

MATURITY AND SPIRITUALITY

"Ignorance has a knack of making complicated things look quite easy."¹ Canon Joseph Nuttin of Louvain voiced this sentiment while urging priests to profit by the discoveries of clinical psychology and to learn more about the affective life of man and the complexity of human motivation. At the same time he warned the psychologists against the danger of dehumanizing man for "by shifting its center of gravity over towards the unconscious, human personality becomes drained of its true meaning and value, consisting as they do of mind and conscience, freedom and responsibility."²

In discussing the relationship between maturity and spirituality we must of necessity walk into that terrain of thought where the work of the psychiatrist and the work of the spiritual director cross paths. Both practitioners, if we may use that term, have been repeatedly warned against an occupational hazard besetting their particular competence. With somewhat excessive insistence the pastor of souls has been reminded of the danger of excessive supernaturalism lest he imagine that neurotic guilt can be absolved away.³ Less frequently, but perhaps in more solemn tones, the psychologists and psychiatrists have been alerted to the danger of psychic determinism.⁴ By this time we are well aware that directors of souls must disown that naive obscurantism which has sometimes turned them into apostles of "common sense" who consign even the authenticated findings of depth psychology into the category of transient fads. Similarly, Catholic healers of the maladjusted and mentally ill should know by now that they cannot unwittingly let themselves become "split personalities" who affirm the spiritual conception of man at the altar rail or in the confessional box but implicitly deny it in their clinics or consultation rooms.

¹ J. Nuttin, "Psychology for Priests" in *Psychology, Morality, and Education*, 7.

² *Ibid.*, 15.

³ Cf. e.g. Rengel and Van Lun, *The Priest and the Unconscious*, 42-58.

⁴ Pius XII, "On Psychotherapy and Religion" April 13, 1953; Commentary—A. Gemelli, *Psychoanalysis Today*, 114-146.

Still, the complete harmonization of the diverse roles of priest and psychiatrist in dealing with problems of immaturity has not yet been achieved. There are still unsolved speculative questions about such basic human problems as the dynamics of scrupulosity, the meaning of evaluative cognition, the imputability of seemingly compulsive acts, etc. The practice of dealing with people must go on, even while speculative questions remain unsolved. In the meantime all who work with the maladjusted, the immature, and the sinful must do their work with profound reverence for the mystery which lies at the heart of every man; they must be confident, likewise, that whatever scientific conclusions are ultimately arrived at will be reached under the regency of an integrated theology.

This paper makes no pretence of solving any speculative problem. Under the heading of ascetical-pastoral theology the Committee on Current Problems has asked me to write a practical paper addressing itself to two questions: Can the neurotic be a saint? What norms for practice can be given to spiritual directors with the view to developing maturity as a sound basis for spirituality?

I. CAN THE NEUROTIC BE A SAINT?

A. *Neurosis and Psychological Maturity*

In considering the relationship between maturity and sanctity it will be helpful to start with workable definitions of three individuals: a normal person, a psychoneurotic, and a saint. Building upon Glover's definition of normality, Cavanaugh and McGoldrick define a normal person in these words:

The normal person may thus be defined as one who conforms to the average human being in his methods of thinking, feeling, and acting, is reasonably happy, emotionally balanced, and adjusted and oriented toward future goals.⁵

The same authors quote Brown's descriptive attempt at defining the psychoneurotic:

Psychoneurotics are individuals who because of their conscious or unconscious conflicts are prevented from arriving at the accomplishments of a productive sort which would

⁵ Cavanaugh—McGoldrick, *Fundamental Psychiatry*, 20.

normally be expected of them in consideration of their abilities and culture.⁶

Coupling the teachings of two articles of St. Thomas,⁷ we can define a saint in these terms:

A saint is a man who cleaves to the Supreme Goodness of God with as total a commitment of love as his state will allow and thereby enjoys purity of heart and stability in virtue.

Neither normality nor holiness is possible without a relatively high level of psychological maturity. It is not surprising, therefore, that in current psychological literature we sometimes find the word "maturity" used as a kind of secularized synonym for sanctity.

Psychologically speaking, maturity is inseparable from creative productiveness. The mature man has achieved freedom from a parasitic dependence upon others; he has increased his productive capacity and diminished his need to receive; he has been liberated from unwholesome egotism and competitiveness and he can harness his hostile aggressiveness to legitimate work and play outlets; he prizes a flexibility of mind and a power of speedy adaptation to the needs of others; his genuine capacity for love brings enrichment to his sexual and social life; and he is sufficiently self-critical to avoid subjectiveness and to retain a firm grasp on reality.⁸

Obviously a great amount of natural virtue is required for reaching this kind of maturity. Undoubtedly it is a complexus of so-called natural virtues which the psychologist sums up in the phrase "productive activity." Thus in *The Art of Loving* Erich Fromm refers to a "syndrome of attitudes" characteristic of the mature person:

Care, responsibility, respect and knowledge are mutually interdependent. They are a syndrome of attitudes which are found in the mature person; that is, in the person who develops his own powers productively, who only wants to have that which he has worked for, who has given up narcissistic dreams of omniscience and omnipotence, who has acquired humility based on inner strength which only genuine productive activity can give.⁹

⁶ *Ibid.*, 220.

⁷ *S.T.*, II-II, 24,8; 81,8.

⁸ L. Saul, *Emotional Maturity*, 7-19.

⁹ E. Fromm, *The Art of Loving*, 32.

In contrast with such a mature person the psychoneurotic hems in an area of potential productiveness in his personality and lets it lie fallow. Consequently, as Leon Saul has pointed out, "neurosis signifies a failure in adaptation in which the personality partially relinquishes mature reactions and regresses to childish ones or fails to outgrow childish reactions upon reaching physical maturity."¹⁰

This same author, who has written so perceptively about emotional maturity, is illustrative of those who build a secularized ethical system on the pursuit of maturity. In it infantilism is the breeder of all human crime; there is morality without sin; the personal goal of inner peace is reached only by the path to maturity. Thus he writes of the childish reactions of the neurotic:

These should normally be outgrown and could be if children were properly reared from birth. This provides a scientific basis for morality—it reveals the evil in man as the persisting traumatic infantile, the result of impaired emotional development, and it shows that the true good is not submissiveness to a code but rather an expression of the strength of maturity.¹¹

B. *Neurosis and Theological Maturity*

Achieving "the strength of maturity" is a worthy human goal even though some men's misguided pursuit of it has terminated in a morality without sin. But emotional maturity proper to a child of God, while aptly described in psychological terms, is always a theological achievement. It is ultimately a product of actual grace. And the neurosis which may remain even a lifelong threat to a man's maturity is not seen in its full dimensions unless one takes into account its theological significance. It would surely savor of Pelagianism to maintain that the sick psyche of wounded man must first be healed by human science before he can be mature enough to accept the graces enabling him to reach the spiritual stature designed for him by God. If the saint is a man who cleaves to God's Supreme Goodness with as total a commitment of love as his state will allow, it might very well happen that a stubborn neurotic illness is an element in his God-given state as long as he remains a

¹⁰ L. Saul, *op. cit.*, 3.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

wayfarer in a vale of tears. The neurosis would always remain a disability in relation to normal psychological maturity; as an evil both nature and grace should marshal their forces to remove it; yet its theological significance would be overlooked were it not ultimately appraised as an ingredient in a higher kind of maturity which is the creative productiveness designed for this soul by God's far-reaching Providence.

The theologically mature man is the man who is ever doing the truth in love (Eph. 4:10). He grows in his maturing process as he acquires an ever increasing responsiveness to illuminating graces and a habitual docility to the Spirit of Wisdom. The neurotic can be a saint as long as he is deputing his zeal to the attainment of an open-heartedness which is receptive of God in so far as conditions of his present life will allow him to do so. To be a saint the neurotic, like anyone else, has only one assignment—to achieve his own authentic sanctity. And Father Goldbrunner has said very truly:

Authentic sanctity is always bound up with an authentic human life, and hence with the uniqueness, with the limited talents and potentialities of the individual—which are his truth. It is wrong to say: "That is how I want to develop!" What one should say is: "What does God expect from me and my particular talents?"¹²

Neurosis is compatible with sanctity *in fieri* because such emotional illness over which the saint cannot exercise despotic control serves as a passive purgation of spirit. There is hardly a more poignant way of learning the limitations of one's creaturehood than to be seemingly pushed around by a power which seems to enjoy a mocking autonomy within oneself. Ultimately the soul has no alternative but to surrender with hope into the hands of God. But while the neurotic symptom has an autonomy in its mode of operation, we must never forget that the dynamic unconscious itself can never elude the providence of God.

The dynamic unconscious is not a monstrous juggernaut completely out of control. God's providence presides over the genesis of each man's dynamic unconscious life; the hidden motivations within

¹² J. Goldbrunner, *Holiness Is Wholeness*, 27.

us stemming from our pre-rational years did not take shape haphazardly; there is a design even in the forgotten experiences of our infancy and childhood. God's providence likewise presides over the dynamic influence of this unconscious in our day to day life; He does not want to give us fully-developed freedom ready-made; we must *grow up* into the liberty of the children of God and part of our exercise for growth is our wrestling with unreasonable fears and inexplicable anxiety. Finally God's providence presides over the tranquilizing of our dynamic unconscious for in His own good time and in His own wise way even the wounded psyche of an adopted son is healed in Christ, the Saviour.

Can the neurotic be a saint? Our answer must be "yes" because a saint's theological maturity does not necessarily run parallel with a hypothetical normality which we call psychological maturity; the one maturity is not necessarily co-extensive with the other; some of "the unhealthy features in the faces of the saints"¹³ may await transformation until the other side of the grave. Canon Jean Vieujean, who has written so wisely about the sense of sin and its deviations summed this up very pointedly when he wrote:

The true moral worth of a man, the one he has in God's eyes, does not ultimately depend on the quality of his psyche. It depends above all on what he achieves with the psyche he has As for holiness, it is a secret between man and God, the mysterious act of a human soul opening out and offering itself to the transfiguring love of God. A healthy psyche can remain closed to God, complacent and self-satisfied in what

¹³ *Ibid.*, 15-16. Goldbrunner neatly describes some misshapen by-products of "holiness."

In contrast to these legitimate imperillings of bodily health there are other "illegitimate imperillings" of health caused by a striving after holiness. There are unhealthy features in the faces of the saints which are not the expression of true human suffering. We read of illnesses which are not necessary, illnesses of the body and the soul which represent untruth, since they are caused by false attitudes, by false ways of life, by a false conduct of life, not in accordance with the laws of nature nor with the true relationship between the natural and the supernatural. These "illegitimate illnesses" are contrary to nature. But such mutilations of life, physical and spiritual, have become so identified with the very notion of holiness that one almost has to smile, when calling a man a saint, as if to apologize for his manifest oddity.

it calls its honesty. A neurotic psyche can open to God, all the more so for being aware of insufficiency and weakness. . . .¹⁴

II. WHAT NORMS CAN WE GIVE?

A. *Christ and Existential Man*

Just one year ago today Pope John XXIII, when speaking to rectors of seminaries, voiced two important convictions in the matter of psychological maturity. He said:

1. sound ascetic principles raise the young man from the state of immaturity, of indecision, and of shyness which, in predisposed subjects, can lead even to psychopathological forms. And
2. needed above all is a sound Christian philosophical foundation, according to the principles, the doctrine, and the method of St. Thomas, which can give the student of today and the man of the future a balanced judgment, depth of vision, common sense, and intellectual maturity.¹⁵

Traditional ascetical wisdom has a timeless pertinence not only to the business of achieving holiness but also to the work of achieving mental health. In our enthusiasm for the newer insights of depth psychology, which are undeniably astute, directors of souls may sometimes be tempted to undervalue the role of dogmatic motivation in meeting the needs of the instinctive life of man. In educating for emotional maturity as a basis of spirituality part of our task will be to engender a deeper awareness of those truths of faith which are God-given counterparts to the instinctive drives put into man's heart by God himself.

Before suggesting four basic norms for promoting Christian maturity, I would like to advert momentarily to a theological presupposition which is sometimes forgotten. We must remember that it is existential man whom God came to heal and to save. It is not an unverifiable text-book man, with his neatly fashioned faculties,

¹⁴ J. Vieujean, "The Sense of Sin and Its Deviations" in *Psychology, Morality and Education*, 59-60.

¹⁵ John XXIII, *Speech to Italian Seminary Rectors* (June 28, 1961).

his proper objects, and his "unincarnate" freedom. It is man of every age with all his bewildering complexity—his wounded psyche, his instinctive drives, his infantile complexes, his unravelled neuroses, and his unrepented sins. Moreover, the man Jesus, with his infused knowledge, knew exactly what is in the heart of man. The turbulent chaotic world of the id; the tension-fraught, sometimes childish, world of the superego; the imperious conscious yearnings of the human spirit—all these were an open book to the human mind of Christ.

Yet the wisdom He gave us for tranquilizing our troubled psyches was a wisdom with no necessary dependence upon the psychological enthusiasms of a later age. He gave us His sermon on the mount, His perfect filial prayer, His parable of the prodigal son, His sobering story of the buried talent; He gave us the allegory of the vine and the branches, the mysticism of the farewell discourse; and, best of all, He gave us the inexhaustible wordless wisdom of Calvary's cross. On the level of conscious motivation it is this wisdom, fortified by actual grace, which must lead a man to peace of mind and maturity of spirit.

B. Instincts and Theology

We must now give some basic norms for practice in engendering maturity. To be realistically helpful it seems that we should simultaneously bring into focus three categories of being: a) the instinctive drives upon which even our spiritual life must be built, b) the characteristics of the neurosis which is an index of unsolved conflicts among our instinctive drives, and c) the truths of faith which supply dogmatic motivation for harnessing those instinctive drives to the pursuit of maturity.

Dr. Lawson Lowrey puts the instinctive drives into a workable framework for us when he reduces them to 1) self preservation, 2) ego-maximation, 3) group conformance, and 4) psychosexual desire.¹⁶ Rudolph Allers finds the common characteristics of the neurosis reducible to 1) fear, 2) rebellion, 3) artificiality, and 4) egocentricity.¹⁷ The truths of faith which aptly run parallel to these

¹⁶ L. Lowrey, *Psychiatry for Social Workers*, 161.

¹⁷ R. Allers, *Psychology of Character*, 337-358.

instinctive drive and psychic disorders of wounded man are 1) the Fatherhood of God, 2) the uniqueness of vocation, 3) man's solidarity in sin and redemption, and 4) the benevolence of Christ's personal love for each one of us.¹⁸ In this respect the Apostle gave us a whole philosophy for Christian living in a few inspired sentences when he wrote: "With Christ I am nailed to the cross. It is now no longer I that live, but Christ lives within me. And the life that I now live in the flesh, I live in the faith of the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself up for me" (Gal. 2:20).

Keeping all these realities in mind, we can allege four aims of spiritual direction which can serve as norms for practice in helping souls to achieve maturity. As spiritual directors we must endeavor:

1. to make our disciples so relaxed with the providence of God that they are seldom crippled by fear or unmanned by self-pity;
2. to help them to believe effectively in the uniqueness of each one's vocation in Christ so that they may be delivered from the artificiality of posturing;
3. to train them to expect the inevitability of conflict and the predictability of failure so that they may not resort to childish rebellion in the face of their own imperfection;
4. to convince them that maturity is impossible without a total commitment to love lest they be engulfed by egotism which never learns to love.

With these aims in mind it may now be helpful to couple each instinctive drive with appropriate dogmatic motivation and illustrate how integrated spiritual direction can work toward the control of neurotic symptoms.

¹⁸ Pius XII, Statement on *indirect treatment*:

"Where instincts are concerned, it would be better to pay more attention to indirect treatment and to the action of the conscious psyche on the whole of the imaginative and affective activity. This technique avoids the deviation we have pointed out above. It tends to enlighten, cure and guide; it also influences the dynamics of sexuality, on which there is so much insistence, and which is said to be found or really exists in the unconscious or subconscious."

"Address to First International Congress on the Histopathology of the Nervous System"—*Catholic Mind*, May 1953, 308.

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| 1. Instinct of Self Preservation | |
| God's Fatherhood in Providence | "With Christ I am nailed
to the cross" |
| Control of Neurotic Fear | |

No man reaches his mature development in Christ without facing threats to his own security. His instinct of self-preservation meets these threats with an impulse to flight or an impulse to fight. Both these instinctive impulses find a congenial outlet in a truly Christian abandonment to God's providence.¹⁹ If we see the Fatherhood of God in true perspective our impulse to flight can take childlike shelter in God's fore-knowledge, far-reaching causality, and benevolent wisdom in behalf of the elect; yet at the same time our impulse to fight is spurred on by a God-given assignment to confront evil as an adult and to wrestle with everything disruptive of order in our Father's house.

To do the truth in love every Christian must take up his cross and follow Christ. We reach maturity only through mystic crucifixion. But we must never forget that we are nailed to the cross *with Christ*. In Christ, we are the Beloved of God. Our Father hands us over to the cross in the same way that He handed over His well-beloved Son.

Spiritual directors can help to forestall neurotic fear and disabling self-pity if souls can be made to see that a loving Father is the cause of their mystic crucifixion in exactly the same way as He caused the Passion of His Son. It was the Father who planned the cross of Jesus; it was the Father who inspired His human will to endure it; and it was the Father who delivered Christ to His enemies when He might have protected Him from their power and their viciousness.²⁰ "God so loved the world as to give His only-begotten Son. . . ."

In meshing in the instinct of self-preservation with a filial act of surrender to God's providence, the Christian soul must see the Father's love as the ultimate dynamic behind every trial of life. No haphazard pushing around by the world, no successful machination of an enemy, no treachery by a friend, no abuse of power, no

¹⁹ R. Garrigou-Lagrange, R., *Providence*, 215-225.

²⁰ *S.T.*, III, 47, 3c.

corruption of love is ever the ultimate explanation of a man's being nailed to the cross "*with Christ.*" The ultimate explanation is always the Father's loving design. For God's greatest work of love, the redemptive Passion of Jesus Christ, assures us that even the effects of evil, as they touch the Beloved of God, are positively willed by the Father's love. A man cannot long remain crippled by self-pity and fear once he really believes that it is His Father who hands him over to the sacrificial wood and it is His Father who engenders in him a willingness to hang there.²¹

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| 2. Instinct of Ego Maximation | "It is now no longer I that |
| Uniqueness of Vocation in Christ | live but Christ lives within |
| Control of Neurotic Artificiality | me" |

All legitimate self-expression is dynamized in part by the instinct of ego-maximization. Even the most sublime achievements of mystic surrender or the most complete self-emptying of ascetic austerity is inseparable from a deeply-planted impulse to assert oneself. In Christ this instinct is meant to receive its perfect fulfillment because in Christ each person puts on a new and wondrous dignity which is uniquely his own. In Christ each man can discover himself as an utterly unique and irreplaceable product of God's own workmanship. "And the eye cannot say to the hand, 'I do not need thy help'; nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you'" (I Cor. 12:21).

The Christ who dwells within each one of us is the Christ who was first nailed to the cross so that He might evoke from our heart that charity "in which the perfection of human salvation consists."²² We must never forget that our Christian vocation is not precisely to save our souls but to save our souls by loving an all-lovable God on God's own terms. Only He can say how much each one of us shall love Him. Only He can say how much of His supreme loveliness He chooses to reveal to us.

Spiritual directors would help their disciples to purge much neurotic pretense out of their lives if they could succeed in making

²¹ St. Thomas, *Super Evangelium S. Joannis* 21: 18-19; 4, 2631—(Diverse causalities in Crucifixion of Peter).

²² *S.T.*, III, 46, 3c.

souls disown a childish concept of salvation. Many think of salvation univocally as if it were obtained like a seat at the drama by paying a common purchase price. There is no one minimum or maximum price of salvation. Our God is the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. He is the God of each one of us as an individual. And each finds Him as the salvation of his own soul in keeping with God's unique call.

Salvation is not like purchasing a seat at the drama. It is rather like having a part in a play. But there must be no dramatics. There is no need for pretense or artificiality in the life of the genuine Christian. He need only be himself. He has the role assigned to him by God. And the whole dramatic portrayal is the human career of One Mystic Christ unfolding itself on the stage of human history whereon all who find salvation also find joy of heart simply in being living tributes to the mercy of God. Holiness does not stifle the instinct of ego-maximation; it sets it free with the liberty of the children of God.

3. Instinct of Group Conformance "And the life I now live in
 Solidarity in Sin and Redemption the flesh I live in the faith
 Control of Neurotic Rebellion of the Son of God". . . .

We live the Christ-life in fallen flesh. Fallen flesh has of itself little congeniality for things of the spirit. God is a Spirit. Consequently the ways of God are enshrouded in darkness and obscurity and "unreasonableness" from the viewpoint of fallen flesh. "The word of the cross is foolishness" to mere men. It does not make human sense. It can become intelligible only by living "in the faith of the Son of God" which steepens us in the thought-life of Christ Himself and makes us see the reality of God's goodness and our own sinfulness with the Son's own gift of understanding. "No one has at any time seen God. The only-begotten Son who is in the bosom of the Father, he has revealed Him" (John 1:18). Christ revealed the authentic Face of the Father of mercies. But fallen flesh has a way of disfiguring the countenance of God; it turns a filial service of love into a code of inexorable prohibition; it deforms a wholesome sense of sin into an oppressive morbidity.

The instinct of group conformance makes a man feel stifled in

spirit unless he can enjoy a sense of belonging. Morbid guilt feelings which find such congenial soil in fallen flesh overshadow a man with a sense of loneliness, indignity, disgust with himself and these in turn produce a rebelliousness against all the alleged causes of his misery.

A Christian awareness of our solidarity in sin and redemption can allay this morbid guilt if the soul will simply accept its lifelong status as "a hearty, cheerful invalid,"²³ confident of a complete healing in God's own good time. In face of the struggle between flesh and spirit the mature man must expect the inevitability of conflict which is crucifying; in face of the soul's vulnerability to so many weaknesses besieging it from so many sides he must expect the inevitability of failure by at least occasional venial sin.²⁴ Consciousness of our kinship with the rest of sinful mankind produces a true and fruitful sense of guilt for the incongruity of even venial sin; consciousness of our inclusion in the redemptive victory of Christ saves us from the sense of hopelessness which produces "a guilt of existence." Paul Ricoeur expressed this truth well when he wrote:

To put it all in one phrase, accusation plunges man in despairing misery as soon as it cuts off culpability from the memory of innocence and the promise of liberation.²⁵

4. Instinct of Psychosexual Desire "who has loved me
Christ's Personal Love for His Saints and given Himself
Control of Egocentricity up for me."

No man runs gladly to the cross even with the hope of finding Christ there. The uncongeniality of flesh for mystic crucifixion can be overcome only by love. Love is the sole source of sacrificial surrender. And love cannot long thrive without an awareness of being loved. Unless we see the cross of Christ as a "desperate" gesture of personal love for each one of us, we miss the point of our Lord's role as a lover of souls. Calvary is the earnestness of God breaking

²³ W. Faber, *Spiritual Conferences*.

²⁴ D. 833.

²⁵ P. Ricoeur, "Morality Without Sin or Sin Without Moralism?", *Cross Currents*, Fall 1955.

through the obtuseness of men's minds so that eventually we say with conviction: "He has loved *me* and given himself for *me*."

Even the best of human loves, the fruitful blossoming of psychosexual desire, is but a murky mirroring of the soul's union with God through Christ. All the elements of this imperious instinct—the yearning for fruitfulness, the capacity for surrender, the delight in union—are meant to be lifted unto a higher plane when the soul meets Christ on His cross. Father Goldbrunner expresses this truth very beautifully when he writes: "Graciously the Lord turns our passion on to Himself when we bring our love to the Cross. On the Cross Agape takes Eros into her arms."²⁶

In some particular area of his personality development the neurotic is stunted by his own egotism. On this particular terrain he is too frightened or worried or egotistical to surrender to the demands of love. Here the spiritual director must try to convince him that maturity cannot come without a total commitment to love. The outstretched arms of the Crucified Christ are an overture of love summoning the neurotic to achieve maturity; and maturity achieved on the cross of Christ is just another name for sanctity.

AUGUSTINE P. HENNESSY, C.P.
Holy Cross Seminary
Dunkirk, New York

²⁶ Goldbrunner, *op. cit.*, 61.