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Catholic Physicians' Guilds

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HIS HOLINESS POPE PIUS XII'S DISCOURSE  
to  
DELEGATES ATTENDING THE FIFTH CONGRESS  
of  
PSYCHOTHERAPY AND CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY

APRIL 13, 1953

WE GREET YOU, dear sons and daughters, who have come from all parts and are gathered together in Rome to listen to learned conferences, and discuss questions of psychotherapy and clinical psychology. Your Congress has ended, and, in order to guarantee its fruitfulness and the success of your research and future work, you have come to receive the blessing of the Vicar of Christ. Very gladly We accede to your wish. We avail Ourselves of this occasion to address to you a word of encouragement and to give you some advice.

Science declares 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 to see how they can be used. People speak of dynamisms, determinisms and mechanisms hidden in the depths of the soul, endowed with immanent laws, whence are derived certain ways of acting. Undoubtedly these begin to operate within the subconscious or the unconscious, but they also find their way into the realms of the conscious and determine it. People claim to have devised methods that have been tried and recognized as being able to sound the mystery of the depths of the soul, to throw light on them, and put them back on the right road when their influence is harmful.

In these questions, which are within the province of scientific psychology, you are competent. The same may be said of the use of new psychic methods. However, 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 moral obligation of ethics.

Last year, in the month of September (13th September, 1952—*Acta Apost. Sedis*, A. XLIV, 1952, pp. 779 et seq.), to meet the wishes of members of the "First International Congress of Histopathology of the Nervous System," We traced the moral limits of medical methods of research and treatment. On the basis of that explanation, We would like to-day to

add something by way of complement. We would briefly outline the fundamental attitude which must be adopted by the Christian psychologist and psychotherapist.

This fundamental attitude can be summed up in the following formula: Psychotherapy and clinical psychology must always consider man:

- (1) As one psychic whole;
- (2) As one single, complete structure;
- (3) As one social entity;
- (4) As one transcendent whole, that is to say, as a human being moving naturally Godward.

### I. MAN AS ONE COMPLETE PSYCHIC WHOLE

Medicine has learned to look upon the human body as a mechanism of great precision, whose parts fit into each other. The place and the characteristics of these parts are dependent on the whole, they serve its existence and its functions. This, however, is all the more true of 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 are at the service of its final purpose.

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 purpose of the whole man. What constitutes man is principally the soul, the substantial form of his nature. From it, ultimately, flows all the life activity of man; in it are rooted all the psychic forces, 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. Given this ontological and psychological fact, it follows that it would be quite unrea-sonable 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 what is at the centre, namely, 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.

It is not possible, therefore, when studying the relationship of the ego to the dynamisms that compose it, to admit unreservedly in theory the autonomy of man, that is, of his soul, and then go on immediately to state that in the reality of life this theoretical principle appears to be very often set aside, or held of the smallest account. In real life, it is argued, man always retains 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 the force of instinct. That is not the way in which God fashioned man. 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, make known 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 SINGLE STRUCTURE

Man is an ordered unit, one whole, a microcosm, after the fashion of a State whose charter, determined by the end of the whole, subordinates to this end the activity of the parts in the right order of their value and function. This charter is, in the final reckoning, of an ontological and metaphysical origin, not a psychological and personal one. There are those who have thought it necessary to stress the opposition between the metaphysical and the psychological. What a mistaken approach! The psychic itself belongs to the domain of the ontological and metaphysical.

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, an effort has been made to establish the contradiction between traditional psychology and ethics, and modern psychotherapy and clinical psychology. Traditional psychology and ethics, they say, have for their object man's being in the abstract, "*homo ut sic*," who, in fact, nowhere exists. The clarity and logical connection of those sciences, they add, calls for admiration, but they suffer from a basic fault: they cannot be applied to the real man as he exists. Clinical psychology, on the contrary, deals with real man—with "*homo ut hic*." And the conclusion is: between the two conceptions there opens an abyss which cannot be crossed unless psychology and ethics change their position.

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 influence of his milieu, education, his personal development, his inner experi-

ences and other circumstances have made him. It is only man in the concrete that exists. 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 is one and the same in his inner structure as "essential" man. The essential structure of man does not disappear when individual qualities are added to it; it is not further transformed into another human nature. Now 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.

Consequently, it would be erroneous to establish for real life standards which would move away 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

What We have said up to now concerns man in his personal life. The physical 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, with the idea also of making it serviceable for the purposes of clinical psychology and of psychotherapy. However, one should take good care in this matter to make an exact distinction between the facts in themselves and their interpretation.

Social psychism touches also morality, and the principles of morality affect, to a large extent, those of serious psychology and psychotherapy. Now 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 dwell.

*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 conscience and of the soul. One should be slow to

lower man, in the concrete, along with his personal character, to the level of the brute.

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.

A word also on the method sometimes employed by the psychologist to set the "ego" free from 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 obscure. Is there not therein a harmful exaggeration of the value of knowledge in these matters? There is, however, an effective sexual education which, quite safely, teaches calmly and objectively what the young person should know, for his own personal conduct and his relationship with those with whom he is brought into contact. For the rest, special stress will be laid, in sexual education, as indeed, 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, 21st March, 1931 — *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, a. XXIII, 1931, p. 118). These norms have not been rescinded, either expressly or "*via facti*."

What has just been said of ill-considered initiation, for therapeutic purposes, is true also of 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, like all other inhibitions of the same origin, can be suppressed only by its being brought to the level of consciousness, is not valid if it is stated baldly and without qualification. Indirect treatment is also effective, and often is quite enough. As to the use of the psychoanalytic method in the sexual domain, Our allocution of 13th September, already quoted, has already pointed out its moral limits. Truth to tell, one cannot consider as lawful, without further explanation, the bringing to the level of consciousness of all, the imaginations, emotions and sexual experiences which lie dormant in the memory and the unconscious, and which are thus psychically experienced. If protests arising from a sense of human and Christian dignity are heeded, who would dare to claim that this manner of treatment does not imply both present and future moral danger, since, even though the therapeutic necessity of unlimited exploration be asserted, its necessity has not been established.

Then there is *Error by Excess*.—This consists in emphasizing the need

to make total surrender of the "ego," and of its personal assertiveness. With regard to this, We would consider two points: a general principle, and a point of therapeutic practice.

Beginning with certain psychological explanations, the thesis is formulated that the unconditioned extroversion of the ego is the fundamental law of congenital altruism and of its dynamic tendencies. This is a logical, psychological, and ethical error. There exists in fact a defence, an esteem, a love and a service of one's personal self, which is not only justified but demanded by psychology and morality. Nature makes this plain, and it is also a lesson of the Christian faith (cf. St. Thomas S. Th., 2a, 2ae p., q. 2, art. 4, in c.)! Our Lord taught: "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself" (Mark xii, 31). Christ, then, proposes as the rule of love of neighbour, 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, a return to a former state of development, under the pretext that it is contrary to the natural altruism of the psychic being.

The point about psychotherapeutic practice that We mentioned, has to do with an essential interest of the community, namely: the safe-guarding of secrets which the use of psychoanalysis places in jeopardy. It is not at all denied that a fact or knowledge which is secret, and repressed in the subconscious, may provoke serious psychic conflicts. If psychoanalysis discloses the cause of this trouble, it will want, following its principle, to draw out this unconscious element completely, and make it conscious, in order to remove the obstacle. Now there are secrets which must on no account be broken, even to a doctor, even in spite of grave personal inconveniences. The secret of Confession may never be revealed. It is equally forbidden to make known the professional secret to another, even to a doctor. The same is true of other secrets. One may invoke the principle: "for a proportionately grave reason it is lawful 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.

From the moral standpoint, and first and foremost for the common good, the principle of discretion in the use of psychoanalysis cannot be sufficiently stressed. 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

This latter aspect of man raises three questions which We would not wish to overlook.

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 that lies beyond him, by not making him know it, but because of an upward gravitation that comes directly from the very depths of his being. This dynamism is regarded as an independent force, and, in fact, the most fundamental and the most elementary force of the soul, an affective impulse carrying man immediately to the divine; just as when a flower unfolds to light and sunshine without knowing it, or as when a child breathes unconsciously as soon as it is born.

Of this assertion We would say, forthwith, that if it be stated that this dynamism is at the root of all religions, and manifests the element common to all, We know, on the contrary, that religion, 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 teaching 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*," of Our Predecessor, Blessed Pius X.

Having laid down this principle, the question of this mysterious dynamism still remains. On this subject one might make the following remarks. We should certainly not find fault with deep psychology, if it deals with the psychic aspect of religious phenomena, and endeavors to analyse and reduce it to a scientific system, even if this research is new and if its terminology was not in use in times past. We mention this point, because misunderstandings can easily arise, when psychology attributes new meanings to terms already accepted. Prudence and reserve are needed on both sides in order to avoid false interpretations, and to make it possible to reach a reciprocal understanding.

It belongs to the technique of your science to clarify the questions of the existence, the structure, and the mode of action of this dynamism. If the 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*" also implies an "*esse ad alium*,"\* 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 a help, and what an invaluable help, this would be for the search after God and the affirmation of His existence!

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

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—an not infrequently—an irrational and even morbid sense of guilt. Yet a person may also be aware of a real fault which has not been wiped away. 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. In any case, it is certain that a purely psychological treatment will cure a genuine sense of guilt. Even if psychotherapists, perhaps even in good faith, question its existence, it still abides. Even if the sense of guilt be eliminated by medical intervention, auto-suggestion, or outside persuasion, the fault remains, and psychotherapy would deceive both itself and others if, in order to do away with the sense of guilt, it pretended that the fault no longer exists.

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.

A final remark on the transcendent leaning 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 purpose 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 not to be discounted.

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. Yet 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 counsel would also be wrong 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.

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So much We feel obliged to say to you. Furthermore, be assured that the Church follows your research and your medical practice with warm interest and best wishes. You work on a terrain that is very difficult. Your activity, however, 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. May Providence and divine grace light your path! In pledge thereof We impart to you with fatherly good will Our Apostolic Blessing.

\* i.e., being "from another" implies being "for another," or moving "towards another" [Ed.].

The above is a translation taken from *Catholic Documents*, XII. *Catholic Documents* is a publication containing recent pronouncements and decisions of the Holy Father. The translations are usually excellent, and the publication is of immense value. It can be obtained from the Salesian Press, Surrey Lane, Battersea, S. W. 11 for a nominal price.