

JOURNAL INTERVIEW—34

Conversation with Monsignor Ignatius McDermott

In this occasional series we record the views and personal experiences of people who have specially contributed to the evolution of ideas in the Journal's field of interest. Monsignor Ignatius McDermott has spent a life in developing help for homeless or disadvantaged people with alcohol or drug problems.

Addiction: *Tell me something about your personal background.*

IMcD: I was fortunate in emanating from a family where my mother and father were very precious and wonderful people. My father had emigrated from Ireland and started a milk business, and there were six boys and two girls in our family. My mother was a school teacher; her grandparents came from Ireland. My oldest brother became a judge—he was in the political world in Chicago. I had another brother who owned a tavern. I was born and raised in Chicago and I went to a grammar school, graduating in 1924. I used to go into church, close by across the street, run in there and make a visit. I realized that the Lord resided in the tabernacle and He was my friend, and I would talk to him and I would ask Him to tell me what He wanted me to do, and give me the grace to do it. So when I left school I went to the seminar in Chicago known as Quigley Preparatory Seminary. I went there for five years, 1924-29. We started out with about five classes with 40 in each class. In 1929, 95 of us graduated and we went to the major seminary. We were to be ordained six years later, but it took me seven. I was injured playing football and lost too much time and had to repeat a year. I was ordained in 1936.

Addiction: *And what was the next move after you were ordained?*

IMcD: The way God draws blueprints is better

than any person who is human. We had been ordained on 18 April 1936; we pursued our studies till 30 May and then we were given a month's vacation. My brother had a summer home on Long Beach, Indiana, and I figured I would go there rather than be homeless on the beach. I would be getting an appointment within a month; I had a couple of class-mates with me, and I was down on the beach and we were playing ball, and my sister-in-law said to me, "I got a call from the Chicago archdiocese and you are to see the Cardinal tomorrow". So I called the office of the seminary and I said to the rector, "This is Ignatius McDermott, and my sister-in-law received a call that I'm supposed to see the Cardinal tomorrow". He said, "Well, Ignatius, you had better be there". I knew it was for real. So next day I arrived at the seminary. A few minutes later we were ushered into the cardinal's office. He was sitting behind a desk, and we went over and greeted him and sat down. He said, "I'm gonna make you young priests missionaries".

Addiction: *Was that good news?*

IMcD: Oh! Missionaries! I'm saying to myself, Missionaries—Oh! I'm supposed to go to the pampas, supposed to go to some vile country and eat rice. What about the Chicago White Sox that I love so much, and I want to see them play on my day off. And what about my mother and father? Those things were cantering through my mind. The Cardinal then said "Where I'm sending you as a missionary, you don't

have to board an ocean liner or go across to Europe or distant territories. You don't have to get on an aeroplane and fly to some distant shores. You don't even have to get on a ferry-boat! Life here is hard in our own archdiocese, it's mission territory. I have appointed Father O'Connor as the superintendent of Merryville, a children's home in a poor suburb about 25 miles north west of Chicago, and I want you to report there on 30 June.

Addiction: That job sounds like a pretty big demand on a young man.

IMcD: I'm sitting at Merryville, and I took it for granted that I had a wonderful mother and father who were still living, and I had brothers and sisters. I'm 25 years old. I see hundreds of boys and girls running around out there at the children's home, and I'm saying to myself, "God, how come you shortchanged those people? How come they're out here?" I'm 25 years old, and for the first time in my life I realized that I had taken something for granted. Parents were a gift from God. Why did He take a father or a mother away out of some family? A TB sanatorium, a death perhaps. Why did a mother die? I said to myself, "God, you short-changed those gifts". And I was beginning to realize how blessed I was to be out there doing this work. I felt sorry for my classmates. They think, maybe I got the worst appointment! But I saw myself as having the best. I'm looking upon these kids as my brothers and sisters. How fortunate, so many brothers and sisters.

Addiction: And how did your interest in drinking problems begin to emerge?

IMcD: While I was in the seminary from 1924-29, I had a job at a racetrack during the summer vacation and I would board the train in the Skid Row area. I'd walk along and I would see the men populating the streets. My first real exposure to the Skid Row area in Chicago was, however, at Merryville, when I came across children who were not receiving any visitors. On one occasion that sent me down to Skid Row to find a parent who wasn't visiting. And at that time I became aware of alcoholism as a family sickness. I saw some of the parents coming out on a Sunday and they were, as we would say, 98% proof under the influence and rude to their own child.

Addiction: How long were you at Merryville?

IMcD: After five years I left Merryville and was assigned to a parish in the south shore area of Chicago. There was a school of about 700 boys and girls, 1st to 8th grade, and the nuns taught the children while I was the religion instructor. Often when a boy or girl would begin to manifest behavior problems, the sisters would say, "Well, we should release this child and let him go to a public school". Recalling my exposure to the children whose parents had been dependent upon alcohol in the orphanage, I would again do a home visit, and ring the doorbell and get up the stairs before they knew who I was, and often as not the door would open and I would find a mother dependent on alcohol. That too lasted for five years, and then I was sent in 1946 to the Catholic Charities, again a residential home for children, and the office was two blocks from Chicago's Skid Row, and right next door to our building was the police station.

Addiction: What exactly is the social, human, meaning of this term "Skid Row"? You must be one of the world's experts on that question.

IMcD: Well, as I said, I became acquainted with Skid Row early in 1931 when I was working at the race track. I would have to walk from the bus three blocks to a railroad station, and I would be walking through the heart of the Skid Row area. Skid Row had been there for a long time, but I had never heard the men ever refer to themselves as being a resident of Skid Row. Skid Row to the men is not a piece of real estate; it's a state of mind (and there are more alcoholics in pent-houses than in flophouses). The origins I suppose are something like this. In the wake of the American Civil War we had more than a few widows. In those days there wasn't any veterans assistance. The women had to live, and they had children, so they resorted to using their skills as housekeepers and cooks and laundresses. They started some rooming facilities along West Madison Street, because that was close to the Union Railroad Station and to the North Western Railroad Station. The canal and the railway tracks were under construction so the men could reside in that area, and then they could get on the train and go out to the place where they were working and return at night. Breakfast and a lunch-pack, and dinner would be there and their clothes laundered when they returned at night.

Time marched on and other people saw that this could be a good way of earning a living, and this generated all the hotels along Chicago's West Madison Street. So you had a proliferation of Skid Row hotels, and the men were living in cages. And then another disastrous development took place along this street—pawn shops and blood banks. You would have the reputable hospitals in the city coming down and buying the blood, and the donors were getting \$5 for a pint of blood while it was being sold for \$35.

Then too people began to look toward Skid Row as a source of cheap, exploitable labour. "Slave marts"—that's the people who are running those employment agencies. They were prostituting the men. Some business would call them and say that they wanted 10 or 20 men for a job that had to be done in a hurry and the agency would contract to get \$1 an hour for the man who did the work, and they turned around and paid that man at 65 cents an hour. How otherwise did the men survive the Skid Row area? Some of them had part-time jobs: they would pass out handbills; they would set up pins in bowling alleys; wash the lettuce and clean the tomatoes in a restaurant or act as dishwashers, and this with many of them suffering from TB. So I talked to people from the Chicago Health Department about bringing a truck to take chest X-rays of their lungs. But the ones that got a card and knew they were positive, they would disappear to another Skid Row and they would not want to be taken out of circulation.

Addiction: When you were first involved with Skid Row, what kind of help was available for the men who inhabited this "state of mind"?

IMcD: In those days when the public inebriate was apprehended by the police he would be brought to the police station, he would be thrown into a cell in the basement, and the cell would reek of urine and excrement and there would be a trough for them to relieve themselves. The next day they would appear before the judge who would probably say, "Well, why don't you try to be better, we don't want you back here again". If a man was making repeated appearances, the judge might send him to the city prison. Of course, an alcoholic thrives on resentment, sending a man to prison generates lots of resentment, and the man would be saying, "If you thought I was drunk the last time, wait till you see me when I get out this time". And he

didn't know he was on the path of self-destruction. With the alcoholic it's either the Desert or the Jones Town Flood. It's either majoring in dryness or in wetness. I would look in on the cells and throw the men cigarettes and talk to them, and I would see religious students coming down and talking to a captive audience and telling them about the wages of sin. And these were sick people, and here they were being incarcerated for being sick.

Addiction: Were there at the time any state institutions which offered help as an alternative to imprisonment?

IMcD: There were two state institutions at that time, about 30 miles from Chicago, which catered for the homeless alcoholic. I would motor there every week and take some of the men with me, and all they were getting was a clean bed. As they used to say on Skid Row, "You're getting three hots from the cop"—you're getting three hot meals from the police. They were breathing in fresh air but nothing was done in the rehabilitation line. We would stop at a restaurant about two miles before the state institution and they would buy a hamburger or cup of coffee, and I would buy each one of them a pack of cigarettes. Later I would bring them back, and they would play many return engagements.

Addiction: And who were these men you would find on Skid Row?

IMcD: Every kind. You had to identify with them and believe in them, and you had to give them the dignity of man. Why should I be up here and them down there? Every man came from dust and to dust he shall return. I was beginning to find more than a few professional men on the street. In fact, I met a doctor on the street after he found out I was for real. He'd be sober from time to time and I'd be going in and out of the flop houses, so when I found the doctor in sober moments, I would ask him to come with me. Of course, he himself was experiencing a tremendous loss of self-esteem. Here he was, an MD, and found on Madison Skid Row. In the meantime, I came across a man who was a graduate at Rutgers University, and this man had taken a geographical cure. He had been a professional football player, and had majored in sociology. He found sobriety as a desk clerk in a hotel. I ran into priests on Skid Row who left

their dioceses and found their way down here. They would be from the West coast and residing on Skid Row trying to lose their identity. It was looked upon solely and exclusively as something that's sinful, and you should be able to say your prayers and be able to escape the dependency on alcohol. The Church didn't realize, of course, about the illness of alcoholism.

Addiction: What role did you see AA playing in helping people on Skid Row?

IMcD: AA is for people who want it. You have to have the desire to embrace sobriety and serenity. It's a program of attraction and you see living, breathing, walking examples of it. I read an article in the *Readers Digest* about Alcoholics Anonymous and I learned that there was a Big Book. I met a vice president of a bank in Chicago and I asked him about this book, and he came out to the rectory to see me a few nights later and he had a large bag under his arm. There were three offices in the rectory and he said, "We're not going to sit in this office are we?" We went to the middle office .. "Is the door going to be closed?" We went to the third office and sat down. He gave me the book, telling me I could keep it as long as I wanted, but don't ever call him at the bank. In those days he could have lost his job because of the terrible feelings that people had about alcoholics. They always felt that in order to be an alcoholic you had to live on Skid Row.

Later, Clem Lane, the city editor of the *Chicago Daily News*, would come over every day and make a visit to our chapel, and I learned that he was a member of Alcoholics Anonymous. At that time I began to see him often. I talked to him about establishing an AA facility in West Madison Street. So I said they could meet in our office and we put a sign on the door "If alcohol is your problem, why not come to an AA meeting on Monday or Friday night?" and, of course, quite a few people had to say, "Well, it's a rainy night, and I could go in there and I could twist the priest's arm and may be he would give me a buck and I could buy another drink".

Addiction: When you were starting your own work on Skid Row, how well informed were Church attitudes on drinking?

IMcD: Clergymen make a retreat once a year. The retreat master, he was not equipped to talk about alcoholism. Yet one of the talks usually

would be on alcoholism, and often times the retreat master would be saying, "Well, if you don't drink before nightfall, you'll never get in trouble. If you drink it straight, you'll get in trouble. So the best thing to do is always cut your gin or scotch or bourbon or rum, mix it with soda water, or with water. Never drink alone; if you drink alone you're in trouble". A priest talks about alcoholism and he doesn't know what he's talking about. There were though more than a few priests in Chicago who were dependent upon alcohol and were members of Alcoholics Anonymous, and they were staying dry. Austin Ripley opened this place in Wisconsin, and he welcomed alcoholic clergymen; in fact, he went looking for them. He would bring them back to his place; he would have them always in the house as a clergyman, their trousers had to be pressed, they had to have a clean shirt and collar, they had to be shaven, they had to be tonsorial, and have a hair cut. As some of these priests began to recover, the priests in the neighbourhood were infatuated and they'd come over—"Hey, what is this place?" Well, Austin Ripley would talk to them and his wife would work with them.

Addiction: And general public attitudes to alcohol dependence. Was it always a secret problem?

IMcD: There was a drug store across the street from where I was working in Chicago, and some of the children would go over there and have their lunch at noon-time. I became close with one of the pharmacists: my children used to go there at noon and he would joke with them. One day a woman rang the doorbell at the rectory and said she'd like me to talk to me about her brother. I said that I didn't know her, so how could I know her brother. She said, "You know him very well, he's the pharmacist and he's across the street. I am unmarried and he's unmarried. We live in our parents house, they are both dead. He has a dependency on alcohol, and when he's missing for two or three days and you talk to him, he tells you that he was sick. He did not tell you his sickness was a dependency upon alcohol".

Addiction: And meanwhile, I imagine, everyone had a good drink, and alcohol had nothing much to do with alcoholism in the public mind?

IMcD: I was at a wedding reception one night and was in the company of a judge and his wife.

I don't know what the custom is in other countries at wedding receptions, but in Chicago people would arrive and the bride and groom would receive them, and they would all be imbibing cocktails. So there'd be a cocktail hour, and then when they sat down to attack the solids at the table, there would be bottles of white and rosé wine. After the meal was consumed, the Master of Ceremonies would announce that the band is here: "We're going to have dancing; there'll be a sweet table later, and the bar is re-opened". You see all these wonderful people, how well-dressed they are, how self-confident, you see the family roots. Now, these people on their way home, they don't know how much they have been drinking, and it hasn't cost them anything. On the way home they could maim or kill somebody, behind the wheel of a car. Now, you are the judge I said, would you like to send those people to the jail? It was probably the father who overimbibed and he's thrown in that jail, do you think that he's going to get his job back when he returns? What's going to happen to the source of income for the wife and children, are they going on general assistance and be a drag to the taxpayer?

Addiction: Did you get interest in this work from the university community?

IMcD: The professor of sociology at Rutgers, we had met somewhere, and he said, would you come over and be a guest lecturer twice a year and talk to the students. So I went there and talked with these students and they were all saying "How can we help you? We want to come over and help you". After a year or two conversing with them in the class, I said "I don't believe any of you people at all. I have been coming over here for two years, you said you wanted to come to Chicago, there was only one person that I know ever came down here and he didn't come out of the university, he came out of Michigan, Kalamazoo, a young Calvinist". He came as a postgraduate student to these boys, and we had him living with us.

Addiction: You had obviously over the course of some years become very close to the men who were living on Skid Row in a personal, feeling, compassionate way. How did you make the first move toward establishing any kind of formal helping facility?

IMcD: I was on a commission which was funded

by the Mayor and we'd meet once a month. The group was composed of businessmen and newspapermen. The idea was to try to better the lot of the Skid Row men. We started with a reading room, a sort of warm-up centre where men could go for a day and have a shave and a wash. Dr James West, he and I became fast friends and allies, were both on this commission. In 1973 or 1974, he said there's an article coming out of Toronto about non-medical detoxification. So we went to Toronto. Dr. West and myself at our own expense. We returned around midnight, and we were all agog. Boy, we'd got something to talk to our fellow commission members at the next meeting. And our words fell on deaf ears. So I said to Dr West let's open a social setting detoxification centre. We opened this place on 31 December 1975, and they passed the law decriminalizing the public inebriate in July 1976. The building was owned by the Presbyterian Church who had moved to other quarters. The roof was leaking. And we found the same thing as in Toronto, that less than 4% of the people needed the services of a hospital or an MD. We were saving the County Hospital close to a \$1 million tangibly, but intangibly we were saving the people so that their toes wouldn't be amputated for frostbite. The first law mandated that the person would have to be seen by a doctor, but they later amended the law so that a medical opinion was not needed. When we opened our non-medical detox centre in December 1975 it was the first in the Mid-West. It was pretty much a pioneer project. We stayed in that place until the building was condemned and then we went in quest of another site.

Addiction: Was it easy or difficult to find new accommodation?

IMcD: Looking for a building is one thing, and looking for a building owned by a person who's understanding is another. We found a man who owned property in the neighbourhood, and he had a building with two empty floors. The first floor had been a tropical fish business; the second overshoes, but both of those enterprises had gone out of business, and this man rented his property to us for altruistic purposes at a very modest cost. The men stayed on the first floor for a while and then they moved to the second, where the objective was to create an atmosphere to keep them dry. When the gentleman who had rented us this accommodation died, his son

owned the whole block of property and didn't want to sell us just part of it. We didn't have enough money to purchase that building, a little over \$300 000, so we went in search of some persons who would help us. Before we could develop this strategy, the building was sold to a Jewish father and son who ran a restaurant supply business. We asked them about purchasing the building from them, and they said "We'd love to, but our present building is condemned and we have to move out into this property". But they were wonderful and noble people and they said we'll give you a year to see if you can find another building for your center. We looked all over the city and we encountered an obstacle course because of zoning difficulties. Zoning is where in certain neighbourhoods you cannot put things in that you want to put in.

Addiction: *And what was the state of play at the end of that year?*

IMcD: A year marched on and we needed another year, so we petitioned the father and son who owned the restaurant supply business, and we found them favorably disposed. In this day and age it's awfully hard to find people like that. We were into our second year when we found a building practically across the street. We bought the building for \$1m, and all we had was a monumental faith in the divine providence of God. I signed the letters at the Bank, and I had only one-third of the down payment. So we purchased this building and we moved the facility into what we called Haymarket House, because it was the scene of the Haymarket riots of 1886. When we came into our area and bought this building for \$1 million-odd, all the windows were broken, there weren't any elevators, you could put saddles on the rats running out of the building. And people were questioning me—"What kind of people are you bringing in here? Are you going to bring this neighbourhood down?" But before long I was able to say "Hey, why don't you put some windows in your building; why don't you paint the frame. You're making our building look bad. We're out to help humanity, you're out to make a buck. You should be giving us money, because we're making your neighbourhood look better and enhancing it".

Addiction: *And you've moved on again since?*

IMcD: We are now into our third Haymarket

House. The building we are now in, we get about 16 000 people there annually; it's open 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. When we again moved on to a new building we began to remodel the facility, and we had to generate funds which now would be in the neighbourhood of perhaps \$12-14 million. I always felt that the success rate would be better if the environment is pleasant, clean, and attractive.

Addiction: *What kind of a person do you look for to work with you?*

IMcD: I'm looking for somebody who is going to identify with the people we are privileged to serve. And I want some people who have experienced alcoholism in their own lives, or in their families. I'm not myself an alcoholic. We interview all the potential members of staff. I want them to realize that it is a *privilege* to work with these people. I remember when I was a kid going to Quigley, and I'd go down State Street every day, where the big stores are. I was always magnetized by a sign in one of the clothing stores "Our best ads are worn, they are not written". The most powerful thing in the world is the power of example. And I want our staff to look upon the people we are privileged to serve as the nobility, and we are the servants. If you forget that, I don't want you around here. You don't look upon them as "things". This is a beautiful place and when I walk through here and I see a piece of paper, it's not beneath my dignity to pick it up. And I'll keep telling them the Master is kindness. Kindness is the only language in the world that the deaf can hear, the blind can see, that the dumb can speak.

Addiction: *Your future plans? I doubt whether you are resting.*

IMcD: My 50th anniversary in the priesthood was in 1986, and that's when I founded the McDermott Foundation. We have a facility for women who are in the last three months of pregnancy. In this institution it's costing in the neighbourhood of \$90 a day for taking care of a woman, but if you bring a crack-saturated baby into the world, it cost minimally \$1000-\$2000 a day in our country. We have 200 women on our waiting list and we're expanding our facility.

Addiction: *Would you have done so much if you hadn't been a priest?*

IMcD: I don't know. I often wonder. I had ideas ... love sport so well I thought I might be a sports writer—I love baseball and football. Write for one of the papers or become a sports pro-

moter, or something of that nature. I figure, well, the Lord put me in the best arena in the world. I may not be on the pitching mound, but I'm on the mount of Melchizedek—that's pretty good!

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