

On Psychotherapy And Religion

Pope Pius XII - 1953

1. We greet you, dear sons and daughters, who have come from all parts and are gathered together in Rome to listen to learned expositions and discuss questions of psychotherapy and clinical psychology. Your Congress has ended, and, in order to guarantee its results and the success of your research and future activities, you have come to receive the blessing of the Vicar of Christ. Very gladly do We respond to your desire and We avail Ourselves of this occasion to address to you a word of encouragement and to give you some advice.

2. Science affirms that recent observations have brought to light the hidden layers of the psychic structure of man and tries to understand the meaning of these discoveries, to interpret them and render them capable of use. People speak of dynamisms, determinisms, and mechanisms hidden in the depths of the soul, endowed with immanent laws whence are derived certain modes of acting. Undoubtedly these begin to operate within the subconscious or the unconscious, but they also penetrate into the realms of the conscious and determine it. People claim to have devised methods that have been tried and recognized as adequate to scrutinize the mystery of the depths of the soul, to elucidate them and put them back on the right road when they are exercising a harmful influence.

3. These questions, which lend themselves to the examination of scientific psychology, belong to your competence. The same may be said for the use of new psychic methods. But theoretical and practical psychology, the one as much as the other, should bear in mind that they cannot lose sight of the truths established by reason and by faith, nor of the obligatory precepts of ethics.

4. Last year, in the month of September (September 13, 1952-*Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, vol. 44, 1952, p. 779 ff), acceding to the wishes of members of the "First International Congress of Histopathology of the Nervous System," We indicated the moral limits of medical methods of research and treatment. On the basis of that explanation, We would like today to add something by way of complement. Briefly, We intend to outline the fundamental attitude which is imposed upon the Christian psychologist and psychotherapist.

5. This fundamental attitude can be summed up in the following formula: Psychotherapy and clinical psychology must always consider man (1) as a psychic unit and totality, (2) as a structured unit in itself, (3) as a social unit, and (4) as a transcendent unit, that is to say, in man's tending towards God.

I. Man as a Psychic Unit and Totality

6. Medicine has learned to consider the human body as a mechanism of great precision, whose parts fit into each other and are connected to each other. The place and the characteristics of these parts are dependent on the whole. They serve its existence and its functions. But this conception is more applicable still to the soul, whose delicate wheels have been assembled with much more care. The various psychic faculties and functions form part of the whole spiritual being and subordinate themselves to its final end.

7. It is useless to develop this point further. But you, psychologists and psychic healers, must bear this fact in mind: the existence of each psychic faculty and function is explained by the end of the whole man. What constitutes man is principally the soul, the substantial form of his nature. From it, ultimately, flows all the vital activity of man. In it are rooted all the psychic dynamisms with their own proper structure and their organic law. It is the soul which nature charges with the government of all man's energies, in so far as these have not yet acquired their final determination.

8. Given this ontological and psychological fact, it follows that it would be a departure from reality to attempt, in theory or in practice, to entrust the determining role of the whole to one particular factor, for example, to one of the elementary psychic dynamisms and thus install a secondary power at the helm. Those psychic dynamisms may be in the soul, in man. They are not, however, the soul nor the man. They are energies of considerable intensity perhaps, but nature has entrusted their direction to the centerpost, to the spiritual soul endowed with intellect and will, which is normally capable of governing these energies. That these energies may exercise pressure upon one activity does not necessarily signify that they compel it. To deprive the soul of its central place would be to deny an ontological and psychic reality.

9. It is not possible, therefore, when studying the relationship of the ego to the dynamisms that compose it to concede unreservedly in theory the autonomy of man- that is, of his soul-but to go on immediately to state that in the reality of life this theoretical principle appears to be very frequently set aside or minimized to the extreme.

10. In the reality of life, it is argued, man always retains his freedom to give his internal consent to what he does, but in no way the freedom to do it. The autonomy of free will is replaced by the heteronomy of instinctive dynamism. That is not the way in which God fashioned man.

11. Original sin did not take away from man the possibility or the obligation of directing his own actions himself through his soul. It cannot be alleged that the psychic troubles and disorders which disturb the normal functioning of the psychic being represent what usually happens. The moral struggle to remain on the right path does not prove that it is impossible to follow that path, nor does it authorize any drawing back.

II. Man as a Structured Unit

12. Man is an ordered unit and whole, a microcosm, a sort of state whose charter, determined by the end of the whole, subordinates to this end the activity of the parts according to the true order of their value and function. This charter is, in the final analysis, of an ontological and metaphysical origin, not a psychological and personal one. There are those who have thought it necessary to accentuate the opposition between the metaphysical and the psychological. A completely wrong approach! The psychic itself belongs to the domain of the ontological and metaphysical.

13. We have recalled this truth to you in order to base on it a remark about man in the concrete, whose internal order is being here examined. Indeed, the effort has been made to establish the contradiction between traditional psychology and ethics relative to modern psychotherapy and clinical psychology.

14. Traditional psychology and ethics, it is affirmed, have for their object the abstract being of man, *homo ut sic* (man as such), who assuredly exists nowhere. The clarity and logical connection of these disciplines merits admiration, but they suffer from a basic fault. They are inapplicable to real man as he exists. Clinical psychology, on the contrary, deals with real man, with *homo at hic*. And the conclusion is: Between the two conceptions there opens an abyss impossible to surmount as long as traditional psychology and ethics do not change their position.

15. The study of the constitution of real man, ought, in fact, to take as object "existential" man, such as he is, such as his natural dispositions, the influences of his milieu, education, his personal development, his intimate experiences and external events have made him. It is only man in the concrete that exists. And yet, the structure of this personal ego obeys in the smallest detail the ontological and metaphysical laws of human nature of which We have spoken above. They have formed it and thus should govern and judge it. The reason behind this is that "existential" man identifies himself in his intimate structure with "essential" man.

16. The essential structure of man does not disappear when individual notes are added to it. It is not further transformed in another human nature. But the charter, of which We spoke just now, rests precisely in its principal terms on the essential structure of real man, man in the concrete.

17. Consequently, it would be erroneous to establish for real life norms which would deviate from natural and Christian morality, and which, for want of a better word, could be called "personalist" ethics. The latter would without doubt receive a certain "orientation" from the former, but this would not admit of any strict obligation. The law of the structure of man in the concrete is not to be invented but applied.

III. Man as a Social Unit

18. What We have said up to now concerns man in his personal life. The psychical includes also his relations with the exterior world, and a praiseworthy task, a field open to your researches, is found in the study of the psychic in its social aspects, in itself and in its roots, and to make it serviceable for the purposes of clinical psychology and of psychotherapy. But one should take good care in this to make a scrupulous distinction between the facts in themselves and their interpretation.

19. Social psychism touches also morality, and the principles of morality affect to a large extent those of serious psychology and psychotherapy. But there are some points where the application of social psychism sins by excess or by defect. And it is on this that We would briefly pause.

20. Error by defect: There is a psychological and moral disturbance—that of the inhibition of the ego—with which your science concerns itself in order to discover its causes. When this inhibition encroaches on the moral domain, as for instance, when there is question of dynamic tendencies, such as the instinct of domination, of superiority and the sexual instinct, psychotherapy would not be capable, without further considerations, of treating this inhibition of the ego as a kind of fatality, as a tyranny of the affective impulse streaming forth from the subconscious and escaping completely from the control of the conscious and of the soul. One should be slow to lower man in the concrete together with his personal character to the level of the brute.

21 Despite the good intentions of the therapists, sensitive natures bitterly resent this degradation to the level of instinctive and sensitive life. Furthermore, the observations We have made above on the hierarchy of values among the functions and the role of their central direction should not be disregarded.

22. A word also on the method sometimes employed by the psychologist to liberate the ego of its inhibition in the case of aberration in the sexual domain. We refer to complete sexual initiation, which would not pass over anything in silence, leave nothing in obscurity. Is there not therein a harmful overestimation of knowledge in these matters?

23. There is also an efficacious sexual education which in entire safety, teaches with calmness and objectivity what the young man should know for his own personal conduct and his relationship with those with whom he is brought into contact. For the rest, the accent will be placed principally, in sexual education, as moreover, in all education, upon self mastery and religious training. The Holy See published certain norms in this connection shortly after the Encyclical of Pius XI *On Christian Marriage* (Holy Office, March 21, 1931-*Acta Apostolicae Sedis* vol. 23, 1931, p. 118). These norms have not been rescinded, neither expressly nor *via facti* (by way of fact).

24. What has just been said of inconsiderate initiation for therapeutic purposes is valid also for certain forms of psychoanalysis. One should not come to regard them as the only means of relieving or of curing psychical sexual troubles. The trite principle that sexual trouble of the unconscious, as all other inhibitions of identical origin, can be suppressed only by their being brought to the level of consciousness, is not valid if it is generalized without distinction. The indirect treatment also has its efficacy and often it suffices to a large extent. As to the use of the psychoanalytic method in the sexual domain, Our allocution of September 13, already cited, has already pointed out the moral limits. In truth, one cannot consider as licit, without further consideration, the evocation to the level of consciousness of all the representations, emotions and sexual experiences, which lie dormant in the memory and the unconscious, and which are thus actualized in the psychic. If the protests arising from a sense of human and Christian dignity are heeded, who would risk making the claim that this manner of treatment does not imply both immediate and future moral danger, when, even if the therapeutic necessity of unlimited exploration be affirmed, this necessity is not, after all, established?

25. Error by excess: It consists in emphasizing the exigency of a total surrender of the ego and of its personal affirmation. With regard to this, We wish to consider two points: a general principle and a point of therapeutic practice.

26. From certain psychological explanations, the thesis is formulated that the unconditioned extroversion of the ego constitutes the fundamental law of congenital altruism and of its dynamic tendencies. This is a logical, psychological and ethical error. There exists in fact a defense, an esteem, a love and a service of one's personal self, which is not only justified but demanded by psychology and morality. It is a natural evidence and a lesson of the Christian faith (Cf. St. Thomas, S.Th., 2a2ae p., q. 26, article 4, in c). Our Lord taught: "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" (Mark, 12, 31). Christ, then, proposes as the rule of love of neighbor charity towards oneself, not the contrary. Applied psychology would undervalue this reality if it were to describe all consideration of the ego as psychic

inhibition, error, return to a state of former development, under the pretext that it is contrary to the natural altruism of the psychic being.

27. The point about psychotherapeutic practice that We mentioned concerns an essential interest of society: the safeguarding of secrets which the use of psychoanalysis endangers. It is not at all excluded that a fact or knowledge which is secret and repressed in the subconscious provokes serious psychic conflicts. If psychoanalysis discloses the cause of this trouble, it will want, according to its principle, to draw out entirely this unconscious element and make it conscious in order to remove the obstacle. But there are secrets which must on no account be divulged, even to a doctor, even in spite of grave personal inconveniences. The secret of Confession may never be revealed. It is equally forbidden for the professional secret to be communicated to another, including a doctor. The same is true of other secrets. One may invoke the principle: "for a proportionately grave reason it is permitted to reveal a secret to a prudent man and one capable of keeping a secret." This principle is correct within narrow limits for certain kinds of secrets. It is not right to make use of it indiscriminately in psychoanalytic practice.

28. As regards morality, for the common good in the first place, the principle of discretion in the use of psychoanalysis cannot be sufficiently emphasized. Obviously it is not primarily a question of the discretion of the psychoanalyst, but of that of the patient, who frequently has no right whatever to give away his secrets.

IV. Man as a Transcendent Unit, Tending Towards God

29. This latter aspect of man brings up three questions which We would not wish to overlook.

30. First of all, scientific research is drawing attention to a dynamism which, rooted in the depths of the psychic being, would push man towards the infinite which is beyond him, not by making him know it, but through an ascending gravitation issuing directly from the ontological substratum. This dynamism is regarded as an independent force, the most fundamental and the most elementary of the soul, an affective impulse carrying man immediately to the Divine, just as a flower opens up to light and sunshine without knowing it, or as a child breathes unconsciously as soon as it is born.

31. This assertion immediately calls forth an observation. If it is stated that this dynamism is at the origin of all religions, that it manifests the element common to all, We know on the contrary that religions, the natural and supernatural knowledge of God and worship of Him, do not proceed from the unconscious or the subconscious, nor from an impulse of the affections, but from the clear and certain knowledge of God by means of His natural and positive revelation. This is the doctrine and the belief of the Church, beginning with the word of God in the Book of Wisdom and the Epistle to the Romans, down to the Encyclical *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* [On Modernism] of Our Predecessor, Blessed Pius X.

32. Having laid down this principle, there still remains the question of this mysterious dynamism. On this subject one might make the following remarks. We should certainly not find fault with depth psychology if it deals with the psychic aspect of religious phenomena and endeavors to analyze and reduce it to a scientific system, even if this research is new and if its terminology is not found in the past. We mention this point, because misunderstandings can easily arise when

psychology attributes new meanings to already accepted expressions. Prudence and reserve are needed on both sides in order to avoid false interpretations and to make it possible to reach a reciprocal understanding.

33. It pertains to the technique of your science to clarify the questions of the existence, the structure and the mode of action of this dynamism. If its outcome proves to be positive, it should not be declared irreconcilable with reason or faith. This would only show that, even in its deepest roots, *esse ab alio* [to be from another], also implies an *esse ad alium* [to be for another], and that St. Augustine's words: "Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord. and our heart shall not rest until it rests in thee" (*Confessions*, Book 1, chapter 1, N.1), find a new confirmation in the very depths of man's psychic being. Even if there were question of a dynamism involving all men, peoples, epochs, and cultures, what an invaluable help this would be for the search after God and the affirmation of His existence!

34. To the transcendent relations of the psychic being there belongs also the sense of guilt, the consciousness of having violated a higher law, by which, nevertheless, one recognizes himself as being bound, a consciousness which can find expression in suffering and in psychic disorder.

35. Psychotherapy here approaches a phenomenon which is not within its own exclusive field of competence, for this phenomenon is also, if not principally, of a religious nature. No one will deny that there can exist — and not infrequently — an irrational and even morbid sense of guilt. But a person may also be aware of a real fault which has not been wiped away.

36. Neither psychology nor ethics possesses an infallible criterion for cases of this kind, since the workings of conscience which beget this sense of guilt have too personal and subtle a structure. But in any case, it is certain that no purely psychological treatment will cure a genuine sense of guilt. Even if psychotherapists, perhaps even in good faith, question its existence, it still perdures. Even if the sense of guilt be eliminated by medical intervention, autosuggestion or outside persuasion, the fault remains, and psychotherapy would both deceive itself and deceive others if, in order to do away with the sense of guilt, it pretended that the fault no longer exists.

37. The means of eliminating the fault does not belong to the purely psychological order. As every Christian knows, it consists in contrition and sacramental absolution by the priest. Here, it is the root of the evil, it is the fault itself, which is extirpated, even though remorse may continue to make itself felt. Nowadays, in certain pathological cases, it is not rare for the priest to send his penitent to a doctor. In the present case, the doctor should rather direct his patient towards God and to those who have the power to remit the fault itself in the name of God.

38. A final remark on the transcendent orientation of the psychic being towards God. Respect for God and His holiness must always be reflected in man's conscious acts. When, even without subjective fault on the part of the person involved, these acts are in contrast to the divine model, they still run counter to the ultimate finality of his being. That is why what is called "material sin" is something which should not exist, and which constitutes in the moral order a reality which is not indifferent.

39. From this a conclusion follows for psychotherapy. In the presence of material sin it cannot remain neutral. It can, for the moment, tolerate what remains

inevitable. But it must know that God cannot justify such an action. With still less reason can psychotherapy counsel a patient to commit material sin on the ground that it will be without subjective guilt. Such a counsel would also be erroneous if this action were regarded as necessary for the psychic easing of the patient and thus as being part of the treatment. One may never counsel a conscious action which would be a deformation, and not an image of the divine perfection.

40. That is what We feel obliged to say to you. In addition, be assured that the Church follows your research and your medical practice with Her warm interest and Her best wishes. You labor on a terrain that is very difficult. But your activity is capable of achieving precious results for medicine, for the knowledge of the soul in general, for the religious dispositions of man and for their development.

41. May Providence and divine grace enlighten your path! In pledge thereof We impart to you with paternal benevolence Our Apostolic Benediction.