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# Some Moral Problems Connected with Psychological Testing of Religious, Seminarians and Candidates

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In June 1976, an article in the *Civiltà Cattolica* written by Rev. Vittorio Marozzi, S.J., professor at the Gregorian University, discussed the question of psychological testing and human rights. In October, 1976, a French translation of the same article appeared in the *Documentation Catholique*. The article states that there has been a lack of clarity concerning human and ethical dimensions in psychological examinations; abuses have been made. The author then gives a description of the methods used in psychological testing, and proceeds to the study of moral implications. He does not go into fine details or very specific problems. Some of the conclusions, however, question a certain number of present practices in the field. For instance, Father Marozzi, referring himself to directives of the Congregation for Religious (AAS 61, 1969, 113), believes that a religious superior has no right to *prescribe* a psychoanalytic examination to a religious subject or to a candidate, because persons have a natural right to inviolability of private life. He can only *propose* such an examination, and the religious or candidate to religious life after having been well-informed about the nature of the testing, should be completely free to accept or refuse the invitation. However, other types of psychological testing which evaluate more or less "exterior" psychic capabilities, like I.Q., memory, nervous resistance, etc. could, for a just reason, be imposed on subjects.

Father Marozzi's article was thus mostly concerned about the use of psychological testing in the field of priestly and religious life. Being published in the *Civiltà Cattolica*, it also expresses in a semi-official way the opinion of Vatican authorities. As a matter of fact, an official letter was later distributed by the diplomatic delegations of

the Vatican, calling attention to abuses and to the article of Father Marcozzi.

In this short paper, we will not try to make an analysis of Father Marcozzi's article. We will touch upon some of the questions that he mentions, and introduce more concrete problems which arise in the field of psychological testing for religious people, although we will in no way study all the possible — even important — questions which arise in this field.

In many countries, there is now an extensive use of psychological testing as a screening device for candidates to the priesthood and religious life. It is also used as one of many possible intervention procedures in situations of vocational crisis. And finally it is increasingly used as a normal educational instrument during the process of religious formation.

In the field of personality, most of the tests and interviews are influenced to a certain degree by psychoanalytic insights; they probe into very private aspects of personality, some of them conscious and some of them subconscious. The interviewer or the test questionnaire may ask very private questions, and/or they may ask apparently inconsequential questions or prescribe very simple tasks such as the drawing of a person or the telling of a story. The person being tested may have the feeling of revealing himself by answering very private questions, or may have the feeling of being involved in a rather interesting game, or may just find the whole thing boring. Actually, he is always revealing to the psychologist very personal and private dimensions of his personality. The testing situation, in the field of personality, could be seen as a condensed life situation, where some scientific methods are used in order to observe in a limited time-span what could otherwise be observed in a long period of time (even without asking personal questions, but also with less certainty at the end). Obviously, the competence of the observer makes all the difference, just as in the case of a medical doctor making a physical examination.

The nature of psychological testing and the right of the individual to protect his privacy (past experiences, thoughts, fantasies, subconscious material) make it obvious that a seminarian, religious or candidate should normally have given a free *informed* consent before being submitted to this type of examination. Catholic moralists would probably all agree on this general statement. Psychologists in general are also likely to agree. In the third edition (1970) of his widely used textbook on *Essentials of Psychological Testing*, L. J. Cronbach proposes to make the following statement to a person coming for psychological consultation or therapy:

It should help to solve your problem if we collect as much information as we can. Some of our tests use straightforward questions whose purpose you will readily understand. Others dig more deeply into the personality. Sometimes they bring emotional conflicts that the person is not even conscious

of. Few of us admit the whole truth about our feelings and ideas, even to ourselves. I think I can help you better with the aid of these tests (p. 513).

The stress on the desire of the psychologist to be of help is clearly expressed in this statement. This would fit well in the context of an intervention during vocational crisis, or in the general context of religious vocation. In the situation of screening candidates for religious life, the psychologist could easily stress the fact that he wants to help the candidate discern his vocation or confirm it, adding that one can best serve other people and find his own happiness if he is living where the Lord wants him to be.

We would now like to come down to more concrete situations and discuss them in order to bring to light a few of the moral principles which can be used as guides in this field.

### Case 1

A candidate for religious life, after having given an informed consent, spends one full day doing testing — four or five tests, including an I.Q. test, MMPI clinical test, sentence completion test, a TAT and a Rorschach. There also is an interview with the psychologist who sends a report to the religious superior. Later, the candidate is accepted in the religious order (hopefully not only because he has “passed” the psychological examination). But he never gets a report from the psychologist, and has no access to the report sent to the religious superior. The candidate feels somewhat frustrated, because he has tried to be open with a competent person who was studying his personality but he has no feed-back at all. He thinks that he could have been helped to arrive at a better knowledge of himself had he received a report from the psychologist. Did the psychologist or the religious superior have a lack of due respect for his person?

The testing is justified by the fact that a religious vocation supposes a healthy psychological structure; it is one of the ways used to discern the presence or absence of a divine call to this type of life.

Such extensive testing as supposed in this case also gives a wealth of information, useful not only to see if there is a vocation, but to understand many aspects of personality. The results of the testing could, for example, be extremely useful to a master of novices competent enough to use them during the formation of the subject, that is, for the good of the subject, to help him mature in his personality and in his vocation. If there is such a formator and if the subject is actually introduced slowly to the results of the testing so that he can profit from them, we believe that he will not be frustrated, and his rights will have been protected.

But the religious superiors are rarely competent to use the test material in this way. In such cases, it should be the responsibility of

the psychologist to give a report to the subject. Actually, it seems that the subject is entitled to get a feed-back from the testing, somewhat in proportion to the extension of his (conscious or unconscious) uncovering in the testing situation. Most people are aware of not knowing perfectly their own selves and of having conflicts that they do not understand completely. They have a right and even a responsibility to come to a better self-knowledge and to resolve the inner conflicts, as much as this is reasonably possible and in the context of their other rights and obligations. It seems that one would be entitled to receive some help in the field of self-knowledge once he has agreed to expose himself to a psychologist with the goal of letting his personality be known. If he is not given any feed-back, he may rightly feel that he has been used.

From the part of the psychologist, to report to the subject means more work, and this means a greater economical burden for the religious congregation paying for the testing. Readiness to pay this fee would show a real respect for the candidate as a person (whether he is judged fit or unfit for this particular vocation) and not only as a prospective addition to one's religious congregation. If the extra fee is judged too high, and if there is no competent superior to give a decent feed-back to the subject, it would seem better to give a much simpler testing (in order just to eliminate gross psychopathology); this would then relieve the obligation of giving a somewhat extended report to the subject.

## Case 2

A seminarian, student of theology, freely decides to undergo psychological testing in a Church-run consultation center. The superiors of the seminary encourage seminarians to undergo such a program. More concretely, the seminarian will have to take some projective tests like TAT and Rorschach as well as two 90-minute interviews. The psychologist promises to keep confidentiality.

At the end of the psychological examination, the psychologist gives a 90-minute verbal report to the seminarian. He tells him what has been observed in his personality, with a view to helping the seminarian arrive at a better self-knowledge, improved living, freer response to God's call. The seminarian actually feels that he is told a lot of things of which he was hardly aware; some aspects of his life are re-evaluated. He basically feels that he has been helped. However, the psychologist has refrained from telling the seminarian some of his more serious personality defects because he believes that the seminarian would not be able to psychologically stand such a revelation, and that such a revelation would only make his life more difficult to live. Is the psychologist right in not telling all the truth?

It is true that the seminarian, as a human person, has a right to

know the truth about himself, and consequently to be able to make freer choices in his life. On the other hand, there is always — especially in such important matters — the need for a *pedagogical* introduction to truth. The case is somewhat similar to the doctor who finds an incurable terminal disease in a patient: he has to help the patient to come progressively to an awareness and acceptance of the situation. In the present case, the psychologist can only have *one* occasion to make his report to the client; pedagogy may require that he tells only part of the truth.

It may be useful to introduce here a distinction between “information” and “communication.” To give “information” would be to transmit a pure fact, abstracted from all context, like “You are schizophrenic.” To give “communication” would be to transmit truth in a personal context, considering the whole background of personality and circumstances of both partners in the dialogue, like educational attainments, personal history, belief system, etc. In other words, in communication, the information is interpreted so as to fit in the context.

In the case that we are now considering, the psychologist can only transmit what can be “understood” by the seminarian, either now or in the near future (when he reflects on his experience). It is well known that much psychological information about a person just *cannot* reasonably be understood in a single session with the psychologist. It often takes many months of psychotherapy to communicate one single piece of important information. There would be no advantage (and possible dangers of misinterpretation) if the psychologist would just transmit information without really *communicating* what he wants to tell his client.

### Can Seminarian ‘Bear’ Information?

Another point that has to be pondered by the psychologist is whether the seminarian can “bear” the information. It is a well-known fact that human beings subconsciously build psychological defenses to protect themselves from becoming aware of certain aspects or conflicts of their personality. Some of these defenses, having been built up in a distant past, have lost any constructive function, and consequently could be destroyed. Some other defenses, although limiting the person’s possibilities for self-realization, protect him from psychological breakdown. Consequently, the psychologist has to judge whether the fact of destroying some psychological defenses will be beneficial to the seminarian or not. The psychologist may find that his client is able to live with more anxiety, to lead a more “tragic” existence but at the same time to become more free, more master of himself. Then the psychologist should communicate more to the

client. Or the psychologist may find that the opposite is true, in which case he will not tell so much to his client.

Another point to be considered by the psychologist is the social impact of his communication. If the client has special responsibilities, like being a bishop, or religious superior, and if his psychological difficulties have a direct impact on his leadership, there is obviously a need for a fuller communication. It is also conceivable that a seminarian who is normally going to become a leader in the community, should be told more frankly about his psychological make-up than some other person who is likely to spend a more retired life.

If psychologist and client both understand the meaning of priesthood and have common values, it seems that it will be easier to strike a good balance between what the psychologist can tell his client and what is better not to tell him.

The above analysis also shows that the psychologist has a very delicate task. He must be aware of his own limitations; he should not be too dogmatic about his findings. If he himself is a priest with a good philosophical, theological and moral background, he is likely to have a better-balanced judgment in such matters. Moreover, he must have a good knowledge of his own personality. If he is too paternalistic, he may tend to let people stay in their immaturity and save them painful but liberating confrontations with themselves; if he is a bit sadistic, he may impose on people useless sufferings by giving them information which they cannot integrate in their lives.

### Case 3

This case is a continuation of case 2. Let us suppose that the psychologist is morally convinced that the vocation of this seminarian is just a big psychological defense to interior conflicts, and that there is virtually no hope of a "healing" taking place even with extended psychological help. The client, however, is not psychotic and most probably will never become overtly psychotic. He is affected with a serious condition called "borderline personality organization," at such a degree that he is unable to internalize religious values. Moreover, this particular client can only establish superficial relationships with people, he has serious problems of latent homosexuality, serious fits of anger, episodes of impulsive drinking, etc.

This seminarian is so defensive that he is not likely to question his vocation unless he is actually told the whole truth about his psychological health. But then there would actually be a high risk of a severe psychological decompensation (psychosis) or of a stronger clinging to vocation as a lifeboat.

In such a situation, is it morally correct to ask permission from the client to make a report about the testing to his spiritual advisor,

without the client knowing that the report to the spiritual advisor will be more complete than the report given to the client himself? Could the same thing be done if the spiritual advisor would also happen to be the person mainly responsible for sending the client away from vocational life?

There seems to be here a breach of confidentiality, although the client has given a generic permission to the psychologist, because the client is working on the impression that the psychologist will not tell the spiritual advisor more than he was himself told. (Some clients may be suspicious and ask: "Are you going to tell him that I am crazy?" or "Are there things that you did not tell me?" At times a psychologist is asked questions formulated so that he can hardly answer evasively. If he explicitly denied that he would say more than what he has already said to the client, it would be harder to justify a breach of promise.)

Let us suppose that a generic permission has been given. Is the psychologist, by giving a more complete report to the spiritual advisor, "manipulating" his client out of religious life? Obviously, this is a serious matter, and only for a serious reason could the psychologist give to the spiritual advisor information that was withheld from the client.

First of all, we must examine the *intention* of the psychologist. We suppose that he really wants the good of his individual client. If the psychologist could tell the client directly about his psychological state, being sure that he would be correctly understood, that he would not put the client in danger of psychotic decompensation and that the client would then be able to make a free decision about his vocation, the psychologist would readily refrain from giving the report to the spiritual advisor. Also, the psychologist would be personally willing, if possible, to give psychotherapy to the client for one year or more, with the hope that at the end of treatment the client would have a reasonable knowledge of his situation and be able to freely decide about his vocation. The intention of the psychologist is clearly to help the client.

What does the psychologist intend to achieve by making a report to the spiritual advisor? First, the psychologist knows that since there is already some sort of a trusting relationship between his client and the spiritual advisor, it is likely that the advisor will be more able than the psychologist to help the person take the decision of leaving with a minimum of psychological distress. In other words, the psychologist is looking for a vicarious agent in order to be of help to his client. It must be said also, as experience shows, that the psychologist will probably only confirm what the advisor is already thinking, by giving a more scientific basis to doubts already present in the advisor's mind. Consequently, the advisor, when he tries to persuade his advisee to leave religious life will be acting on his own, and not as a pure agent of the psychologist.

If the spiritual advisor is also master of novices, he practically has the power to send the novice away, even against his will. This, of course, can be done only as a last-ditch procedure. The psychologist should be more circumspect in making a report to the spiritual advisor who is also master of novices, when the psychologist has been working under the seal of confidentiality. He could give the information with the condition that it be used only at the "internal forum."

Here enters the relation to the common good. Normally, the psychologist's first purpose is to help his client, and in doing so the psychologist contributes to the common good. When he is dealing specifically with a question of vocation, which is a vocation *in* a community and *for* a community, the importance of a consideration of the common good comes more to the fore. For instance, the psychologist may see clearly that his client's personality will, in the long run, be harmful to community life, and that as a pastor he is going to do more harm than good to the faithful, etc. However, the psychologist must also consider the fact that his client, if ever involved in married life, will most probably have an unsuccessful marriage, with deleterious influence on children. Wherever the client will be living, he is going to be a burden. And it is unlikely, for social reasons, that he will decide to live as a celibate layman, because he would be psychologically unable to stand the solitude of such a life; this is precisely why he longs for community life and celibacy. (As a theoretical question, it could be asked here if there should not be some social institution geared to help this kind of person, even under the cover of an ideal. For instance, there are already a few loose organizations of lay people who live in the world a celibate lifestyle; they have a socially and personally acceptable religious motivation, although they may be, in fact, more or less psychologically conditioned to this type of life.)

In our case, the psychologist tries to promote the good of his client by not pushing him into a state of unbearable psychological distress. At the same time, the psychologist is also trying to promote the common good; leaving religious life will mean a lesser harm to the common good. In order to achieve this double objective, he reports to the spiritual advisor.

Clearly enough, there are many variables here, and it is impossible to come to any clear rule. Any psychological condition is *sui generis* and calls for a prudent judgment. This is why we believe that it is so important to have a good knowledge of the case, to have a well-trained and emotionally balanced psychologist who is also well aware of theological and moral dimensions. The degree of involvement of the vocationer in his vocation is also another factor to be constantly kept in mind; there is a difference between a candidate who is under observation, a novice, a religious with temporary vows, and a priest or religious with perpetual commitment.

As a matter of principle, however, it must be said that the psychologist who gives this type of psychological examination should try to settle the questions mostly between himself and his client, in order to protect confidentiality.

#### Case 4

A religious superior has problems with a religious of professed vows. The superior wants to ask him to consider leaving the community, because he seems to have no vocation. The superior, however, is not absolutely sure that the subject has no vocation and consequently dares not put too much pressure on the subject. The superior decides to consult a psychologist, and presents the case in all the details. The psychologist, however, in order to make a sound judgment, needs to know many other details unknown to the superior (and partially unknown to the subject himself). The superior then suggests that the subject be sent for a thorough psychological examination. The superior knows that the subject cannot be forced to take such an examination, but feels confident that the subject is likely to accept the proposition, because he himself is desirous of coming to a better knowledge of his problems. Could the superior ask the psychologist to submit a report after having done the psychological examination of the subject?

In such a case, it would be better for the psychologist to tell the superior that the religious will be welcomed if he wants to come for testing, but that there will be absolute confidentiality, since this type of testing and interviews probe into very private matters. The psychologist would make no report to the superior, but would try his best to help the person. The psychologist would also tell the religious that his superior expressed concern, and he would stress the aspect of confidentiality, in order to ensure mutual trust between the religious and the psychologist.

This attitude is dictated by the legitimate right to privacy, and also by the fact that in many cases there is no trusting relationship between the superior and the religious in difficulty. The psychologist wants to eliminate, as much as possible, obstacles to communication between his client and himself.

Another important consideration of the psychologist is that he needs to protect the credibility of his profession; the more he is known to keep secrets, the more he can practice effectively his profession.

After having done the tests and interviews, and coming to an agreement with his client on the nature of the problems, the psychologist might suggest that his client talk to his superior, or the client himself could ask the psychologist to see the superior. Of course there would then be no problem.

At times pressure may be quite strong on the part of superiors to get information from the psychologist. He should resist, unless he is clearly dealing with a case of psychosis, which falls into a totally different category. According to Canon Law (No. 530) religious superiors are strictly forbidden *in any way* to induce their subjects to manifest their consciences.

### Case 5

A sister is applying to join an eight-month renewal program in a pastoral institute. A psychological center sends her by mail a biographical questionnaire and a series of tests, some of them projective tests. She is told that these are essential requirements for admission and that they are personality tests, which might reveal some subconscious aspects of personality. The tests are mailed back to the psychological center, where a psychologist analyzes the tests and writes a 15-line description of the personality, together with his judgment about this sister being adapted or not to reaching the goals of the Pastoral Institute. The personality description and the psychologist's opinion are then forwarded to the three-member screening committee of the Institute. The reports are strictly confidential.

Although the prospective participant in the Institute has implicitly permitted such use of the information, it is most probable that she would be extremely surprised and even shocked if she would come across the report written about her by the psychologist. It is not that the report is untrue, but it deals with dimensions of her personality which are usually carefully hidden or simply repressed, precisely because they are socially taboo and apt to arouse anxiety. Has this sister been fooled?

It must be said that such psychological reports are usually more "pessimistic" about human nature than most laymen wish to admit. Almost invariably, to read such a report about oneself is a blow to self-esteem. Those who write and use these reports have seen a lot of them and do not get upset by just one more. The reports have to be understood in a context, which would absolutely not be the case if the sister would happen to read such a report written about herself. We can recall here our distinction between "information" and "communication" and the need for a pedagogical revelation of the truth.

Consequently we are inclined to say that such a procedure is morally acceptable, under the condition that there is strict confidentiality in the use of the information, and that the information is used only for what it is meant, that is, screening of candidates. After screening has been completed, the information should be destroyed, or (for research purposes) coded in such a way that it becomes impossible for anyone to ever find the exact identity of the subjects.

Concretely, the sister may be excluded from the program because she appears to have an anti-social personality and paranoid tendencies, although she has expressed in the self-report some nice ideas about community life. The screening committee feels that she will be a trouble-maker, endeavoring not so much to renew herself spiritually as to affirm herself by trying to set the student body against the faculty. These dynamics work unconsciously in her and she feels perfectly correct in her attitudes. She would certainly need help, but the community-oriented renewal program is not the best way to help her; she will only be able to become a nuisance to the group. Consequently, she is excluded, and she is not told the exact reason, because she would not be able to understand it. Other subjects, also with negative reports, may be accepted, because there is hope that they will learn from the experience and they will contribute to community life.

It would have been possible to present other cases in the field of religious life and psychological examinations. The five cases briefly analyzed here show the complexity of the matter and have helped us present certain moral principles which must guide our reasoning in this area. We are conscious that professional activity in the field of depth psychology may be extremely dangerous if there is not a climate of basic trust and if there is a desire to manipulate human persons.

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