

Father Joseph Martin, S. S. - Biography

Father Joseph C. Martin, S.S. (1924-2009), was co-founder of the addiction treatment center Father Martin's Ashley in Havre de Grace, MD, and a noted authority and lecturer on alcoholism. Best known for his "Chalk Talk on Alcohol," delivered to alcoholics and their families with his charismatic style and sense of humor, Father Martin is credited with saving the lives of thousands of alcoholics and addicts. His "Chalk Talk" lecture, which began "I'm Joe Martin and I'm an alcoholic," and more than 40 films, are legendary.

His films, which have been translated into multiple languages, continue to be used at treatment centers around the world, in hospitals, substance abuse programs, industry, and most branches of the U.S. government. He is author of several publications, including Chalk Talks on Alcohol, published by Harper & Row in 1982, which is still in print.

The Early Years

Father Martin was born in Baltimore on October 12, 1924, the fourth of seven children of Marie and James Martin. His leadership ability, communications skill, and charm became evident early in life. He was valedictorian of Loyola High School's class of 1942, and was voted best debater, best actor, and class member with the best smile. He attended Loyola College from 1942 to 1944.

During his senior year in high school and as he was attending Loyola College, he had a part-time job with St. Mary's Seminary, where members of the Society of St. Sulpice taught seminarians. Increasingly drawn to their mission, he felt the calling to enter the priesthood, studying at St. Mary's Seminary on Paca Street and at St Mary's in Roland Park in Baltimore. He was ordained a priest for the Archdiocese of Baltimore in 1948. The following year he entered the Society of St. Sulpice, a community of priests devoted to the formation and education of seminarians and priests.

Following ordination, he was sent to teach high school students preparing for the priesthood at St. Joseph's College in Mountain View, CA (1948-56), where he was a successful and popular teacher. In 1956, he was sent to teach at St. Charles College in Catonsville, MD.

Addiction and Recovery

When it became apparent to colleagues that he had a problem with alcohol, Father Martin was sent to Guest House in Lake Orion, MI, an alcoholism treatment center and sanctuary for Catholic priests that advocated the Twelve

Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.). He left Guest House in 1959, in recovery and charting a new course for his life.

He returned to Baltimore and St. Charles College, where he resumed teaching and supported his recovery by attending A.A. meetings three or four times a week. He seized every opportunity to speak about alcoholism, captivating audiences with what became the “Chalk Talk on Alcohol.”

The Transition Years

In 1968, he was assigned to serve as chaplain for the Oblate Sisters of Providence in Catonsville, and he continued to deliver his “Chalk Talk” to audiences along the East Coast.

In 1970, Father Martin reached out to Mae Abraham, a woman he met through A.A., and with her and her husband’s encouragement, he made the decision to work the field of recovery. He became a lecturer and educator in the Division of Alcohol Control for the state of Maryland, conducting seminars for doctors, lawyers, parole officers, and social workers.

In 1972, the United States Navy filmed “The Blackboard Talk,” which they then dubbed “The Chalk Talk.” It became known throughout the U.S. military and established Father Martin as a recognized leader in the addiction treatment field.

The Ashley Years

In 1977, on a flight returning from an appearance in South Carolina, Mae Abraham said, “Father, why don’t you open a treatment center where people can get well with the philosophy you have?”

Mae Abraham and Father Martin began their quest to establish an addiction treatment center, raising funds over a seven-year period with Father Martin’s “Chalk Talk” delivered to audiences across the U.S. Thousands of small donations and several large gifts and matching funds made it possible to buy and renovate Oakington, the estate owned by the widow of U.S. Senator Millard Tydings on the Chesapeake Bay near Havre de Grace.

Father Martin’s Ashley opened in 1983. Just two years after opening, Forbes magazine ranked it as one of the top ten addiction treatment facilities in the country.

Today, patients come from the East Coast and across the U.S. to the 85-bed facility, which has a reputation for treating alcohol and drug addiction and relapse with respect for the dignity of each individual who enters its doors.

To date, Ashley has provided treatment to more than 40,000 people suffering from the disease of addiction and has provided program services to their families.

Father Martin always had a very special concern for priests in trouble. In this, he remained faithful to his Sulpician vocation throughout his life.

Honors and Awards

In 1991, Father Martin was invited by Pope John Paul II to participate in the Vatican's International Conference on Drugs and Alcohol. He made four trips to Russia under the auspices of the International Institute on Alcohol Education and Training, and also traveled to Switzerland and Poland to speak to A.A. groups and to addiction counselors in training.

Father Martin's awards include the Andrew White Medal from Loyola College, Baltimore, for his contributions to the general welfare of the citizenry of Maryland; Rutgers University's Summer School of Alcohol Studies' Distinguished Service Award (1988); and the Norman Vincent Peale Award (1992).

The Later Years

Although he retired from active management at Father Martin's Ashley in 2003, he continued to lecture, addressing patients as recently as last month, ending each talk, as he always did, "It's the likes of you that keep the likes of me going." He passed away at his home in Havre de Grace on March 9, 2009 at the age of 84.

Father Martin's Legacy

In the words of the late Mike Deaver, former White House Chief of Staff under President Ronald Reagan, "Father Martin changed my life and changed me. When I came to Ashley, I had been with presidents and kings and popes and prime ministers, but Father was the most powerful person I had ever met, and he still is today. You see, Father has the power to change people, to make them better, to make them whole again." Father Martin's legacy is Father Martin's Ashley.