

The Scripps Estate, the original Guest House treatment facility in Michigan, which is still in use today

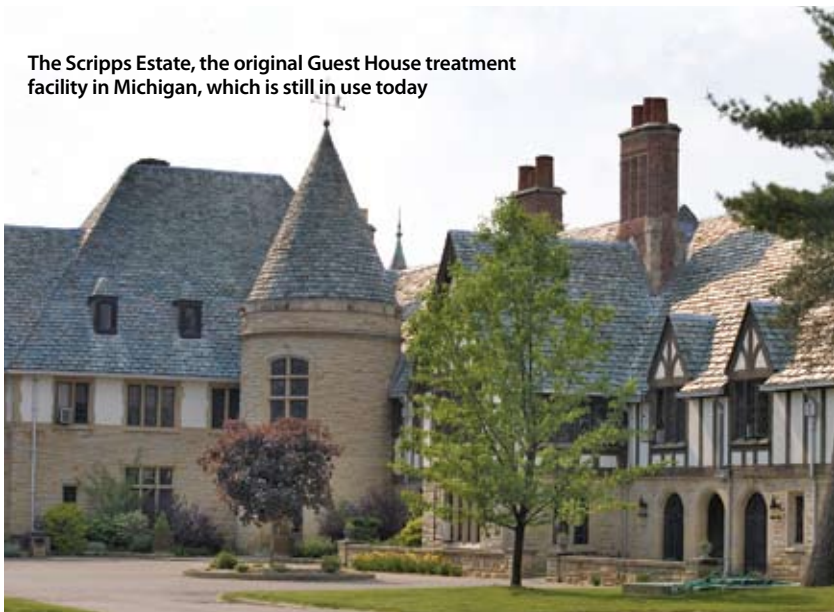


PHOTO COURTESY OF GUEST HOUSE

How *Guest House* saved my life

Guest House

BY **FATHER BILL***

As told to Julie L. Rattey

“You’re not going to live six months,” the doctor told me. The sad thing was, I didn’t care. The year was 1974, and I was an alcoholic in denial.

I can’t claim I didn’t know what alcohol could do to a person, especially one with a family history of it, which was the case with me: All but one of my uncles died of alcoholism, and my father had warned me and my siblings about the dangers of drink. Ironically, I was ministering to alcoholic priests when my addiction began in earnest. In January of 1963, six months after my ordination, my bishop asked me to take care of a priest who’d been an active alcoholic for years. When I arrived at the parish, things were in complete disarray. The mail lay in piles on the floor. Bills had not been paid. The electric company and the gas company were threatening to shut off the power and heat.

This was my first glimpse of what alcoholism could do to a priest. It wasn’t my last.

Over the years it began to get to me, and a daily pattern developed. When I’d come home from my high school teaching job, I would sit down with the priest I was ministering with at the time, who was an alcoholic. I would share the news of my day over a drink with him: a little whisky, a little scotch, maybe a beer on a hot day. I was seeing a good Catholic psychiatrist for depression, but in the end, the alcohol won. Alcohol worked better than any therapy or anti-depressant my doctor prescribed. It eased

my anxiety and gave me comfort. When I was drinking, I felt good. But my life was going down the drain.

In 1969, after drinking and taking sedatives, I nearly died in a car accident on the way home from my parents’ house. I passed out on the drive and later



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awoke to the sight of police, people pulling me out of my totaled car, a crowd of horrified onlookers. I had fractured teeth, a concussion, lacerations in my head, cracked vertebrae. But in the depths of my addiction, I refused to make a connection between my drinking and the accident. In my mind, I didn't even have a drinking problem. I got a friend to smuggle alcohol into the hospital for me so I could drink while I was recovering.

After that, things got worse. My stomach was shot. I lost control of my bowels. My body was a mess. My parents confronted me every chance they got. "Can't you see what the alcohol is doing to your life?" they'd say. Friends and superiors confronted me too. But I wouldn't listen.

When I bottomed out in Christmas of 1974, I was consuming three packs of cigarettes and a quart of whisky a day. I had walking pneumonia, strep, and bronchitis. The doctor had to give me antibiotics, but they wouldn't do a thing because I wasn't eating

properly. "I can't do anything for you anymore," my doctor told me finally. "You're going to die." But I was in a state of despair. I didn't care what happened.

The turning point came in May of 1975, when my bishop forced me to act. "Bill, you've got to deal with this," he said. "You told me you were going to deal with it. You're not. I want you to go to treatment. If you don't, you're finished. You can't function anymore." He told me he was sending me to Guest House, a treatment center for clergy and Religious.

I was terribly hurt and resentful, even outraged. I was also a little indignant — my bishop drank a fair bit

himself. But he was firm.

"You have to go," he said. "I've set it up for you. You have to go tomorrow."

Reluctantly, I agreed. But when he left, I was very angry. I went to see my spiritual director, a fellow priest. "Bill," he said, "what harm can it do for you to go up there and be evaluated?"

■ ■ ■
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On the drive back to my rectory, I passed the cemetery where my mother, who had died in 1971, was buried. It was a warm, humid day in June, but there was a slight breeze, and it seemed to carry a grace to me. I thought of the work I was doing at the time, educating developmentally disabled people. I was urging them to exert themselves to do the simplest chores like putting on a shirt or clothes, or wear a helmet so if they had convulsions they wouldn't fall down and hurt themselves. *If I can ask them to do all these things, I thought, why can't I do what the bishop asked me?* And so I finally surrendered to it, and grace began to come into my life. The war was over. Now I had to deal with the damage and find a way to rebuild.

It wasn't going to be easy. A lot of difficult steps lay ahead, the first of which was to explain to the people I worked with what was going on. At the time I was pastor of a small parish. I was also directing diocesan programs for the developmentally disabled as well as a program for the elderly. On that very day, June 11, I went to the place where I was minis-



PRAYER FOR AN ADDICTED LOVED ONE

Prayer to St. Anthony

O blessed St. Anthony, God has made you a powerful advocate in all necessities and beloved patron of those in search of the lost. I turn to you today with childlike love and heartfelt confidence. You were the counselor of the erring, the comforter of the afflicted, the healer of the sick. Please help our beloved (name), who is lost. O Lord, through the intercession of St. Anthony, help (name) to find the way back, guide each member of our family to hope and recovery. Amen.

■ PRAYERS FOR ADDICTED PERSONS
AND THEIR LOVED ONES, NCCA

► **To request a free copy of this prayer booklet**, or for more information about the National Catholic Council on Alcoholism and Related Drug Problems, call 800-626-6910 ext. 1200 or visit nccatoday.org

The story of Guest House » In 1956, Austin Ripley, a Catholic layman and recovered alcoholic, founded Guest House to treat Catholic clergy and Religious suffering from alcoholism. Since then, it has been the means for more than 7,300 priests, Brothers, Sisters, deacons, and seminarians to be released from the ordeal of active alcoholism and drug dependency. Today, many of these men and women lead sober and productive lives. Dan Kidd, president and CEO of Guest House, quotes one participant: “Guest House made me the priest I always wanted to be.”

The National Council of Alcoholism and Related Drug Problems is now an affiliated program/service of Guest House. For more information on Guest House, visit guesthouse.org or call 800-626-6910.

tering these programs and told the staff that I was probably an alcoholic, since I was being sent for evaluation. The staff all congratulated me for going along with the bishop. While I was gone, the bishop’s office would arrange for people to come and help with the work I was doing. They wanted me to focus on my health.

The next day, on June 12, 1975, a priest classmate of mine took me to Guest House for treatment.

We made a stop on the way to get me my last drink so I wouldn’t go into a shaky delirium. But it was only putting off the inevitable. I was in the hospital the next morning, fevered and shaky. **CD**

READ THE CONCLUSION OF THIS STORY IN NEXT MONTH’S *CATHOLIC DIGEST*.

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WHAT ELSE?

When asked for the time, Yogi Berra’s classic reply was, “Do you mean *now*?”



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■ **Father Ron Cloutier,**

DIRECTOR OFFICE OF CORRECTIONAL MINISTRIES
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Other _____

I was naked and you gave me clothing,
I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison
and you visited me. MATTHEW 25:36

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