



Addiction Recovery through the 12 Steps and the Sacraments

by Scott Weeman

The presence of an addiction or mental health challenge is not a moral referendum on someone's life. This is a critical starting point when considering how to approach the work of healing addictions, compulsions, and unhealthy attachments of all varieties.

Oftentimes, individuals suffering from alcoholism, drug addiction, compulsive overeating, gambling addiction, pornography and sex addiction, codependency, and other attachments find themselves seeking fulfillment from an idol that can only provide short-term relief. Their family members lie alongside them in darkness while balancing concern and care with mistrust and resentment. The substance or behavioral addiction might change from situation to situation, but patterns of shame, fear, and isolation tend to describe the pre-recovery experience of most addicts and their loved ones. I know this because I have lived it.

How can the Catholic Church respond to the alarming rates of addiction we continually hear about? We can start by leaning into the sacramental life of the Church and borrowing some spiritual wisdom from modern recovery groups. The 12 Steps of addiction recovery were founded in the 1930s with the beginning of Alcoholics Anonymous. In its early years, the organization was strongly influenced by a Jesuit priest, Fr. Ed Dowling, who noted that the 12 Steps had a strong correlation with the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius of Loyola. Although not affiliated with any religion, 12-step fellowships have been responsible for saving hundreds of thousands of lives across the world, restoring family relationships, and awakening some of the most disaffiliated members of society to the transformational power of God.

In a 2013 interview with *America Magazine*, Pope Francis shared his vision of the Church as a field hospital where priority is given to healing wounds. Unfortunately, addiction is the source of some very deep wounds among God's children. Addiction does not discriminate, and identifying as Catholic does not make one immune from its devastating effects. However, truly embracing your Catholic faith can be a catalyst for great change assuming it is accompanied by honesty, openness, and willingness. Tending to the wounds of addiction is most effective when those seeking help are united in fellowship with those who have overcome a similar condition of hopelessness.

"I know exactly how you feel," were the first words spoken to me by my first recovery sponsor. His message was radically different from the well-intended family members and friends who previously shared their concerns. The authenticity of others in recovery disarmed the shame of

my past and inspired me to follow direction. The 12 Steps gave me the blueprint to accept the circumstances of my life, recognize I am powerless over alcohol, drugs, and many things of this world, surrender my life to the care of God, take an honest inventory, share it with God and another human being, clean up the mess I've made in relationships, connect with God in prayer, and share with others what was freely given to me throughout the process.

Put simply, working through the 12 Steps transformed my dark past into a spiritual asset that keeps me desperately close to Jesus Christ and qualified to share the gospel of hope to those who still suffer. I am not alone, as many others are on a similar mission to stay sober and help others achieve sobriety. After all, the best daily remedy for a condition rooted in selfishness is service and self-sacrifice for others. When overlapped with the sacraments, addiction recovery can enliven the faithful and serve as a bridge and evangelical model for those seeking a deeper relationship with their Higher Power.

As we plunge into the waters of Baptism, we profess Jesus Christ as Lord and acknowledge our own powerlessness and need for a savior. When others are new to the Church and seeking Baptism, we are reunited with our own baptismal promises and our faith is rejuvenated as the community welcomes newcomers. A similar movement takes place when a recovery fellowship welcomes a new member and each person is given a fresh reminder of God's saving power.

The Sacrament of Reconciliation is, perhaps, the most glaring similarity between 12-step traditions and Catholic spirituality. In its fullness, the preparation for Confession is a valuable outlet for self-discovery, honesty, and humility. Absolution is bestowed upon us and we are given the chance to reconcile relationships to which we've done harm. The fruit of our penance, or amends, is restored connection with God, our brothers and sisters in Christ, and ourselves. The 12 Steps and the sacraments unite what addiction naturally divides.

The Catholic Church provides many opportunities to grow in conscious contact with God. None, however, can get us closer than the Eucharist. The Blessed Sacrament is the source and summit of the Christian life, and its reception both glorifies God and sustains the healing power of Christ. Through prayer we seek knowledge of God's will for us and the power to carry it out, which is propelled by the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ.

A gift is not truly so until we give it away, which is true of our faith and recovery. The Sacrament of Confirmation showers us with gifts to deepen our relationship with Jesus while sharing it with others. Sharing this message is vital to long-term recovery and provides practical application of important spiritual truths. Empowered by God's saving grace, a Catholic response to addiction can invigorate the Church and be a vital source of healing.



Scott Weeman is the founder and executive director of [Catholic in Recovery](#) and author of [The Twelve Steps and the Sacraments: A Catholic Journey through Recovery](#). He is a registered associate marriage and family therapist, has a heart for serving young adults and those seeking recovery from addictions, and loves God and his family. Scott lives in San Diego with his wife and daughter.

We've also asked our team of experts to provide resources for you to get more information. **If you are in crisis or you think you may have an emergency, call your doctor or 911 immediately. If you're having suicidal thoughts, call 1-800-273-TALK (8255) to speak with a skilled, trained counselor at a crisis center in your area at any time (National Suicide Prevention Lifeline). If you are located outside the United States, call your local emergency line immediately.**

With the help of professionals and those who have struggled with stress, anxiety, and other mental health issues, we're offering insights, resources, and suggestions for a path to healing and a road to hope in the midst of dark and scary times.