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Life is Worth Giving

VENERABLE MATT TALBOT: CAN AN ALCOHOLIC BECOME A SAINT?

by Fr. Kevin Shanley, O.Carm.

Many believing people today struggle with addictions to various spirit-destroying substances in their lives. And such addictions can also be life-destroying, too. To aid in the struggle against such addictions, many support groups have been founded to aid and advise those who wish to regain control and return to normal living.

One of the more prevalent addictions in our society is that of alcoholism which plagues millions of lives, and affects even more. In its 12-Step program, Alcoholics Anonymous encourages people to seek help from others but especially from a higher power and to turn their wills and lives over to God, as they understand Him.

This highly-successful group is at times the last best hope for those struggling with alcoholism. But can such a group have a canonized saint for their role model?

A recovered Dublin alcoholic, "Venerable" Matt Talbot, may answer that question in the future when the Vatican gives serious consideration to his life and example.

Who is Matt Talbot?

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(MATT TALBOT)/ 2

Dublin in the 19th Century, then still under British Rule, may have been the "second city" of the British Empire for the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, but for the Catholic Irish poor it was a place of substandard tenements and deplorable working conditions. It was on the Northside of the city, in a basement flat, that Matt Talbot was born ^(IN 1853) to Charles and Elizabeth Talbot as their second eldest son and one of their 12 children. With only a minimum of two years of schooling at best, young Matt joined his father and brothers as an unskilled laborer. He was just 12 years old.

Introduction to Alcohol

Unfortunately for the young Matt Talbot, who would later be known as "the saint in overalls," his first job was at the bottling store of E. & J. Burke along the River Liffey. His somewhat boring job was to fill bottles with stout and porter all day long. He soon began sampling the contents of the liquor barrels, and began a period of drinking that lasted some 16 years. He soon became a compulsive drinker and remained so until the age of 28.

When the elder ^(Charles) Talbot realized his mistake in obtaining the bottling job for his son, a change to another position ensued. However, the change was for the worse as Talbot's new job was in the whiskey and other spirits ~~of~~ ^(BONDED STORES) of the Custom House along the Liffey.



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(MATT TALBOT)/ 3

Here young Matt Talbot became the delivery boy for bottles of whiskey for the numerous pubs of Dublin. Unfortunately, this led to his drinking of hard liquor and the boy became virtually a full-fledged alcoholic who simply lived to drink and cared little about life except the thought of where his next drink could be obtained.

A Drinking Epiphany

This dissolute life continued for Matt Talbot until one week in 1884. He was 28 years old and had been drinking steadily from about the age of 13. He had spent every penny he had earned or borrowed on liquor and was craving for more alcohol. He went to his usual pub with the hope that some of his fellow drinkers would pity his craving and buy him a drink. When none would offer Talbot even a pint of stout, he came to the realization that his life was in a shambles and the cause was his dependence on liquor. It was, indeed, a moment of spiritual truth for Talbot. He returned home, serious and sober, a great surprise to his Mother.

Matt Talbot announced that he was "going to take the pledge" to refrain from drinking alcohol.

"Go in God's name," admonished his Mother, "but don't take the pledge unless you are going to keep it."

Matt Talbot answered simply, "I'll go in God's name."



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(MATT TALBOT)/ 4

The Battle for Sobriety

The young Dubliner had seemingly inherited two Talbot family characteristics: the capacity for heavy drinking and for difficult work. He had left his job at the Custom House and became a builder's laborer for a short time. But he soon returned to the River Liffey as a dock laborer loading and unloading ships with cargoes for and from Ireland.

But now Talbot was starting out on a new drink-free life. He went to Clonliffe College on Dublin's Northside to take the pledge. Initially he took it for three months, and then renewed it for the rest of his life.

The craving for alcohol was almost overwhelming, and Talbot turned to God for help. ~~He~~ He later explained that he considered his decision to abstain from alcohol as the beginning of his true conversion and return to God. He also had great temptations to give up hope and also his Catholic Faith. But his return to the Sacraments, especially the Eucharist, and his deeper union with Christ and the Blessed Mother Mary, enabled him to weather his spiritual storms and to return to the calm of a deep Faith life. As an added incentive, since he was also a heavy smoker, he gave up the use of tobacco.

Change of Work and Life

This was, indeed, the beginning of a life of deep prayer and great penance. He attended Mass each morning for Eucharist.

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(MATT TALBOT)/ 5

He also frequently attended extra Masses and spent time in church praying on his knees, especially on Sunday. As his prayer and sacramental life deepened, so Talbot's struggle to overcome his addictions became a success of personal freedom, *BUT* he still had to contend with controlling his quick temper.

When Talbot realized that his work on the Dublin docks interfered with his spiritual life, he decided to change jobs and became a laborer at the Martin Lumberyard on the opposite side of the River Liffey.

As he grew older and more confident in his new spiritual and Christian life, Matt Talbot became quieter but still enjoyed the conversations with his fellow workers who knew little of his great struggle. But his personal generosity soon became well known to them and others. He loaned money freely whenever there was a need and often wasn't re-paid.

End of the Struggle

On Trinity Sunday, June 7, 1925, Matt Talbot died on a Dublin street on the way to Mass. His heroic life might have gone almost completely unnoticed except that the nuns at the Jervis Street Hospital, who prepared his body for burial, discovered that he wore chains around his body as a form of great penance to aid in his struggle for sobriety and to become closer to God. As a fellow Dubliner said of Talbot that "he couldn't go easy at anything."



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(MATT TALBOT)/ 6

Two others who knew Talbot well said that he "wanted only the one thing." Before his conversion, "Matt" wanted only the one thing, drink. " After his conversion, "Matt wanted only the one thing, God."

Road to Sainthood

Through much of his working life, Matt Talbot had been a member of the Irish Transport and General Workers Union from its foundation, and participated in the workers' General Strike in 1913.

At the IT&GWU's annual conference in 1975, Ireland's largest trade union agreed to an unprecedented resolution by its 300,000 members to petition the Vatican to expedite the beatification and eventual canonization of their fellow union member "Venerable" Matt Talbot.

As a saint, Talbot, who died a little over 75 years ago, would be an excellent role model for all those who struggle with addictions.