

*Correspondence about quarrels
between Father Pfau and various
other A.A. figures*

Father Ralph Pfau and Bill Wilson initially became good friends when the two of them met one another in San Diego, California in 1948 and then traveled together to Ensenada, Mexico. Ralph and Bill further cemented that relationship when they appeared on the same speakers platform in Austin, Texas in June of that year.¹

But they eventually had a falling out, clearly in part (as at least one of the major issues) over the question of public anonymity.

Bill Wilson had first become upset with Lillian Roth, the well-known Hollywood film actress. She was an alcoholic who got sober in A.A. in 1946, and then told her story in a book entitled *I'll Cry Tomorrow*, which came out in 1954 and sold more than seven million copies in twenty languages.² It was turned into a hit film the next year, starring another famous Hollywood actress, Susan Hayward, in the title role.

Father Ralph Pfau then broke his anonymity when he published his autobiography in *Look* magazine in 1958.³ It not only gave his full name, but there were also a number of photographs showing Ralph's face, portraying him in full ecclesiastical vestments celebrating mass, and so on.

Bill W. and Father Ralph eventually made up at the Fourth A.A. International Convention in Toronto in 1965 and renewed their friendship (see Chapter 8 in Part I of this book). Pfau (who died in

1967) was sixty at the time, and Wilson (who died in 1971) was seventy — neither of them young men any more, but it was satisfying that they ended their lives on good terms once more.

Amy Filiatreau, who at that time was the Archivist at the central A.A. Archives at the GSO in New York City, sent me an e-mail on July 5, 2007 giving me the full text of several pieces of correspondence relating to possible reasons for the quarrel between Father Ralph and Bill W.

Dear Glenn,

Hello from the GSO Archives! I hope this note finds you well. I wanted to say again how wonderful it was to meet and spend some time talking with you the other week in Lebanon [in eastern Pennsylvania, at the A.A. history conference there]. I had a great time, and learned so much from all of you.

You had asked me about problems or conflicts between Bill W. and Father Ralph Pfau. In our correspondence files we have a few documents that reveal something of this. I hope the following will be helpful.

In a letter dated Feb. 11, 1958, Bill writes to Dean B. of Indianapolis, IN: “I note with interest what you say about Ralph Pfau. I have always felt very grateful for his actual contribution to the welfare of A.A.

“Though he is certainly within his individual rights, a good many of us regret that he is apparently about to break his anonymity at the public level in his new book ‘The Prodigal Shepherd.’ This means, of course, that he doesn’t really believe in the tradition of anonymity at the public level, so far as he is concerned. Like Lillian, he feels that he has a special mission which should exempt him from these traditions. I have no doubt that he, like Lillian herself, really

believes that AA will be helped if he thus makes a public character of himself.

“Actually, I feel more disturbed on his account than I do for AA itself. Most of us regard anonymity at the public level as a protective thing for AA, a very vitally protective principle. Consequently, I am afraid he will be criticized rather severely by a good many members who refuse to understand his good intentions. The record shows Ralph is rather easily hurt and excited by adverse criticism. I don’t think Ralph has any better friend than I am. So I’m not a little sad that he so resolutely sets his face against the tradition of the society that gave him a new life and for which he has done so much.”

In another letter, June 2, 1958, Bill writes to George S. of Philadelphia : “Being convinced that neither Lillian nor Father Pfau are going to establish any wholesale precedent [through breaking their anonymity] I can’t get too excited about what they do. It only confirms in the movement the need for anonymity at the public level. The awareness of the Traditions is growing daily. So I honestly have no real fear for the future.

“However, the good Father has received a pretty severe shellacking from many AA members; among them, yourself. This will doubtless be salutary, provided it doesn’t crack him up entirely.”

We also have a couple of letters suggesting that Father Pfau was charging speaker fees and that there was evidently some resentment about him selling his booklets.

Captain Jack S., while traveling in South America , wrote to Bobbie B. in the Alcoholic Foundation office on March 19, 1949: “We also enjoyed Father Pfau. Just between ourselves there may be a little resentment against him on account of the

sale of books and the collections which I know were large, but frankly I got a lot out of him and his interpretation of the program.”

George S. of Philadelphia writes to Bill August 24, 1962. He writes: “Father Pfau is in our Philadelphia news again. A young lad ... came to me about forming a group ... It is called the Bridesburg Group and meets in a Protestant Church. Without consulting anybody the fine lad contacted Father Pfau. He said that he would appear at a meeting if he came within the area. The charge would be \$75.00 and he would sell his booklets. These are signed Father John Doe. The last name should read “Dough.”

I hope this limited sharing is somewhat helpful for you! Please let us know if you have any other questions. Again, it was a pleasure to meet you.

Very best wishes Glenn! Take care.

Amy

Amy Filiatreau, CA
Archivist
AA World Services, Inc.

There were other prominent A.A. figures who were not pleased by Father Pfau’s breaking of his anonymity in 1958 in that two-part *Look* magazine article. One of them was Sackville Mollins in Dublin, Ireland, whose story “The Career Officer” appeared in both the second and third editions of the Big Book. In a letter to Sister Ignatia Gavin in Cleveland, Ohio, Sackville was highly critical of what Father Ralph Pfau had done.⁴

19.3.58.

Dear Sister Ignatia,

Thank you so much for your letter of February 18th, which got here very late. I was so very sorry to hear through Mickey and Joe Donnigan of Kay's death. R.I.P. I know how much you will feel her loss and would like you to have my very sincere sympathy

Mickey seems to be in good heart, and I hear from him frequently ... He sent me Fr. Pfau's articles in 'Look' [Pfau's autobiography in Look magazine in March 1958]. I thought them rather horrible. I did miss the word ADVT. at the end, but that was the impression I got from them! I didn't care for the accompanying photographs either and cannot think that this form of publicity can do much good for the Church or for A.A. Of course there are always two ways of looking at things, and perhaps once again I have got the wrong one.

The bike, thanks to St. Christopher, goes well and safely so far. The winds are rather cold for long rides at present. I hope it is warmer with you.

Must end and get to Mass. Very best wishes, and thanks for not tearing up my photograph on sight. You really are VERY tolerant...

Yours sincerely,
[signed] Sackville

In addition to these letters, Sally A. Corbett, Executive Director of Stepping Stones, the Historic Home of Lois and Bill Wilson, found a letter in their excellent and superbly maintained archives (which is also one of the three or four major archival resources for the early history of A.A.). In this letter we see Father Ralph Pfau threatening law suits against people who were trying to block him from asking for funding from A.A. gatherings which wanted him to travel long distances in order to speak to them.

NOTES

1. Pfau, *Prod.* 237-238.

2. Lillian Roth, *I'll Cry Tomorrow* (New York: Frederick Fell, 1954).

3. Father Ralph S. Pfau and Al Hirshberg, "A Priest's Own Story," *Look*, Vol. 22, No. 5 (March 4, 1958): 84-97; and "Out of the Shadows," *Look*, Vol. 22, No. 6 (March 18, 1958): 85-98.

4. A transcript of a photocopy (found in an Irish A.A. archival source) which had been made of the original letter, which I was told was preserved in the archives of the Sisters of Charity of St. Augustine (Sister Ignatia Gavin's order) in the United States. See Glenn F. Chesnut, *Father Ed Dowling: Bill Wilson's Sponsor* (Bloomington, Indiana: iUniverse, 2015), Chapter 41.