Total Abstinence Union and they, like all the members, were required to pledge: “I promise, with the Divine assistance, and in honor of the sacred thirst and agony of our Saviour, to abstain from all intoxicating drinks; to prevent as much as possible, by advice and example, the sin of intemperance in others, and to discountenance the drinking customs of society.” 7 Not until 1903 was a separate national organization established for priests. This was the Sacerdotal Abstinence League which grew out of a group in Cincinnati, the Sacred Heart Priests’ League for the promotion of Total Abstinence. The founders insisted, however, this was not intended for the reform of priests who drank too much. 8

By and large then the early temperance movements, both Catholic and Protestant, were made up of people who wanted to reform other people. Exceptions to this generalization, not led by clergymen, were the Good Templars, the Sons of Temperance, and especially the so-called “Washingtonians.” 9 This latter group, formed in the nation’s capital in 1840, was made up of reformed drunkards who freely told their alcoholic experiences and had no official church connections. “In their evangelical techniques, indifference to theology, and vulgar identification with the manners and language of the masses, they were anathema to the more conservative and sedate leaders of the earlier movement.” 10

ADMITTING ALCOHOLISM IS HARD

Whatever the drinking habits of Catholics may have been in the past, the early zeal of temperance and abstinence organizations seemed to have abated with the national prohibition experiment and its aftermath. The reluctance to admit that clergymen may have a drinking problem was widespread as long as moral stigma was attached to such behavior. To the extent that this moral and social stigma is still attached to the alcoholic person, its negative connotation is magnified in the case of the man of God. As late as 1967, in an otherwise sympathetic article about alcoholic clergy, Pirone used the pejorative term, “fallen priests,” but regretted “there are still many church officials who treat the problem of their drinking priests as strictly a moral issue, not as a disease.” 11

The first alcoholic priest, known to have become a participating member of Alcoholics Anonymous, was the late Father Ralph Pfau, who wrote:

7 Ibid., p. 82.
10 Gusfield, Symbolic Crusade, p. 49, and footnote 29, where he remarks about the “anticlerical nature of the Washingtonians.”