model for all of us in this meditation, a man who offered essential help to Jesus. Tradition sometimes suggests that he was reluctant at first, then as the agonizing trip along the way of sorrows unfolded, he became much more compassionate himself. Mel Gibson’s interpretation in the celebrated movie “The Passion” has Simon defying the soldiers in Jesus’ behalf before they reached the crown of the hill.

The other side of the “sponsorship” coin is the satisfaction which can result from serving as a “sponsor” for a newcomer. A middle-aged man with the pallor of death and dragging his leg approached me at a meeting one day and asked me to sponsor him. To be perfectly candid, I was reluctant - I have to think of Simon. But as our relationship unfolded over the next couple of years, before God finally called him home, it was one of the most enriching times of my recovery. “Charlie,” that was his name, came with me to wakes and helped to recite the prayers. Tears can still well up in my eyes recalling his tender words to a father of a tiny baby who had died. We were in the funeral parlor. Charlie said to him in so poignant a way, with such empathy, “I’m a father, too.”

When Charlie died, the serving mayor of our city and two of the men who had preceded him in office were in the church. A police escort accompanied the cortege to the cemetery, this, for a man who was living in a boxcar outside New York City at one sad stage of his life. He died a man of dignity and integrity. “Sponsorship” was and is a two-way street. I think Simon of Cyrene would understand that; maybe we could say that he would “identify.”





Veronica wipes the face of Jesus

Again, we have an incident to which the Scriptures bear no testimony. Rather, the event appears to be rooted in the memory of the Christian community of the earliest years, in the “tradition” which has been, as the word itself suggests, “handed down.”

We are told that a courageous woman burst from the crowd lining the street to offer a simple gesture of compassion. Some of the devotional books contain an imagined replica of the linen cloth with which “Veronica” cleansed the blood-stained, sweated face of Jesus as the Station portrays for us. “Veronica” is literally rendered, “True Likeness” reflecting the tradition that the cloth wondrously captured the facial image of the suffering Jesus.

For our meditation addressing themes of our gift of recovery, may we build upon the notion of “sponsorship” which emerged in the immediately preceding Station and think of that dimension of our recovery which challenges us to be a power of example to others in our fellowship, especially newcomers. When we begin to come into our fellowship and not just fiddle around the margins or the periphery, generally we affiliate with a “group.” In mysterious and congruent fashion, some reflection of each man and woman enriches all the other “members.”

The “Declaration” adopted at the 30th Anniversary Convention of the AA Fellowship in 1965 is a kind of “mission statement” to guide all members:

When anyone, anywhere, reaches out for help, I want the hand of AA always to be there. And for that, I am responsible.

Responsibility is sometimes challenging for those of us who are afflicted with the diseases of addiction. Still, it will often happen that people will judge AA by the manner in which we, each of us, reflect the power of the 12 Steps, the suggestions, the way of life. You and I are the “face” of AA. Sick and suffering alcoholics may at some critical moment in their pain have no pamphlet to examine or Big Book to consult. They may at that moment of truth have only our own experience, strength and hope to cling to. What gifts we share and what an awesome responsibility we have: to offer a true image of this precious gift.

Sometimes, this is akin to the challenge of being a disciple of Jesus. The young woman whom this Station celebrates was courageous and willing to take great risks. Aside from the strictly “religious” dimension of this thought, there is a great challenge to us. After all, ours is a program of “attraction” and not “promotion.”





Jesus falls for the second time

Sometimes, when the devotion of the Stations of the Cross is celebrated in a parish church, there is a dialogue which introduces each individual Station: “We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you. Because by your holy cross, you have redeemed the world.” As these words are exchanged between the priest or deacon and the congregation, everyone genuflects, bending their knee (usually the right knee) for a moment. When you see some of the older folks, perhaps with a touch of arthritis, struggling to do this fourteen separate times, it speaks, somehow, to the incident suggested in this Station.

Again, it is a tradition and not the Scriptures, which tells us that Jesus went tumbling yet another time, crashing to the ground on his painful journey through the streets of Jerusalem, “once again” to rise and struggle on.

For a meditation, perhaps we might spend a moment contemplating one of the realities of the adventure of recovery in the AA fellowship. Here, I am not talking about a formal “slip” or “relapse,” but rather about something else which can crop up. We can slide into what the folks around our halls sometimes call a “Dry Drunk,” a condition which afflicts those who get away from adherence to the 12 Steps, when we neglect the suggestions about simple daily routines for the maintenance of our sobriety. We might stop asking for help on a daily basis or expressing our gratitude to our Higher Power. Perhaps we begin to miss attending meetings. Some of the oldtimers used a phrase, noting that people can begin to engage in “stinking thinking,” a prelude to drinking.

Those of us who are alcoholics come equipped with a “built-in forgetter,” one which is easily triggered. Perhaps we have been fortunate enough not to pick up a drink or a substitute, but the old self-centered arrogance begins to pick up a head of steam in our lives, our defects of character rear their sometimes ugly heads. We begin to emit toxic vibrations which affect those who are closest to us. Our attitude becomes negative.

Imagine a person walking into your presence dragging a leg or noticeably limping. Perhaps it’s a permanent condition. Maybe it can be repaired with surgery or therapy. The person may have been afflicted for a long or short time. These things we may not know. But we do know that it’s clearly apparent that there is something wrong physically. This holds true for our attitude as well. You can accurately gauge a person’s spiritual condition by the attitude which he or she exhibits. If yours or mine should be sliding, it’s time for a pick up. We simply cannot play fast and loose with the deadly disease with which we are grappling; it will show. If yellow warning lights are blinking, take heed.

Jesus was an innocent victim, yet he models so much that is useful for us with all our baggage. The second fall did not deter him. He did not quit. He struggled back to his feet and moved on.



Station VIII



Jesus comforts the women of Jerusalem

The way most churches are arranged, we'd probably have to cross over by the back doorway to come to this Station, arranged on the right side of the wall as we face the sanctuary and altar. For this incident, there is a Scriptural basis, found only in Luke's account (Chapter 23, verse 27f).

Not all the populace crowding the streets and byways of Jerusalem on that occasion were hostile to Jesus. We hear that a group of women, some carrying infants and holding toddlers, sobbed as the caravan passed their way. Jesus, we may be sure, was grateful for the comforting presence and words of the distressed group of women. "Weep not for me," he responded, "but for yourselves and your children." Not everyone along the streets and byways of Jerusalem was condemning him.

The same rings true for us. By way of a meditation on this Station, consider how the people who loved us prayed for us, even, perhaps especially, when you and I couldn't really pray for ourselves. If you are like me, there was a stage in the progression of our disease that whatever prayers we did say were desperate "bargains" with God. "Get me out of this mess, this jackpot," we might have pleaded, "and," adding the bargaining chip which we would concoct, "I will not drink, I will not do this again." And however sincere we might have been in eliciting this plea, we were unable to keep such a bargain.

Instead of such hollow "prayers," people who loved us offered very sincere prayers for our recovery. There are good Scriptural foundations for such a thought. Think of all those times in the Gospel accounts when a loved one pleaded with Jesus for the good health of someone, perhaps in a coma, certainly unable to come him- or herself to Jesus. Parents pleaded for their children. The Roman centurion approached Jesus in behalf of a beloved servant. It's almost a certainty that someone, perhaps lots of people, presented you in prayer to Almighty God because they loved you.

The largest banner in most of our halls speaks of "the Grace of God." I guess that was merely a matter of time when the treasury of prayers recited for us finally opened and we were graced to draw upon it.

I can so well remember how after the weekend Masses, people would come up to me and say, "Father, we're so glad that you are feeling better." What a nice, sensitive way of indicating their concern, their prayers and their gratitude at what God was accomplishing. I am grateful, profoundly grateful, for what other people did to help me become open-minded about this recovery business. I had my "enablers" in the bad old days. But I also had people, like those holy women of Jerusalem, who sincerely cared about what was happening to me and whose prayers had great effect. I have no doubt that you had someone in your corner, too. For this, it is apparent that we cultivate gratitude. In my book, gratitude offsets a lot of those "defects of character" which may hang around. Be grateful for the miracle which is unfolding in your life and for the friends and loved ones whose prayers helped to bring it about.





Jesus falls for the third time

Jesus must have been drained to the very core trudging those last steps in his agonizing final journey. Tradition speaks of a third convulsive fall to the ground. The Roman soldiers were most likely conscripts from among the Gentile people with no love for any Jew. Imagine the cruelty and barbarity with which they pulled him to his feet with so short a distance to go.

How about us? What lesson can be found in this Station? In our meditations on the stations portraying the first two falls of Jesus, we have focused on slips and relapses, on the phenomenon we sometimes call “dry drunk.” Here, a different focus for meditation may be discovered. Taking “life on life’s terms” will inevitably mean that our serenity will be disturbed at times by bruised feelings and heartache.

Let’s think about the setbacks and losses which we have sustained in our sobriety, the disappointments, the failures, the rejections and the times when we feel abandoned. In our meditations on the prior falls of Jesus, we’ve focused upon slips and relapses, on “dry drunks,” but this time, let’s take as a given that we’ve striven to maintain our program and that our sobriety is strongly supported by our fidelity to recovery, and still there are acute feelings aroused by the setbacks in life. We no longer “medicate” bad feelings; we address them.

I have always been convinced that alcoholics have a more-than-average “sensitivity” to events which touch their lives, to people interacting with them along the way. On balance, this is a gift (at least I think so!). The good news is that we have it. The bad news is that we have it.

There are times when, to paraphrase the poet’s words, “We find that our souls are tried.” That is precisely when we have to “accept life on life’s terms.” When there are reverses, sometimes very, very painful reverses, it’s so easy to rage against the fates, to complain that these developments are so unfair! And, perhaps the things which are unfolding are very unfair. But no good purpose is served if we sacrifice our serenity to such troubles.

Sometimes there are losses which cannot be replaced; there are such things. Grieve them, but don’t be overwhelmed. It’s unnatural not to be sad or even angry. Just remember, we don’t enjoy the luxury that some “earth people” have of harboring so-called “righteous anger.” Resentments crop up in these environments with deadly consequences to our spiritual equilibrium.

I’ve heard it explained that there is no such thing as a “bad day.” There may be bad moments within a day. Again, I don’t have a lot of “problems.” I have only one “problem” and it fits in a shot glass. Rather, I have “situations.” When they are really big, or seem so, here’s a thought: identify with Jesus tumbling down under the bitter weight of that cross, wanting to just lie there and die right on the spot. But no, he struggled up and he struggled on.



Station X



Jesus is stripped of his garments

All four evangelists include some expression of the mystery portrayed in this Station; John offers the most extensive recital in Chapter 19, verse 23f. The stripping of Jesus is not specifically mentioned: instead, the Gospel accounts tell of the division of his clothing among the soldiers. By this juncture in the unfolding of what we call “The Passion,” it is safe to presume that no vestige of any material possessions remains.

Regarding our adventure of recovery, what does this Station afford us by way of meditation? Perhaps some reflection is in order on the difference between our wants and our needs, especially as this pertains to material things. In our society today, there are so many influences urging us to find true “happiness” in accumulating lots of material possessions.

In our ranks are folks who have lost so much to this disease, including many material possessions. A few of us never had much by way of worldly riches, and some of our number were able to exit the plummeting elevator before material losses mounted to any great extent. Still, perhaps we can all identify with those who have experienced great deprivations and if they haven’t occurred, simply hold a deep gratitude.

We have an expression, in our fellowship about the “yet’s.” The letters suggest, “You’re Eligible Too!” So, instead of fruitless “comparing” our experiences with others, let’s focus upon “identifying.” We may not have experienced great material losses or deprivations, and if that is the case, it’s cause for simple gratitude: “But for the Grace of God.”

Recovery affords us an opportunity to reflect on so many nuggets of wisdom: “How important is it?” or “Do I really need this, that or the other thing?” I saw another bumper sticker which reads: “Live simply so that others may simply live.” If the driver of that car really lives that philosophy, he or she has this business of “wants” and “needs” pretty well figured out. The trick in recovery is to bring our “wants” into alignment with our real “needs.” Material possessions and success are nice and if they come, be grateful for your good fortune, enjoy these gifts and be generous. But the real gifts of our way of life, serenity and sobriety, are of the spirit.

Alcoholics aren’t much for patience, though we can be wicked procrastinators (another paradox of our condition!). We can be self-centered and immature. “I want what I want when I want it,” can be the trademark of an active alkie and sometimes this disposition carries over in recovery, especially early recovery.

This business of sorting out “wants” and “needs” can be painful, but it isn’t written in cement that it must be excruciating. We have some ability to make choices, you know, as we struggle through recovery.



Station XI



Jesus is nailed to the cross

There are passages in all four Gospel accounts which converge with the tradition reflected in this Station. When the sad and painful procession had moved outside the gates of the Holy City of Jerusalem to the hillside at Calvary, Jesus was pinned to the ground and in a most brutal fashion nailed to the harsh wood. There is no mitigating the cruelty of this incident.

As we suggest a meditation for those of us who are gifted with recovery from alcoholism, certainly we have no intention or thought of diminishing the unique sacrifice of Jesus. With that caution firmly in mind, we can discover a theme for reflection.

Bill W.'s words in Chapter 5 of the "Big Book of AA," the passage about "How it Works" which we often hear cited at the beginning of meetings, the founder of our fellowship writes: "Half measures availed us nothing. We stood at the turning point. We asked his protection and care with complete abandon." One way in which the "old-timers" used to invite us to set aside any "half measures" was with the inquiry, "To what extent are you willing to go to achieve sobriety?"

That is the issue here then: half measures availed us nothing. If you are anything like me, you will fear anything which promises to hurt and tend to quickly give up on initiatives which are difficult or hard, even when these are clearly in our better interests. In this journey or adventure of recovery, however painful as it may be in our situations to commit ourselves to the new way of life, our feeble efforts pale against the extreme example and modeling of Jesus in the Station set before us here.

Still, the deference to Jesus suffering, need not gloss over the application of the lesson contained here to our meditation as it touches our own lives, our own journey. Our founder knew of the propensity we have for procrastinating, for rationalizing. "We balked," he wrote, "We thought we could find an easier, softer way, but we could not."

Even to begin the progressive healing of our lives physically, mentally and spiritually we have, Bill W. tells us, "to let go absolutely." Sometimes this will hurt! Flung to the ground, Jesus experienced the yanking and jerking of his hands and arms, his feet and legs, and then the piercing and the hammering. That constitutes a pretty absolute "letting go." No easier, softer way here for sure!

Generally, we suggest that folks "identify" and not "compare" our stories with those told by others in our fellowship. In this case, however, a little comparison is probably healthy, medicinal. What's asked of us is pretty small compared to the experience of Jesus in this 11th Station. Just imagine how far he was willing to go and then consider what that says to us.



Station XII



Jesus dies on the cross

All four evangelists related the events which have had such a profound effect and impact upon the history and destiny of the human family. Under the sign proclaiming, in three languages, Latin, Greek and Hebrew, “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews,” the final agony of Jesus unfolded, the Gospels tell us, over the course of some three hours. Jeers rained down from those harboring still bitter enmity and a small, sturdy band of loved ones clustered around the foot of the cross, near the watching cohort of soldiers commanded by the centurion who would eventually be moved to testify: “Truly, this was the son of God!”

The Gospel accounts mention seven instances when Jesus spoke during this agony. Certainly all such declarations are important; some may provide opportunities for those of us gifted with recovery to meditate.

No resentments linger in the attitude of Jesus: “Father,” he prayed, “forgive them for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 24:14).

Matthew (27:46) tells us that Jesus cried aloud, “My God, my God! Why have you forsaken me.” On first blush, this might suggest that Jesus had slipped into despair: such an interpretation is mistaken. That passage contains the initial words of Psalm 22, which, though a lament in style, still concludes with a reverent expression of complete trust in God. The Gospel passage cites only the first verse of nearly thirty in the entire psalm.

Even in the midst of his suffering, Jesus exhibited a profound empathy for the need of others, offering forgiveness and the assurance of lasting peace to the repentant thief beside him and attending, with John the Apostle, to the care of his mother, Mary.

Jesus called out “I thirst” (John 19:28). Clearly, he was addressing spiritual and not material, physical succor. Can we not discern some identification here with the lifting of the physical compulsion and mental obsession of our addiction as we meditate on this locution? No small miracle is it to experience the waning, the disappearance altogether of that persistent desire for a drink. “But for the Grace of God” our banner reminds us.

As his sufferings were coming to an end, Jesus spoke, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit” (Luke 24:46). I think that it’s possible to recognize here an echo of the 11th Step in our way of life, when we seek, through prayer and meditation, a knowledge of God’s will and the power to carry it out.

Sometimes in the celebration of recital of the “Station,” in a parish church, the congregation will pray this particular Station while remaining in a kneeling posture. Some of the old-timers suggest that when we address our daily request to the God of our understanding for the help we will need during the day, and again when we manifest our gratitude at the end of the day, we do so on our knees. “That way,” one of the bald-headed old AA’s told me, “you can tell who the drunk is and who God is. The drunk is the one on his knees!” And, it is said that in the original draft Step 7, Bill W. wrote that “humbly, on our knees, we asked” for the removal of the defects of character surfaced in Step 4, 5 and 6. More food for thought and reflection!



Station XIII



Jesus is taken down from the cross

From the time Jesus was apprehended in the Garden of Olives, through the interrogations and “trial,” one after another, the Apostles abandoned their suffering companion. John did accompany Jesus’ mother, Mary, along with a handful of women, but this tiny band, overwhelmed with grief, stood helplessly by the most unlikely persons emerged.

Joseph of Arimathea is identified in all four Gospel accounts as a key figure in the developments which occurred immediately following the death of Jesus. John (only) tells us that Nicodemus collaborated with Joseph in negotiating with Pilate for access to the corpse of Jesus. Denoted in the Scriptures as a man of wealth, Joseph made available his own prepared tomb for the hastily-arranged burial of Jesus.

Certainly Joseph was protected from any retaliation by those whose hostility to Jesus festered even after his crucifixion: he was wealthy and influential. Nonetheless, he exhibited more than a bit of courage in approaching Pilate and attending to Jesus’ burial. Like Joseph, Nicodemus, too, was a member of the Sanhedrin, the council which exercised a blend of political and religious leadership in Jerusalem. For both, then, there was a measure of risk, one which the Apostles were clearly unwilling to take. The representation of this Station in Christian tradition portrays Joseph and Nicodemus on ladders, gently removing the nails from the limbs of Jesus. An extension of the meditation on the Station can be found in the stunning white marble sculpture of Michaelangelo which captures the desolation of Mary holding the lifeless body of her Son, “The Pieta.”

What we suggest for reflection in this Station is more mundane: our commitment to reach out and to help others who are sick and suffering from alcoholism, an aspect of recovery sometimes called Twelfth Step Work. There’s less of it these days because of the availability of detox facilities and the interventions which are made by employee assistance programs. Still; people in desperate straits do call us, sometimes referred by AA central service offices and on other occasions when we receive direct pleas from friends, family members or co-workers who know of our experience in sobriety. Like Joseph and Nicodemus, it is suggested that we work in tandem when undertaking such calls.

Most of us have seen that classic picture, one dating from the 1930s, “The Man In The Bed.” It portrays “AA #3” being “12th-stepped” by Bill W. and Doctor Bob, our founders. You can almost make an analogous interpretation here with our 13th Station: “Here,” our founders seem to be saying, “let us help to take you down from your cross.” Unlike Jesus, however, those whom we touch in such outreach will generally still have a glimmer of life left, a ray, however faint, of hope, which can blossom in recovery.

Thinking a bit more about Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, you know they didn’t have to do this. They were safe and comfortable, but they put their own convenience and comfort aside and went to where they were needed. There’s a thought for those of us who might be called to a “12th Step” initiative. Experience suggests that if we put out the effort, perhaps or possibly the person to whom we reach out may be helped (that remains in God’s hands) but certainly we will find that our sobriety and serenity are greatly enriched!



Station XIV



Jesus is placed in the tomb

The three “synoptic” evangelists, Matthew, Mark and Luke, concur in speaking of the burial of Jesus in a “rock-hewn” tomb, apparently one prepared by Joseph of Arimathea in anticipation of his own burial. John adds the further information that it was in a “garden” setting. In keeping with the custom, a large stone was situated at the entrance to the tomb. Because of the solemnity of the Jewish feast day, the burial was done in haste and some of the usual practices, anointings and sprinkling of spices, were omitted. It was to redress these omissions that the women came to the tomb at dawn on Easter, only to find that the massive stone had been rolled back: Jesus had risen! Stories of his visits to Mary Magdeline, to the Apostles and to other disciples travelling along the road to Emmaus are all recited in Gospel accounts.

The passion, death and resurrection of Jesus, seen as a continuum, are called the “Pascal Mystery.” Christian faith identifies this as the fulfillment of Jesus’ redemptive mission, ransoming, as it were, humankind from alienation from God and bringing about restoration of people to God’s favor, friendship and love. For those of us who have been graced with recovery from the plague of addictive disease, there is a sobering reflection: we are, figuratively speaking, a people who have been brought back from the dead. Remember the beautiful parable of the “prodigal son,” told by Luke in Chapter 15. “Your brother was dead,” the rejoicing father told another son, “and now he has come to life. He was lost and has been found.” Here is a theme echoed by the former slave trader, John Newton, in the timeless song he composed to celebrate his radical new life, “Amazing Grace.”

Meditating on the tomb and the huge boulder placed at the entrance, I am reminded of a poignant interpretation of an important incident in Jesus’ ministry. Remember how his friend, Lazarus, was stricken with sudden illness and died. Upon first hearing news of his friend’s affliction, Jesus seemed to tarry. When he did arrive at the home of Lazarus and his two sisters, Mary and Martha, he learned that his friend had been in the tomb for four days. Suppressing human sadness, Jesus went to the burial place, followed by a crowd of curious bystanders. “Roll back the stone,” he ordered the people and they did so. “Lazarus, come forth,” Jesus commanded and the dead man rose and emerged into the daylight, wrapped in the burial cloth. “Untie him,” Jesus urged the aghast onlookers, and Lazarus was restored to his loved ones. Here is the insight which a very wise observer has noted. What the people could do, Jesus not only allowed them to do, he instructed them... to roll back the stone and to untie the burial wrappings. However, what only the Son of God could do, namely, breathe life back into the dead man, Jesus did. There’s the lesson: do what you can do and ask God to do what only he can do. That’s part of the secret of sober living!

The tradition is to halt the journey through the fourteen Stations. Sometimes, an added meditation on the resurrection of the Lord is included, but we prefer to conclude our reflections here. This way, we are still “open” to the miracles that are yet to occur. A friend in the fellowship has a beautiful saying: “More will be revealed.” Indeed, may it be so for all of us, as, in the words of our founder, Bill W., “We trudge the road of happy destiny.”





Monsignor Thomas J. Harrington



“Father Tom” Monsignor Thomas J. Harrington, is a semi-retired priest of the Diocese of Fall River. After attending parochial schools in his home town of New Bedford, Massachusetts, he received a bachelor of arts degree, magna cum laude, from the College of the Holy Cross. He continued to pursue seminary studies at the Catholic University of America in Washington, DC, and was ordained in May of 1964. He received a degree in canon or church law from Catholic University in 1968. He has served in positions of administration within the Diocese and served in several parishes in ministry in various locations in southeastern Massachusetts. He has been identified with the recovery movement over the years and frequently leads weekend retreats focusing upon the “12 Steps.” He has served as a chaplain to area fire departments for over forty years and recently authored a memoir addressing his chaplaincy, *A Call to Serve*, published by Spinner, Inc. He resides at the Cardinal Medeiros Residence adjacent to Bishop Conolly High School in Fall River.



James A. Flanagan Jr.



Jim Flanagan, born in New Bedford, Massachusetts, graduated with a BA in Fine Arts from Southeastern Massachusetts University. While only a second year student at the University he won the National Society of Illustrators Award, a highly esteemed competition held at the Norman Rockwell Museum in New York City. Since then he has gone on to win several awards and has shown in numerous galleries.

Jim has studied and explored many different mediums, always pushing his ideas to the extreme. As a self taught painter he has worked with oils, acrylics and watercolors. In photography he achieves a unique warm quality by experimenting with handmade papers and hand coloring techniques. He has developed his own process for paper mache which he uses to create his West African influenced masks. Different raw material, such as wood and glass are the components which make up his sculptures.

Traveling extensively through North America and Europe has given him the opportunity to further develop himself as an artist. These sojourns have allowed him to experience first hand many different cultures which have inspired and set the mood for much of his work. Another source of inspiration comes from different societies across the globe.

Jim now resides in the town of Fairhaven, Massachusetts, with his wife Joann and two children Kaya and Emma. He maintains a private studio in his home.