

FATHER ED

The Story of Bill W.'s Spiritual Sponsor

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INTRODUCTION

The Lord did not come to make a display of himself, but to heal and to teach suffering people.

— St. Athanasius¹

Late on a January night in 1925, Eddie Dowling, SJ, sat at the wooden desk in his room at the St. Louis University Jesuit residence with a pen in his right hand—and tried not to think about how empty his left hand felt without a cigarette. It had been more than five years since he stubbed out his last one before entering the doors of the novitiate—a green twenty-one-year-old with little idea of the penances, interior and exterior, that awaited him beyond those stone walls.

On the desk before him, a gray metal lamp illuminated the sheet of notebook paper bearing the fruits of his past few minutes' labor. The scholastic adjusted his wire-rimmed glasses to read his cursive script, marred as it was by a couple of cross-outs and a stray inkblot. "Quotations are like some canned goods. People mistrust them unless they were there when they were made. In a recent issue of the *Modern Schoolman* . . ."²

Eddie paused. A corner of his mouth—on the side that should have been the destination of the absent cigarette—ticked upward, amused by the formality that had flowed from his pen. "A recent issue of the *Modern Schoolman*"! In fact, the article of his for which he was now composing an apology—not an "I'm sorry" apology, he thought, but an apology in the sense of *apologia*, explaining a word or Word—had appeared in the *only* previous issue of the *Modern Schoolman*.

This *apologia* was due to appear in issue number two, and it had to reach the typist by morning. It wouldn't need to go through any other pairs of eyes, since the journal's rotating editorship had been passed to Eddie himself.

How appropriate, Eddie thought. Here he was, the only Jesuit student in his program with professional journalism experience, just the sort of person to show his peers how to harness the power of print to bring scholastic

philosophy to the masses. Instead, on this, his first and last opportunity to belch out a few words under the grand headline, “EDITOR OF MODERN SCHOOLMAN,” he had to fill the space with a shame-faced accounting for himself. . . .

No, not shame-faced, he reminded himself. He had done nothing shameful—imprudent, perhaps, but not shameful. No one should have been scandalized by what he wrote.

Even so, he felt humiliated.

Eddie turned his gaze to the crucifix on the wall above his bed. The memory of his long retreat—the thirty-day Spiritual Exercises he had made as a young novice—came to him, and with it the prayer that Ignatius prescribed for retreatants who wished to make the greatest possible offering to God. He had made that prayer, asking Christ the King, if only it be to His greater service and praise, to let him imitate Him “in bearing all injuries and all abuse and all poverty of spirit.” And he had likewise followed Ignatius’s suggestion to seek “the most perfect humility”—choosing “opprobrium with Christ” rather than honors.

The thought consoled him. Yes, this present humiliation was minuscule compared with even the smallest part of Christ’s sufferings—but even so, it stung. And for that very reason, it provided him with something to offer the Lord as proof of his devotion.

“All for Thee,” Eddie said softly.

Turning back to his draft, he read on.

I referred in an article on “Dum-Dum Thinking” to St. Thomas calling his lordly *Summa* “rubbish.” The authenticity of the quotation has been questioned by several of my friends, and in justice to them and to the Editors I offer this explanation.³

Eddie had appropriated the term “dum-dum thinking” from an editorial he read in *Scientific American*.⁴ There, “dum-dum” was meant in the sense of an expanding bullet. But at this moment, the young Jesuit felt like the other kind of dum-dum.

As an experienced journalist, he should have known that even intelligent readers can find it difficult to grasp an unfamiliar concept when it is presented to them. Within the space of a brief article, he had not only introduced the idea of dum-dum thinking but also tried to apply it to the great St. Thomas. Of *course* that would elicit confusion among budding heresy hunters—especially when he threw in the part about how Aquinas, after a supernatural experience, likened his *Summa Theologiae* to chaff.

What he had meant to do in writing the article (titled “Salvage the Dum-Dum Thought!”)⁵ was to convey something of the wonder he felt when he first read the *Scientific American* editorial and found himself described in it.

Now as he sat at his desk, with nothing to distract him apart from the radiator’s syncopated knock and the whine of a distant ambulance, Eddie tried to recall what it was about the article in the science magazine that moved him.

The *Scientific American* editorial had described two types of thinkers, comparing each of them to a type of bullet. First were the “armor-piercing” thinkers—“those whose minds pursue a thought straight to its conclusion, with no difficulty in concentration.” That was clearly not Eddie’s brand of mental munition.

Where Eddie recognized himself was in the second type. He was, in the *Scientific American*’s words, “the man whose mind strikes a subject like a dum-dum bullet.”

“A dum-dum,” the editor wrote, “tears a big hole, but it doesn’t get very far. The dum-dum mind finds difficulty in finishing what it starts, because the impact starts associations laterally in all directions instead of straight ahead.”

“Finds difficulty in finishing what it starts”! Indeed! That was Eddie’s problem in a nutshell—or, rather, a bullet shell. His brother Jesuits joked that his purgatory would consist of finishing his uncompleted sentences.

The *Scientific American* editor went on to explain that the dum-dum mind “is distracted by the push and pull from all sides, and perhaps has an unconscious resistance against going ahead.”

That last phrase gave Eddie much to contemplate.

From his high-school days, and especially during his past two years in the Jesuit philosophate, he had struggled to master Aquinas’s scholasticism, which was the official philosophy of the Church. He wanted to understand it, for it was the Church’s chief intellectual weapon against the atheistic and paganistic philosophies that were forever popping up in new guises. But when he was in the classroom, try as he might, he found it excruciatingly difficult to attain the level of concentration necessary to think the way Aquinas thought.

St. Thomas’s method involved taking several disparate strands of philosophical thought, filtering out what was untrue or unnecessary from each, and then, finally, converging them into a single, unified understanding. Following his logic was like following a Gothic cathedral’s architectural lines as they extended upward from the marbled floor of its nave to the gold-embossed

interior of its uppermost spire. Each thought traveled in a glorious line until it joined with three or four others at a piercing endpoint.

Eddie's mind worked in a decidedly different manner. Granted, like St. Thomas, he set his heart on things above. But unlike the Angelic Doctor, the young Jesuit could not follow a single topic for very long without making a connection . . . and another connection . . . and another. As long as he remained on the path to truth—a path illuminated by prayer, sacred scripture, and the teachings of the Church—he wasn't impatient to tie up the various connections into a neat resolution.

Perhaps that was why Eddie loved baseball. With its array of interactions between multiple actors in multiple locations within and without the diamond, the game contained enough lateral movement to keep him interested. But more than that, a good baseball game served as a theater of human experience as well as a model of a functioning society. Each player had a unique role, and a team's success depended upon its members' pooling their individual talents for a goal greater than themselves.

Scholastic philosophy was more like tennis. Its motions were constrained to a single back-and-forth interaction on a single plane. And spectators didn't focus their attention upon people so much as upon an impersonal ball.

Outside the classroom, Eddie's dum-dum thinking and his love for all things human served him well on the social level. But in class, only those capable of following Aquinas's armor-piercing arguments made the grade.

That was why the *Scientific American* editorial so affected him, for its point was that the humble dum-dum thinker could be a valuable catalyst for scientific progress.

"The armor-piercing mind," the editorial said, "would frequently fail to get its initial impetus and direction if it were not for some explosive, variant idea" from a dum-dum thinker.⁶ "Very often such a stimulus comes from the combination of two widely different and previously separated elements. It is among such elements that the dum-dum mind is at home."

Hence, the writer added, among the ranks of dum-dum thinkers were major philosophers—men such as Nietzsche, Pascal, and Marcus Aurelius, whose random inspirations, for better or worse, changed the course of world history. The writer's point was that the "flashes and glints" that such minds produced deserved some sort of place in scientific literature—even if they didn't yet rise to the level of proven conclusions.

That was the insight that set off flashes and glints in Eddie's own mind, leading him to write the op-ed that so confused his confreres.

The radiator's rhythms sputtered to a halt. It was late. Eddie glanced up at the crucifix again and turned his gaze back down to put pen to paper once more. He added a paragraph of historical references to back up the story he'd cited about St. Thomas having an epiphany that led him to say that, in comparison, his *Summa* was as rubbish.

Shouldn't that be enough? Or, Eddie wondered, was a *mea culpa* necessary?

A moment's reflection sufficed to convince him it was better to err on the side of apology. After all, not only his schoolmates but also his superior would be reading. Eddie had heard that a certain scholastic was delayed from entering into minor orders just because he had been caught smoking. If that was true, what would the provincial superior do to one who disparaged the greatest mind of the "Thirteenth, Greatest of Centuries"?⁷

Eddie sucked in his pride. "Despite the possible authenticity of the quotation," he wrote, "I admit that the context in which it was used left it open to just criticism on the score of giving too much room for a misreading."⁸

But it was still necessary to spell out what he had really meant to say. "The point I tried to make," he wrote,

was that even the *Summa* was eclipsed in St. Thomas's mind by a siege of "lights" which seem to be very like what Professor Eliot of Northwestern was calling "dum-dum" thinking. And the very force of my point was weakened if the *Summa* was really disparaged.⁹

All he had meant to convey was that perhaps God could use dum-dum thinkers like himself to inspire others. Perhaps the very quality of his mind that seemed to be a weakness could become a source of light to an armor-piercing thinker. After all, St. Thomas's own dum-dum thought, lit by a divine spark, enabled him to pierce the mysteries of heaven.

The instruction that St. Ignatius of Loyola gave to St. Francis Xavier came to Eddie's mind. Perhaps, Eddie mused, a dum-dum thought whose time had come—if it encountered an armor-piercing mind open to the Holy Spirit—could accomplish what the Jesuit founder urged that great missionary to do: "Set the world on fire!"



The efforts of Edward Dowling, SJ (1898–1960), to show his brother Jesuits the value of associative thinking, and the misunderstanding that ensued,

have never before been recounted in print. Even Robert Fitzgerald, SJ's slim 1995 book *The Soul of Sponsorship*, which until now was the only work to draw upon Dowling's archived papers, omits the *Modern Schoolman* episode. So I was surprised to discover it while doing initial research for this book. It made me wonder how much more there was to learn about Father Ed's life. The answer was far greater than I could have imagined.

In 2008, I read *The Soul of Sponsorship* for the first time after discovering Father Ed through an online essay by an alcoholic who was inspired by his story.¹⁰ Fitzgerald's book focuses on the friendship between Father Ed and Alcoholics Anonymous co-founder Bill Wilson, which lasted from 1940 until Dowling's death. Although the author notes that Bill repeatedly said the priest deserved a biography, he admits *The Soul of Sponsorship* "is not that biography."¹¹

The Soul of Sponsorship's account of Father Ed's life before meeting Bill—which is to say, his first forty-two years—amounts to little more than a précis. Fitzgerald writes that when Father Ed was twenty, he lost a younger brother to influenza. A few years later, as a Jesuit novice, he began to feel joint pain and was diagnosed with incurable arthritis. He wanted to be among the privileged number of Jesuits who entered into doctoral study, but his hopes were dashed when he muffed a theology examination.

Beyond those basic facts, Fitzgerald provides only a handful of other tidbits about Dowling's background. He writes that Father Ed had a lifelong interest in social and political activism, and particularly in improving democratic systems. Before entering the Society of Jesus, he worked as a reporter for the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*. Father Daniel A. Lord, SJ, who was one of the Society's greatest evangelists of the era, took note of Dowling's editorial talents and, after his ordination, employed him at The Queen's Work, a national media apostolate.

When I first read those scattered factoids about Father Ed's activities prior to his association with A.A., getting to the heart of the man required an almost heroic effort of imagination. Those data points provided me with a general idea of why Bill Wilson was drawn to Dowling, but they revealed little about why Dowling was drawn to Bill.

Over the next several years, I searched for all the published information I could find about Father Ed—reading biographies of Wilson, A.A. histories such as *Pass It On* and Ernest Kurtz's *Not-God*, the few items about Dowling that were available online, and A.A. historian Glenn Chesnut's self-published *Father Ed Dowling: Bill Wilson's Spiritual Sponsor*. None of those sources provided any biographical information about Father Ed beyond what Fitzgerald had uncovered.

Given the vital role Father Ed played in popularizing A.A. among clergy, as well as the spiritual fatherhood he provided to Bill Wilson, I couldn't understand why more wasn't known about him. Why was such an important figure in A.A.'s history always presented as an enigmatic *deus ex machina* figure, dropping into Bill's story like the biblical Melchizedek—without father or mother or ancestry?

I was also struck by how the story of Bill's and Father Ed's fateful first meeting was always narrated from Bill's perspective alone. In Bill's account, Father Ed arrives unannounced at A.A.'s Manhattan clubhouse on a sleet-stricken night in November 1940. The maintenance man—clearly annoyed at being made to answer the door late at night—heads upstairs to tell Wilson: "Some old damn bum from St. Louis is here to see you." Then, aided by his cane, Father Ed painfully plods up the wooden staircase toward the A.A. co-founder's bedroom, poised to change Bill's life forever.

That last part fascinated me. I wondered if it held the key to the mystery of who Father Ed truly was and where he came from, for when Father Ed first encountered Bill Wilson, there was a strange reversal of the usual order of things. It was the normally disabled, chain-smoking Dowling—whose spine had, in his words, "turned to stone" from arthritis—who became a pillar of strength. He was literally "working the steps"; nothing could stop him from ascending upward to attain his goal. And it was the normally robust former high-school athlete Bill W., Mr. A.A. himself, who was in the position of a disabled person—crashed out on top of his bed, unable to move.

Wilson himself brought out the contrast between the two men when he recounted the story. He spoke of how he was in his bedroom alone, his wife Lois being "out somewhere." As he lay in bed, he felt "full of disappointments," "consumed with self-pity." His stomach hurt with what he imagined was an ulcer (it wasn't). He didn't even rise from his bed to help his visibly stiff-boned guest remove his coat.

Not until Bill saw Father Ed's clerical collar did he summon the energy to sit up. It was then, as the priest excitedly began to share the connections he had found between A.A.'s Twelve Steps and St. Ignatius's Spiritual Exercises, that Wilson felt himself strengthened with spiritual energy as well.

Each time Bill described that first encounter with Father Ed, he used superlatives. Addressing a conference of clergy a few months after Dowling's death, he recounted the transformation that took place within him once he sat up to converse with the Jesuit:

I began to be aware of one of the most remarkable pairs of eyes I have ever seen. And, as we talked on, the room increasingly filled

with what seemed to me to be the presence of God which flowed through my new friend. It was one of the most extraordinary experiences that I have ever had. Such was his rare ability to transmit grace.¹²

Although Bill had a number of supernatural experiences over the course of his life, he typically reserved the word “presence” to describe one of his three great epiphanies—occasions when he encountered a spark of the divine that dramatically regenerated his interior life.

During Bill’s first two epiphanies—at England’s Winchester Cathedral as a soldier in 1918 and at Manhattan’s Towns Hospital as a recovering drunk in 1934—no other person was present. He was alone with God.

Only the third epiphany took place in another human being’s company. On that November night in 1940, Father Ed and Bill W. shared an encounter with the living God.

At least, that was Bill’s impression of what transpired. But, I wondered, how could I find out for certain whether the experience was transformational not only for Bill but for Father Ed as well? Just as Bill felt that Father Ed awakened in him a new sense of mission, might Dowling have felt that, in encountering Bill, he received a kind of call within a call? Could he have perceived in it a divine invitation to enter more deeply into his Jesuit vocation?

That is why the *Modern Schoolman* story was a revelation for me. It showed me that the young Eddie Dowling, SJ, felt deeply that he was different from many if not most of his brothers in the Society of Jesus. He realized he had a mode of thinking that would make it difficult, if not impossible, for him to advance to the esteemed ranks of Jesuit academics. But he also realized God could use this very weakness to accomplish his plan—by bringing him into contact with a mind whose insights would complement his own.

Bill Wilson proved to be that mind. More than eight decades since his and Father Ed’s first encounter with each other, the mutual illumination remains aglow. It shines in the hearts of the millions of people around the world who benefit from the spirituality of twelve-step programs—a spirituality deepened and enhanced through the gifts Father Ed brought to A.A.



Father Ed was not an alcoholic, but he so admired Alcoholics Anonymous that he referred to non-members such as himself as the “underprivileged.”

As a nonalcoholic myself, I have long felt the same way, being in awe of the holiness, joy, and conversion of life that I have witnessed in people in recovery.

I can also identify with Father Ed's background as a journalist who, in following his religious vocation, underwent a radical change of lifestyle. But there the similarities end, for whereas Dowling was born into an Irish-American Catholic family, I was born into a Reform Jewish one. During my twenties, in the 1990s, I was a rock and roll historian, interviewing oldies artists such as Brian Wilson, Del Shannon, and Harry Nilsson. Later, I worked for the *New York Post* and the *Daily News* until 2007 when—after writing my first book, *The Thrill of the Chaste*—I left the newspaper world in hope of finding some way to put my abilities at the service of my new-found Catholic faith.

My journey led me to become in 2016 the first woman ever to receive a doctorate in sacred theology from the University of St. Mary of the Lake/Mundelein Seminary (a school that I would later learn figured into an episode of Father Ed's life).¹³ Along the way, I found a new mission in writing books on healing for readers who, like me, had suffered childhood sexual abuse or other traumas: *My Peace I Give You: Healing Sexual Wounds with the Help of the Saints* and *Remembering God's Mercy*. It was gratifying to see each of them find a global audience; *My Peace* alone was translated into six languages.

In late 2019, after being downsized from a seminary-teaching position, I found myself at a new vocational crossroads. A friend suggested I consider what book I most wanted to write if given the opportunity. And I realized that, more than anything, I wanted to write Father Ed's biography—if only so that I myself, who am always in need of healing, might better know that extraordinary Jesuit whose passion was to help people with problems.

To my great joy, my proposal for *Father Ed* found a home at Orbis Books, whose editor-in-chief and publisher is Robert Ellsberg. The choice of publisher seemed providential, for Ellsberg was mentored by Dorothy Day, who counted Father Ed among her own mentors. (Writing in the *Catholic Worker*, Day called Dowling “our dear Jesuit friend.”)¹⁴

My research entailed traveling to Father Ed's hometown of St. Louis to peruse his papers, which are divided between the Father Edward Dowling, SJ, Archive at Maryville University Library and the Jesuit Archives & Research Center. I also consulted archivists at Stepping Stones, which houses Bill and Lois Wilson's personal papers, and A.A.'s General Service Office. Online newspaper archives turned out to be another major source of information, for Dowling's public-relations skills earned him hundreds of media

mentions. The many descriptions of him given by reporters, along with photographs and audio recordings of Father Ed that I uncovered, helped me imagine what he was like in person.

Most excitingly, I was able to interview a number of people who were close to Father Ed and had never before shared their memories of him. These included his niece and nephew, as well as a secretary in his office; a man whom he helped guide to a priestly vocation; children of his former students; and even the daughter of the man who first told him about Alcoholics Anonymous. Their personal stories made Father Ed come alive for me in a new and profound way.

In any research project, there is a risk that the researcher may find that his or her subject proves less interesting or important than at first glance. But as I began to piece together Father Ed's story from thousands of sources, I found the opposite to be the case. The more I learned about him, the more compelling his story became.

Although I knew Father Ed had undergone illness and loss, his personal papers and my interviews revealed a depth of suffering beyond anything I could have imagined. At the same time, they bore evidence of his tremendous will to work continually to overcome his personal limitations and woundedness so he could be an ever-more effective instrument of healing to others.



A note about the structure of this book: In part one, my information is drawn mainly from documents, including Father Ed's own letters. But in part two and especially part three, I add interview material to the mix. For some readers, the personal observations and anecdotes about Father Ed may make those later chapters easier to penetrate than the early ones.

Personally, as a devoted reader of biographies, I believe you will find Father Ed's story most impactful if you read this book straight through. However, since I realize some may wish to skip ahead, I have provided context in later chapters so readers who bypassed previous ones (or have forgotten details from them) won't find themselves lost.

As you read the following pages, my prayer is that Father Ed will come alive for you as he has for me, and that your encounter with him will light a spark that will draw you closer to the true light that enlightens everyone.¹⁵