

INTRODUCTION

At the age of seventeen, I found my life changing in ways that took me a long time to comprehend. Within the space of a few weeks, I received the Sacrament of Confirmation in the Catholic Church and I took my first drink of alcohol. Little did I know how profound an effect each of these moments would have on my life. In the weeks and months that followed, I drifted further from embracing my call as a Christian as I rapidly fell into the despair that accompanied my developing alcoholism and drug addiction (or was it the other way around?). I came to know a loneliness that I once thought was impossible for a socially capable young man like me. The best phrase that I have encountered to describe the feeling of hopelessness I was sinking into is “incomprehensible demoralization.” If you are struggling or have struggled with an addiction, perhaps you can relate. Nothing I did to help myself provided me with more than brief moments of peace. Any temporary tranquility I experienced was followed by a swift return to the bottle or drugs, and everything that I had worked hard for was taken from me.

What remained, however, was the one thing that I could not earn—God’s loving grace and mercy. God has a tendency to work miracles near water, but it wasn’t until writing this that I realized the turning point in my life occurred just steps from the salt water of Mission Bay

in San Diego. After yet another moment of encountering my own hopelessness and disappointment, I pushed my bike—a one-speed, rusted beach cruiser—through the heavy sand that surrounded me. It was a gloomy day in October. Actually, it may well have been a beautiful day, as most are in San Diego, but my perception of that day, like many others, was marred by gloom. I was drinking to excess or doing drugs every day, mostly isolated and alone.

This day had started like any other. I had woken late in the morning, unable to bring myself out of bed to face the inevitably sad reality that lay ahead of me. But on this day, the pain seemed so great that I did something that I hadn't had the courage to do before. I asked for help.

Tired of the emptiness, the loneliness, and letting down everyone who cared for me, I collapsed on the beach that afternoon, exhausted by what my life had become. As the tide repeated its endless rhythm of approach and retreat, I pulled the phone out of my pocket, thinking that it had never felt so heavy.

By the grace of God I managed to call a few very close friends from back home, then my mom, and then my dad. This did not come as a complete shock to them, and I opened up to them about the darkness that had found its way into my life and my inability to do anything other than to give in to it on a regular basis. I told them that I needed help, even though I wasn't convinced I would find it.

Alcohol and drugs took everything of importance from me. They took away educational opportunities that I had worked tirelessly for. They took away career success, drove me away from friends and family members

that loved me no matter what, and broke the trust that people had in me. My commitment to alcohol and drugs destroyed any chances that I had to be intimate with anyone, including God. They took away any respect and love that I had for myself and replaced them with self-centered fear and loathing that could only be held in check by more drugs and alcohol.

When I say that alcohol and drugs did this to me, what I am saying is that I did this to myself. Before I abused alcohol or became psychologically dependent on a fix of any kind, what I was looking for was some kind of fulfillment. For brief moments, I found that feeling of completion in the bottle, in the marijuana pipe, or through the rolled-up bill that I used to snort cocaine. Sometimes I would find it through the thrill of gambling with money that I couldn't afford to lose. At other times, I would achieve it by chasing women or browsing through pornography. All of the decisions I made to pursue these vices were packaged in the promise that I would be happy. They were all lies, and a mere cover-up, or attempted shortcut, to what I was really searching for: a relationship with God.

What I heard from each of those I reached out to that day was a variation of the words proclaimed from heaven when Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River: "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (Mt 3:17). The words used by my parents and friends differed greatly from one to the other on that autumn day, but the message was the same. I had been plunged into the depths of hell, and by the grace and mercy of our Lord, I was raised into new life.

Since that day, thanks be to the glory of God, I have not had a drink or done a drug. For someone that could

not go one day without some kind of mind-altering substance, I believe that is a miracle. Each day is a blessing, and it is through the healing process of Twelve Step recovery and the sacramental life of the Catholic Church that I have the chance to lay down my head each night and thank God for another miraculous day.

My return to the Church took place within a few weeks of being granted the gift of sobriety at the age of twenty-six. To my surprise, I was not alone in experiencing a real and seemingly unending encounter with my brokenness. Those close to me in my newly found recovery fellowship and church community shared their experiences, strength, and hope with me and gave me the understanding that I was not, and am not, alone. A few of those people's stories are highlighted in the coming chapters of this book.

After about two or three months, I began to encounter the healing power of God doing for me what I could not do for myself. A radical shift—or spiritual awakening—took place within me and brought with it a commitment to turn the darkness that I once knew into my greatest asset. This shift did not take place overnight. Its foundation was laid in working the Twelve Steps of recovery¹ and immersing myself in the sacramental life of the Church.

The Twelve Steps and the Sacraments: A Catholic Journey through Recovery offers a look at the spiritual wisdom behind the Twelve Steps of recovery from a Catholic point of view. Written for both those who identify as an alcoholic or addict and those who do not but desire a fuller spiritual experience, this book will help you find a space in your own life to surrender to God's grace and mercy. It is my hope and prayer that you will be

left seeking a more intimate and vital relationship with your Higher Power, Jesus Christ.

My freedom from the bondage of addiction would not be possible without the love and support that I found through the sharing of fellow recovering alcoholics and drug addicts. I am deeply indebted to all who have fostered Twelve Step recovery within the United States and around the world. These are men and women who, like the pioneers of the Church, relentlessly pursued the message of salvation and spread the Good News to all corners of the globe.

It is important for me to note that Twelve Step groups maintain no religious affiliation. However, as the wording of the steps makes clear, a constant reliance on God (“as we understand him”), a Higher Power, or a Power “greater than ourselves” is suggested (to put it lightly). These groups are seeker-sensitive, meaning that the spiritual nature of Twelve Step recovery leaves attendance open to anyone, regardless of religious beliefs. It is my opinion that this general description of God is critical to providing an entry into a spiritual way of life for people from a variety of backgrounds, some of whom come in with a great disdain for anything relating to God. With respect to this and other principles, the thoughts expressed within these pages are not related to any particular Twelve Step group or related organization.

Somewhere within the personal stories I share, I hope you are able to recognize a bit of your own story. You do not need to be an addict or a Catholic for this to happen. Even the most serene recovering addict or the most devout Catholic may find a new, personal way to understand the principles expressed in this book.

Ultimately, I have no doubt that the Holy Spirit will guide you through the process of reading, praying, and reflecting on the presence of God in your life throughout your encounter with these pages. He has worked wonders in my life, and I know he will do the same for you. The prayer and “Going Further” section at the end of each chapter will help you incorporate the wisdom of the Twelve Steps and the strength of the sacraments into your personal relationship with Christ.

The stories woven within the chapters of this book are taken from individuals who have experienced real darkness as a result of substance abuse addiction, eating disorders, mental and emotional health difficulties, sexual addiction, unhealthy relationship attachments, and other addictions, attachments, and ailments. Most of the names used in these stories have been changed for the sake of anonymity. I am full of gratitude to have the opportunity to share these stories and my own and, perhaps, give back a small portion of what has been so freely given to me as I continue to find freedom through recovery, one day at a time.

BAPTISM

1.

POWERLESS AND UNMANAGEABLE

Thomas was the kind of man that every young boy dreamed of becoming. Standing at six feet, five inches, he boasted a handsome, athletic frame and spoke with enough of a southern drawl to make anything he said seem charming. He was living his life by the rules that society dictated: be successful at everything you do, and have fun doing it. In college, he played football and won a national championship with a prominent program in the Southeastern Conference. After college, he excelled in business and was quite popular with the ladies. He had a luxurious apartment, a fancy car, a beautiful girlfriend, and a promising career. Yet, with all of this in mind and his handsome face staring back at him in the mirror, he asked himself, "Why am I so miserable?"

Sometime after college, Thomas transitioned from drinking socially to drinking alcoholically. His shift in behavior and subsequent downfall were fueled by an addiction to cocaine. Given his athletic and professional successes, Thomas seemed to be in complete control over his life and had power over everything and everyone

around him. His addictions certainly did not seem like things that had control over him. Rather, drugs and alcohol were a temporary means of enjoying life a little bit more and offered an escape from a growing sense of restlessness that was creeping its way into his life.

Sure, there were consequences at times. There were some narrow escapes with death when Thomas got behind the wheel. He never showed up at his own engagement party because “one more beer” with his buddy beforehand turned into an all-night cocaine binge. Relationships with his family suffered as a result of his progressive alcohol and drug abuse, and some of the opportunities in life that seemed to have been handed to him earlier were slowly slipping away. Even brief moments of self-reflection when he questioned what was wrong in his life could not bring him to surrender. Throughout his life, Thomas had been taught that in order to succeed at something difficult, you often have to “grit your teeth and try harder.” The man that got the most out of life was the one willing to go the extra mile, and he didn’t need the help of anyone else. Thomas believed that one day he could be that man and manage it all well.

“For a guy with my background that came from athletics, playing football, being powerful, and having natural leadership abilities that people would follow, accepting that I was powerless was my biggest challenge. I was always taught that you never quit. You never surrender! No matter what,” explained Thomas as he recalled this time in his life. “You fight until the end and then you keep fighting!”

Gradually, this stud football player who was so accustomed to winning at everything began losing more,

and more, and more. Then one day Thomas picked up the phone to call his father.

After a few long rings, Thomas's father answered the phone. He began by saying, "If you are calling for any other reason than for me taking you to rehab, I am going to have to hang up." Thomas did the last thing that he ever anticipated doing: he checked himself into a three-month treatment program in New Jersey, leaving everything—including his over-inflated ego—behind.

"The only reason I called my father that day," Thomas tells me as he draws himself back in his chair while embracing the tears that slowly swell in his eyes, "was because that morning after being on a bender for three or four days—I woke up. Before that last bender I got as much cocaine and booze as I could and said, 'This is it. I'm going to kill myself. I can't live like this anymore, and I can't keep putting people through this.' I was in my apartment, by myself, snorting cocaine and drinking booze. I remember going into the bathroom and, not having prayed since high school, I asked God to please end this. I was praying to die." He was hoping he would overdose and die in his sleep, but God interpreted the end of Thomas's pain a little differently.

After I woke up, I just knew that I was going to die on the streets. There was no other option for me. If I continued to do what I was doing, I would've died on the streets. So when I called my father, I was willing to seek help, but not because I wanted to get sober or thought that I could get sober . . . I didn't want to die on the streets. *I just didn't want to die on the streets.* Somehow, some survival instinct kicked in, but when I got to that treatment facility I had no idea I could get sober, I had no idea anything could

get me sober, and I certainly didn't believe that any human power could help get me sober.

Thomas had come face-to-face with the honesty necessary to begin Step 1: *We admitted we were powerless over (our addiction/attachment)—that our lives had become unmanageable.*

Few who find recovery do so on their very first attempt. Many of us fight our way through life with the hope that one day we may be able to manage ourselves and indulge with grace and temperance. Some addicts drive this pursuit to the extreme and end up in hospitals, institutions, prison gates, or, tragically, grave sites. Oftentimes, we try to mend relationships by proving that we can achieve short-term sobriety and that we aren't really *that* bad. We fight it. We manage it. To our peers, it seems insane. To us at the time, it makes perfect sense.

This was the case for Thomas. Mixing humor and embarrassment, he shares a scene that took place before he ultimately committed himself. He was sitting in the office of a doctor who had seen him a few years prior for a day or two of detox. They exchanged a few heated words before the doctor walked out of the room. Alone in the office, Thomas glanced at the counter where his file lay.

"I decided to take a peek at the folder," Thomas told me in a very vivid account of the moment. "Written on the folder was 'Chronic alcoholic—chances of recovery: zero.' The doctor came back in, and I chewed him out. 'What do you mean I have zero chance?' My voice boomed and I was nearly getting violent. He just looked at me and said, 'Look at your behavior right now. That's why you're never going to recover. You're filled

with anger, resentment, and self-pity, and you can't stop drinking.'"

The words hit Thomas hard. He reflects back on that moment with the wisdom he has gained in working the steps:

My problem spiritually, mentally, emotionally, and as an alcoholic is that I am powerless. If I can't accept that I am powerless, why would I seek a power? Why would I then go on to Step 2 and Step 3? Why would I clean house so that the Light can shine? Why would I do any of that? If I believe that I have the power, then I am going to manage my drinking, manage my cocaine use. I'm going to come up with the solutions, and I have all the answers! Or, I am completely powerless and if I don't accept that, then I have no chance to work the other steps. If I don't accept that I'm powerless on a daily basis, then there's no reason for me to seek God, and without God . . . I'm done.

Thomas made his first step.

Thomas's call for help to his father took place in 1994. As of the writing of this book, he has been sober from drugs and alcohol. Something changed within the man who once seemed to have it all. He has gone through a drastic transformation as a result of God entering his life in the most unpredictable ways. He now has a life of meaningful relationships, including a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. It is a life dedicated to serving God and others, to being a father that his own son can look up to, and to being a supportive son to his aging father as he battles Alzheimer's disease. Thomas's greatest accomplishment in life is not reflected in a championship ring, a bank statement, or