

Fr. John F. Harvey, O.S.F.S. – Courage Conference Talk 2010

A.A. and Courage: Use of the Twelve Steps by Courage

At the beginning of Courage in 1980, I suggested that the five members learn to follow the Twelve-Steps of A.A. as one of the means of being chaste. But they were reluctant to do so, saying that they may be homosexual but they were not alcoholics. Years before, in speaking to a closed A.A. meeting, I suggested that some persons with alcoholic tendencies may be latently homosexual, and the men responded that they may be alcoholics, but were not homosexual.

It is important to consider how beginners in A.A. and beginners in Courage understand the meaning of their organizations. Very often they seek to use A.A. or the Courage Program for their own purposes. Frequently an alcoholic will go to open meetings of A.A. to please his spouse with no intent of changing his way of life. This could happen, for example, if he were in a 30 day residential program; it is not unlikely if one were to join Courage with the idea that he will become chaste without embarking on an intensive life of prayer. To be sure, Courage helps one to be chaste, provided one comes regularly to meetings and develops prayer habits. It is necessary that the leader of the group make use of a screening process, perhaps conducted by a veteran in Courage. The closed meetings of A.A. take care of this need.

While Courage is a Twelve-Step Program, it has its own specific object, reflected in the First Goal of Courage, which is to help persons with same-sex-attractions to learn to live a chaste life and to use the grace of God to reject homosexual acts as intrinsically immoral.

The second Goal of Courage is to develop a Prayer Life. The first members of Courage who wrote the Five Goals desired a strong prayer life. Among the items mentioned in the Goal is attendance at Mass as often as possible, use of the sacrament of Reconciliation, spiritual reading and meditation, and devotion to Our Blessed Mother in saying the Rosary.

The Third Goal is to regularly attend the meetings of Courage and to participate in the discussion of the Twelve Steps. Those who do this learn to apply to their own lives the meaning of the Step being discussed. Each person is expected to take his turn in the presentation of a Step to the members. The Courage Handbook allows other forms and topics for meetings, provided the use of the Steps is not neglected (Courage Handbook, p. 8). Again, we return to the different purposes of A.A. and of Courage. The former is concerned with bringing the addict to sobriety, the latter to chastity and continence. In helping someone to lead a chaste life one may describe the early stages as “white-knuckled chastity.”

The Fourth Goal of Courage is to cultivate chaste friendships. It means that one should seek out a group of persons who share your principles and ideals. This happens among Courage members who seek the virtue of chastity.

The Fifth Goal is to give good example. Man is a person made to the image of God, with a non-rational tendency to act contrary to natural law. The new term for homosexual is “person with same-attractions.” After all, we are speaking of a **person** with a tendency. [We must not equate the **person** with the condition he or she experiences.] The term, “person with same sex attraction” is clearer than the term homosexual, which describes not the person, but only a

false tendency of the person. To say that I am “gay” is a false identity because it identifies the person with a mere tendency rather than with the being of the person.

So far I have described similarities and differences between A.A. and Courage. A.A. is really the grandfather of all spiritual support systems. Indeed, regularly Courage sends persons to A.A., and they get the help they need. Both groups are deeply spiritual. Courage provides, however, spirituality distinctly rooted in Catholic dogma and devotion.

Another way in which Courage’s use of the Twelve Steps differs from that of A.A. is how one understands God. Wisely A.A. guides its members, whether believers or agnostics or atheists, to live on a spiritual basis, but leaves to the individual the understanding of the “Power greater than ourselves” on which they are to depend. That individual might become a member of a religion based upon the Masons or similar groups. On the other hand, those who base their lives on religions of the Old and New Testaments, and who believe in the God of Revelation, have a clearer concept than those, such as the Masons, who believe in a vague God. Those who believe in a personal God, Jesus Christ, who took our human nature and suffered and died for us and rose from the dead, continue to be helped and inspired to use the Twelve Steps to recover from alcoholism. Sadly, however, too many recovering alcoholics are settling for an imperfect explanation of the Twelve Steps. Yet many other alcoholics find inspiration in their religion, becoming more saintly in spite of their beginning as agnostics.

A member of A.A. who does not believe in a personal God may be lacking in religious faith but possesses virtues on the natural level. He is a just man. If he is faithful in conscience by obedience to the natural moral law, God will give him the graces of salvation. St. Paul says, “This is good and pleasing to God our Savior who wills everyone to be saved and to come to knowledge of the Truth” (1 Tim 2: 4-5).

A.A. speaks of the God of one’s understanding; Christianity believes in the God of the Old and New Testament, and Judaism believes in the God of the Old Testament.

In developing this comparison between the way in which Courage understands God, and how A.A. understands Him, I was not aiming to demonstrate that one is better than the other; they are certainly different; they are both the work of God.

In my years with Courage I strove to help members to live a life of Chastity. This is the most important goal of Courage, just as sobriety is the most important goal of A.A. Courage strives to bring the person struggling in “white knuckled chastity” to a chastity of the heart through intensive prayer and self-discipline. Courage and A.A. help their members through similar methods, including prayer, or calling upon the help of a higher Power, self discipline, and group support.

Part II

Shortly after I arrived at the retirement home of the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales, I met James W. Stroud, who gave me a copy of his study of Courage as a growing apostolate in the Roman Catholic Church. Although I desperately desired to read his manuscript, prepared for his MA degree in 2006, I could not do so at the time because of cataracts on both eyes. But recently I was able to read this excellent study of Courage concerning the five goals and twelve steps.

James Stroud points out that Courage follows the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.) with one small change; in the first step the word “alcoholism” is changed to “homosexuality.” Yet the actual usage of the Twelve Steps by Alcoholics Anonymous and by Courage differs from one another in a major respect in regard to how it applies to individuals: he notes that “every alcoholic is compulsive, but not every homosexual is compulsive.”^[i] The Twelve Steps of A.A. apply strictly to the compulsive homosexual, but they apply only analogously to the non-compulsive homosexual.^[ii]

He makes an important point here, and in this next section I will expand on it.

Special Considerations Concerning Addiction and Prayer Life

Leaders in Courage must consider the distinctions between compulsive behavior in alcoholics, as dealt with in A.A., and compulsive behavior as spoken about in Courage. The term “compulsive” as used in Courage applies only by way of analogy. Non-compulsive homosexuals can and sometimes do become addictive homosexuals. (I use the terminology of Stroud here.) Non-compulsive homosexuals may become compulsive alcoholics. This means that we must be using different approaches to heal persons with same-sex attractions, some of whom may be non-compulsive with reference to homosexual tendencies, some of whom may be compulsive, and some of whom, whether compulsive or non-compulsive with reference to homosexual tendencies, may be compulsive with reference to alcohol.

In my book *The Truth About Homosexuality* there is a section about compulsions and addictions.^[iii] There I refer to Gerald E. May, whose book *Addiction and Grace* Stroud also mentions. Gerald May views addiction as a “state of compulsion, obsession or preoccupation that enslaves a person’s will or desire. Addiction sidetracks and eclipses the energy of our deepest, truest desire for love and goodness.”^[iv]

Stroud notes that addiction has lingering effects, and any resolve to stop sinful actions and to avoid the occasions of sin that a person by himself tries through deliberation and sheer acts of the will do not hold indefinitely. Therapists and those who work with people with addictions need to use prayer approaches to help those who come to them, including those with homosexual tendencies, whether compulsive or non-compulsive.

In his thesis James Stroud stresses how important is the program of prayer to help a person to control homosexual tendencies. He quotes Father Benedict Groeschel:

For all Christians, married, single, or religious, chastity is not simply a struggle with physical urges and desires. It is part of the greater effort to seek God above and through all things. Chastity is an aspect of purity of mind and heart, of thought and desire. Like every worthwhile thing in life, chastity is a struggle which has its rewards. They are summed up in the Beatitude, “How blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God.”^[v]

Stroud fully approves of Courage’s five goals and twelve steps. He singles out Harvey’s discussion of the teaching of the Church on the objective immorality of homosexual acts. “It is not enough to say that homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered, but one must also understand that the condition of

same sex attraction itself is objectively disordered.” What does it mean to call all same sex attractions intrinsically disordered? As Father Harvey describes it, the person with homosexual tendencies lives in the occasion of sin—that is to say, the occasion of sin is within his own heart and mind. He may find himself immersed in ways of thinking and acting that incline to sin. These same sex inclinations in an individual provide a constant challenge as the person with these inclinations tries to live chastely. The current American culture bombards people with constant images of sex through various forms of media. One gets the idea from the media that sex brings happiness. One must confront this common mindset which helps perpetuate the false notion that those who have same sex attractions or inclinations will find happiness in sexual behavior.[vi]

Now I must describe Stroud’s reflections on Servais Pinckaers’ mode of moralizing on Freedom for Excellence. Pinckaers follows Aquinas in doing so. Pinckaers begins with an explanation of what freedom for excellence means as opposed to the freedom of indifference. For Aquinas the will proceeds from intelligence and free will which unite to make an act of choice. For him free will alone was not a primary faculty; Aquinas saw intelligence and free will as one practical principle—they are to be used together, as one. Morality is understood as being rooted in the inclination to truth and goodness, not in terms of God versus man. Thus freedom for excellence becomes a morality of attraction, in which man does not choose between contraries (such as a choice between following God’s law or man’s own will) but rather that man chooses the good for its own sake. Freedom for excellence presupposes natural inclinations and takes root in them so as to draw forth the strength needed for their development.[vii]

Conclusion

In his paper Stroud argues that through the use of the Twelve Steps and Five Goals Courage provides a positive method, following the teaching of the Catholic Church, for same-sex attracted individuals seeking moral growth in the virtue of chastity or continence as well as other virtues. One must study the other virtues as well. In the first goal (about loyalty to the Church) is an example of choosing the good for its own sake.

Select Bibliography

Alcoholics Anonymous Big Book, Copyright © 1939, 1955, 1976, 2001 by Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc.

Emmerich Vogt, O.P., *The Twelve Step Series*, a set of twelve pamphlets available from The 12-Step Review, 2001 N.W. 94th Street, Vancouver, WA 98665-6630 (phone 1-800-556-6177). Also available online at The 12-Step Review website at <http://www.12-step-review.org/about/index.html>.

Gerald E. May, *Addiction and Grace* (New York, Harper and Row, 1988).

John F. Harvey, O.S.F.S., *The Truth About Homosexuality: The Cry of the Faithful* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1996).

Servais Pinckaers, O.P., *The Sources of Christian Ethics* (Catholic University of America Press, 1995). (In this book one can find his thought on “freedom for excellence” and on the three fundamental stages of moral formation or “education in freedom,” each stage corresponding to the three stages of human life—childhood, adolescence and adulthood.)

[i] James W. Stroud, *Courage's Twelve Step Program: A Case Study for the Acquisition of Virtue Through Servais Pinckaers' Account of "Education in Freedom"* (unpublished thesis, Catholic University of America), p. 45.

[ii] Ibid.

[iii] John F. Harvey, O.S.F.S., *The Truth About Homosexuality: The Cry of the Faithful* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1996), pp. 142–7.

[iv] Gerald E. May, *Addiction and Grace* (New York, Harper and Row, 1988), p. 14.

[v] Benedict J. Groeschel, C.F.R., *The Courage to be Chaste* (New York: Paulist, 1985), p. 21.

[vi] Stroud, 29-30.

[vii] Stroud, p. 10.