

In your obedience remember that he first obeyed, for love of you. 'Christ was made for us obedient unto death, even to the death of the Cross.' (Phil. 2, 8.) He knows your weakness, he knows all the difficulties that lie ahead, he who was 'tempted in all things like as we are, without sin'.

So it is with a holy daring and joyful trust that you can accept and face the obligations and austerities of the life to which you are about to bind yourself. You are not dismayed by the very real and solemn promises you are making, even though you are weak and they involve burdens and troubles, because you have first turned to the source of all strength, to him who is 'longsuffering and rich in mercy'.

Our Blessed Lady and our Father St Dominic and all the Saints rejoice with us today that you should have heeded God's call. They stand around us, living witnesses to the reality and the fruits of the trust you show. Like you, they heard and obeyed the voice of God. We know that they join us in our prayer that you may ever more devotedly and generously live as you have promised.



## THE PRIEST AND THE MENTALLY SICK

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**T**O the eyes of faith all sickness is a trial. God is there, offering us a special grace of purification and of sharing in his redeeming death, but a grace hidden and hard to discern and live. Yet the trial is still more formidable for the man whose sickness is mental, especially when, as is the case with neuroses, the sickness only partly destroys his balance and control. His agony at feeling himself partly 'alienated', a stranger, that is, to himself, is intense. Something deep inside him is escaping his inner attention and worse still his power. And on top of that those about him most often, even when they are full of good intentions, understand nothing at all, heap one ineptitude on another and

1 Translated by Marion Parker.

(when they have not provoked it) aggravate the disease. The sufferer feels himself excruciatingly alone, not understood, essentially helpless. Very often his faith seems to him unsettled, without strength or efficacy; all is clouded over with pain and despair.

He has one remaining hope, his confessor. But what can the priest do? He is not a doctor or a psychotherapist, and he cannot be too strongly advised to stay within the limits of his vocation and his powers. Amateurism in this sphere is criminal. It is a good thing certainly that some priests should specialize in these matters, but that presupposes years of training sanctioned by the authority of a degree in psychoanalysis or psychiatric medicine. Such specialists moreover can be only rare exceptions, and they cannot obviate the elementary and universal truth that the priest as such is not a psychiatrist, and that to mix these two functions would be a double mistake—a pastoral mistake and a psychiatric mistake.

That does not mean to say, however, that the priest has no object or efficacy as far as the mentally sick are concerned. He can do a great deal, either before his penitent has become aware of his illness or in the course of its treatment.

He can, especially if he has some psychological sense enlightened by solid knowledge, bring decisive assistance to his penitent in helping him in the first place to understand himself and manage himself better. The more sincere a penitent is, the more he risks being subjective, that is to say showing himself to his confessor not as he is but as he appears to himself to be. It is for the confessor, and still more for the spiritual director, to help him to detect his own illusions, to discover the real motives for his actions, the objective truth about the situation in which he is floundering, and God's will in it for him. In short, what the penitent expects of the priest is what Catholic tradition calls the discernment of spirits. That is true in every case, but more especially in the case of the mentally sick who have still not recognized themselves to be so.

It is then the business of the priest to make an initial diagnosis, or rather to divine that the moral or religious problem which is tormenting his penitent has also a psychological side, and that the part this side plays by way of upset or inhibition is too important for prayer, the sacraments, voluntary efforts, grace even, to be, without a miracle, sufficient remedies. It is the priest's part to bring this truth gently to his penitent's notice. He must proceed

with great sensitiveness and patience, so that his penitent accepts the hypothesis of a neurosis without rebelling against or being shocked by the idea, or, on the other hand, finding in it too useful an excuse for some moral disorder. The amount of responsibility which a neurotic has is always very difficult to define precisely. This much remains, that even if some form of morally bad behaviour seems, after numerous efforts, to be totally beyond the penitent's control, he, the penitent, can at the very least enlist the responsibility which he still has in leaving no stone unturned to get himself out of it. He can, and indeed he must, while at the same time going on with his efforts and his prayers, have recourse to a specialist who will, perhaps, help him to free himself from a pattern of action at once regrettable and beyond his power to control.

If the confessor has been fortunate enough to lead his penitent to accept the possibility of a neurosis, he must then find the psychiatrist competent to deal with it. But even in a large city that is not easy. Psychiatry, in fact, is divided into numerous special branches, from neurosurgery to hormonotherapy, from various sorts of psychotherapy to various sorts of psychoanalysis. How is one to know what treatment the case in question calls for? If, lacking enough knowledge, the confessor is unable to make this initial selection he can usefully send his penitent to a more competent confrère, even too, to an ordinary doctor who has an open mind in these matters and can give enlightened advice. It is greatly to be hoped, especially if there is a question of psychotherapy, that he will be able to approach a Catholic doctor. But one can be a good Catholic and a poor doctor. At least he must make certain that the psychotherapist, if he is not a Catholic, has yet a respect for the true values of faith and morals.

When this problem has been solved and the penitent has consulted the right specialist the confessor's duty is not over. He ought to make contact with the psychiatrist. It is a good thing, in fact, that the confessor should know the professional diagnosis and the nature of the treatment undertaken, and should collect as much information as possible about the psychology of his penitent and the stages of his treatment. The ideal indeed is that the priest and the psychiatrist, each working on his own plane, should make their efforts converge, and that one should not undo what the other does. This collaboration is often difficult, not only because of the secrecy which binds, each on his own side and in a different

way, both the priest and the psychiatrist, but also because of divergences in point of view and sometimes mutual ignorance of the disciplines involved. The confessor must leave no stone unturned to surmount these difficulties.

The advice which he has to give his penitent and his attitude towards him are to be weighed carefully. Each 'case' is unique, and it seems dangerous to give any precise rules lest they should be indiscriminately applied. But one may perhaps risk giving two general directives which are useful in most cases.

Although a distinction can quite legitimately be made between holiness and psychological health, it is impossible not to be aware that the principles which govern these are in many ways correlated and analogous. For instance, humility and charity, the two great virtues of the Gospel, have a well-established healing and preventive action in relation to mental sickness. In encouraging his penitent to practise them the confessor can be sure, not only that he is insisting on the essential thing from a theological point of view, but that he is besides collaborating usefully with the psychotherapist.

The neurotic's cure is indeed at hand when he becomes capable of recognizing without a destructive agony the wretchedness which is in him, when he becomes capable of accepting himself not only with his own limitations but with his own weaknesses, with the equivocations and illusions of his own motives, the more or less sordid chaos of his own impulses. It needs good psychological health to accept oneself thus, not in order to find in this acceptance excuses for all the lack of discipline, but in order to tend to perfection with more light and certainty of effect. It is here that Christian humility is called on to unfold all its blessings, and that the confessor unites on a different plane with the efforts of the psychotherapist, by helping his penitent to see himself humbly as he is, not only in his animality as a man, but also in his condition as a creature and as a sinner. By encouraging him to concentrate not on himself but on God his Creator and Saviour, to apprehend his compass and his end in God, the confessor is doing a work of truth. He is making it easier on the psychological plane for his penitent to accept his troubles, he is even making this acceptance a source of peace, a thing fruitful and dynamic (there is no true humility without generosity), a thing of joy. Humility is not humiliation; it is the exaltation of God, and in him of ourselves;

for it is from him that we receive everything. Humility is at the basis of psychological health as it is of moral and religious health. It is one of the essential points where, in most cases, confessor and psychiatrist can—and must—usefully collaborate.

There is a second point, more nearly essential still. A great many neuroses seem to be caused by a lack of love. All our observations go to show indeed quite clearly that a child from the moment of his birth needs love as much as air or milk. His appetite for affection is as great as his fragility in the face of the frustrations which he too often meets. From birth to death our need of being loved and of loving is such (it opens indeed on to the infinite) that there is no man worthy of the name who does not feel himself loved and loving as often as he experiences the need and the appeal. Many neuroses have in that their distant origin and their present sting.

Now we know by faith that God is love, that the Father loves us 'as' he loves his Son, who has come among us and died for love of us. To be a Christian is 'to believe in the love God has for us', to believe that 'God is love' (1 John 4, 16). The point is, then, to believe it, that is to say to take this truth as certain and assured, even though it cannot be rationally demonstrated or palpably perceived. The more this faith is alive in us, the more this love will come to be, if not palpable to the senses, at least lived. The psychological consequences are always beneficial, especially for the sufferer from a neurosis.

It is part of the confessor's duty to encourage his neurotic penitent along this road, particularly when he is crushed by a morbid sense of guilt which makes him see God as a punishing Father or a policeman whose clairvoyance is equalled by his lack of pity. The neurotic who begins to 'believe in the love God has for us', who begins to believe in the mercy of God, and who passes from fear to trust in his relations with him, has taken a big step towards psychological health and Christian perfection.

Charity includes in its essence and in its exercise the love of our neighbour, and progress in this sense cannot fail at the same time to be grounded in and to be made easier by the amelioration of relationships with others which are always in the case of those suffering from a neurosis upset and inhibited.

Charity, which is the purest and strongest of loves, places the Christian in a state where his relations both with God and with his neighbour are sacrificial. Psychological health and Christian

holiness meet harmoniously here to remind us that we are made to love and to be loved. In doing all he can to help his neurotic penitent to grow in a charity which is lived, the spiritual director, in the very act of being faithful to the essential of his priestly vocation, is developing an action certain in its therapeutic effect, an action which cannot fail to converge on that of the psycho-therapist.

But in order that this therapeutic action shall be salutary, the priest himself must have a charity which is not only very great but also, and especially, very greatly purified. He cannot, as spiritual director, avoid playing an important part in the life of his penitent, not only on the spiritual plane but also on the plane of the consciously and unconsciously affective. In spite of very great differences in level and approach, when the priest displays his activity, he is, like the psychoanalyst, the object of what the psychoanalysts call a transference. His penitent projects on to him something of his own unconscious emotion and capacity for emotion. The psychoanalyst has to recognize this transference while at the same time remaining emotionally unaffected by the love and hate of which he is the vicarious object on the part of his patient, and that is, moreover, why every analyst has first to be analysed. And it is in this way that he avoids responding to the transference of which he is the object by a counter-transference of the same sort, which would bring him out of his necessary 'neutrality'. In the same way, *mutatis mutandis*, the spiritual director has to balance and purify the sympathy which he gives to a penitent suffering from a neurosis by a deep personal detachment from the penitent's reactions. The diverse modes of affective attachment of which he is habitually the object must not awaken in him any personal attachment, conscious or unconscious, in return. Only a great and true charity allows this harmony between the deepest and liveliest sympathy and the purest inner freedom. It is possible only to the confessor whose charity is living enough for his emotional life itself to be taken up by the love of God, from whom he receives at the same time tenderness and purity. If he loves thus, he will know how to avoid all the snares which his penitent unconsciously sets for him, he will be able to bring him that specific priestly help which he expects, and he will, besides, develop an action certain in its therapeutic effect, which will unite with that of the psychiatrist.