Mental Health as Viewed by Medics and Mystics

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I·acts but are not. Distortion is a danger. The priesthood rather than the inherent dynamics has fits into the category of the average individual who has felt the compulsion to change his way of life? In some instances there is whether he stays or not. In a few, an a driving need to leave religious life. Others it is wrong or bad or unusual but for a special condition. These conditions are not necessarily necessary for statistically preliminary study. The follow up, exchange of findings by all concerned, as well as the development of a special study team. An important need is for an agency, sponsored by the church, that will aid in the adjustment of the priest after he has left and also arrange for psychotherapy, should that be the need. This would help prevent misleading publicity and even help anyone to return, should he feel leaving was a mistake. My experience suggests some would return if other would help. This does not mean compromise on sound principles but generally if the words are used with compassion, a bridge of communication can be initiated.

It is because of all these factors that each superior, whatever his title must take pains to keep a good rapport with the individual, oil before and after. A ready and willing ear is necessary, the willing ear being in the form of a superior or a designated individual or a professional made available at all times. In this way it is possible to limit unhappy situations.

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This report can only be considered a preliminary study. The follow-up necessary for statistically significant reports must depend on a comprehensive study, based on continuing follow-ups, exchange of findings by all concerned, as well as the development of a special study team. An important need is for an agency, sponsored by the church, that will aid in the adjustment of the priest after he has left and also arrange for psychotherapy, should that be the need. This would help prevent misleading publicity and even help anyone to return, should he feel leaving was a mistake. My experience suggests some would return if other would help. This does not mean compromise on sound principles but generally if the words are used with compassion, a bridge of communication can be initiated.

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Vincent V. Herr

In taking up this difficult question, we must first define our terms very exactly. We do this in the interest of clarity in spite of the fact that many readers will take issue with our definitions.

In discussing the meaning of mental health, as opposed to mental illness, much heated argument has occurred. This seems somehow to be related to the general debate medical men have
carried on down the ages regarding the precise nature of disease. Historically, disease has been thought to be anything from an obsession or a possession by a demon, to a germ or bacterially initiated decay process. Much of this debate might well have been avoided, had the persons concerned agreed on the fundamental concepts of the nature of life.

For the present writer, life means organization from within of variously complex and self-sustaining processes. It involves of necessity a continuously self-perfecting activity, in order that the living being may be able to restore itself when its existence is threatened from outside, as well as to repair itself when subjected to the ordinary and extraordinary stress of daily living.

With this essentially vitalistic concept of life in mind we have described health in general as the state in which a living organism is functioning properly at all levels of its existence. It has the various systems and part processes harmoniously geared toward each other so that it can sustain itself in its normal environment, exercise its functions of growing and maturing; in a word, living beings serve one another by their contributions, and man, who himself shares life with all of them, makes use of them in whatever way he chooses in order to further his own ends. Man alone is master of his environment, both the living and non-living elements of the same.

With this non-mechanistic concept of life in mind it will not be too difficult to get a clear notion of what...
Men of the mental health sciences. Experts in mental health, from five of the largest states in the Union, agree that one habit system, in striving the effect of any system functioning in the manner that is expected, for those species of life which have minds. They not only achieve their individual goals — the sense power responds to its proper objects, etc.; they also contribute to the well-being of the whole. Digestive organs prepare the food for assimilation, whereas psychiatrists often approach the problem without need for divine authority and this may be the reason for the poor communication between the two professions.

By means of countless prayers and self-denials, mystics have reached a state called heroic virtue. They have carried the process of self-perfection to such an extent that they can be designated as mystics. Our aim here will be to show that, in spite of almost unbelievable amounts of self-inflicted penance and prayer, the mystics are still living healthy, normal human lives from the mental health point of view. In other words, they are relatively free from conflicts; they are characters which often go forth into the world and carry civilization to the farthest and most deserted places; they sometimes receive the special favors from God which single them out as living totally and continually in the presence of God, and in communion with Him.

One may go on now to state with precision and clarity that mental health means that those activities and functions, when up to the social norm, in a way that benefits the group as a whole. Digestive organs prepare the food for assimilation, whereas psychiatrists often approach the problem without need for divine authority and this may be the reason for the poor communication between the two professions.

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When it is stated that the supernatural is very true sense, every grace, actual as needed possible religious person, for they are the prayerful activity of the one who and the like. These are far from the daily experiences of the ordinary religious. To summarize, when God is known, loved and invoked through the medium of images, concepts and the many other conscious concomitants of religious experiences, there is the action known as ordinary prayer or asceticism. But when God is known and loved in addition, by some direct psychic process, by an immediate realization of the Divine, then this is mystical experience; there is a difference in intensity between the two processes, but there is also a difference in the quality of the experience which is felt in consciousness, but more of this later.

A thorough perusal of the literature of mystical theology has not resulted in our finding of a very frequent use of the word "peace" by the mystics when they are attempting to describe their own experiences. This might be a reason why medical men take the stance that they do. There seems to be a reason for this omission. It cannot without further study be taken to mean that the mystics are not at peace. It would seem that the researchers, who have catalogued their experiences, have gleaned mostly from the aspects of mystical life which seem "suffering"; this may have been due to the fact that the "dark night of the soul" or the "mastery of the senses" seems to the writers to be the most significant departure, on the part of the mystics, from the normal everyday way of living of Christian ascetics. As we go along it will be apparent, however, that when the writers do come to that phase of mystical growth and development called mystical union, they at least implicitly attribute to the "sufferers" a kind of "peace" that is beyond human and even medical understanding. Actually, in all the books which were consulted, and that were written in English about the mystics, the word "peace" is not even listed in the index of titles.

Since mystics are moved and carried along by divine inspiration, and are experiencing things which no other normal human being could experience by his own power, perhaps they can never be able to report such experiences in terms which the normal, ordinary individual could understand. Altmann (1962) is an authority who holds that even if one could secure the first-hand empirical evidences descriptive of thoughts and motives possessed by the mystics during their unusual mystical experiences, one could not be allowed to use such evidence in the same manner in which he might use introspective reports of other individuals. This point will be hard to grasp by the medical man, usually a rigid unbeliever in the possibility of such phenomena from the very start of the investigation. By definition, in the terminology which is being followed here, mystical experience is a supernatural gift from on high, an activity of the human soul brought about by a mystical, the word "peace" is not even listed in the index of titles.

The case for the mystic is similar but radically different: he knows God directly and without the mediation of creatures nor of sensations, images, and phantasms. God is vividly present to him by a single act, not by a series of reasoning processes. God is known as He is in Himself, not by way of negation of limitations. He is not compared to creatures and then seen to be superior. He is at once present to the intellect and the will of the mystic. This means that he felt, loved, and known in one and the same act. This is as close to a description of the mental process of the mystic as one can get, by comparing the notes of one mystic with those of another, and by comparing both with the reports of other normal non-mystical experiences of human beings.

but still they are such as can be described by a simple appeal to the "eight beatitudes" of Christ, those famous ideals of human perfection given us by the divine master. As examples one might mention a St. Francis of Assissi, a Catherine of Sienna, or St. John Vianney or finally the as yet uncanonicalized Saint of the Sahara Desert. But each reader will probably have his own "favorite" model, and it cannot be doubted that all such are blessed and at peace, with the world as well as with themselves; they suffer, weep, hunger for justice; they are poor in spirit, pure, merciful, meek, and try to make peace.

After confession the Catholic believes his sins are forgiven; he fulfills the token-penance imposed, believes that, however great his sins, he is restored to the friendship of God, provided of course his intentions are sincere to do his best to avoid dangers of serious sin in the future. By communion he gains additional strength to continue his efforts, to practice all the Christian virtues, as far as is possible for him with the aid of God's grace, which he constantly implores.

Mystical experience refers to contemplation, visions, raptures, ecstasies and the like. These are far from the daily experiences of the ordinary religious person, for they are the result of special gifts and aids, coming directly from God to his creatures - they are not the mere resultant of intense prayerful activity of the one who prays or strives for perfection. In a very true sense, every grace, actual as well as sanctifying, is a gift of God. When it is stated that the supernatural life of the soul is a gift, it is surely implied that the mystical experiences of certain persons are special gifts, not needed for gaining heaven, not possible to be merited in any true sense of the word. Ecstasy is a mystical experience, and it is the main one discussed by the writers on the subject; and it is the experience most often ridiculed and belittled by scientists hostile to religion. They claim it is nothing else than an abnormal psychological phenomenon that indicates neuroses or even psychoses, obsessions and the like on the part of the possessor. To summarize, when God is known, loved and invoked through the medium of images, concepts and the many other conscious concomitants of religious experiences, there is the action known as ordinary prayer or asceticism. But when God is known and loved in addition, by some direct psychic process, by an immediate realization of the Divine, then this is mystical experience; there is a difference in intensity between the two processes, but there is also a difference in the quality of the experience which is felt in consciousness, but more of this later.

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This seems like a terrible contradiction—God could reveal Himself to creatures while they are still in the state of probation,—but in vias ad, that is, in preparation for salvation—as theologians are wont to say. Rather than a priori saying such a thing is impossible, we should give the mystic a chance to try at least, to express what he is feeling when he thinks and talks about God. The nearest we can come clearly and truthfully to tell ourselves what their peculiar experiences actually are, is to say that God is almost present to them on earth in the same way that He will be present to them after this earthly existence is over. Such being the case, the manner in which they experience God and experiencing the description which mystics give of supernatural realities is precisely the thing which distinguishes them from "normals".

If this difference in the manner of experiencing God characterizes the mystic, then it seems to follow that the description which mystics give of their "elevated" experiences would seem to need careful and critical interpretation, before it is repeated in language that can be understood only in a limited way by non-mystics. Normal language is only SYMBOLIC and never UNIVOCAL, and capable of identifying an object immediately. It involves abstractions and comparison, generalization and interpretation. God's word to mystics does not require any of these things.

We stress these points in order to answer the charge sometimes made against writers like John of the Cross, Theresa of Avila, that their language is ambiguous, unclear, unintelligible, and an expression of pure fancy, etc. . . . Their biographers seem to speak of a strange and impossible language in which the rules of logic seem inapplicable. Those who read Freudian literature, and find that normals too, when subject to pressure from the unconscious, speak a word and foreign sort of language, unintelligible to the persons themselves when it comes to consciousness, will get a glimpse of what we mean. The language of the normal human unconscious is full of the rarest forms of symbolism. Even after years of analysis and interpretation the meaning is not always certainly clear to the one being psychoanalyzed. The mystic, in speaking of his supernatural experiences, describes fully conscious states, and facts of experience in terms unintelligible to other normal human beings. Instead of calling him abnormal, it would seem to be more proper to designate him as supernational. His words and sentences express reality immediately and directly, whereas those of us normals may possibly express it firstly symbolically by one form of sign, then subconsciously by another form of a supposedly unconscious erotic and repressed symbolism. Readers who would like a further treatment of this important topic from the Catholic point of view will do well to read D'Albiez (1941) who is a practicing psychiatrist with thorough training in his own religious as well as in the various theories of modern psychoanalysis.

**THE MYSTICAL EXPERIENCES THEMSELVES**

We shall preface the description with a kind of guide-line or first principle: mystics express themselves oddly, by strange symbols, and were they to describe experiences shared in common with us, we would certainly believe them. If we believe them as to the FACT that they are having an unusual experience, it seems illogical to deny the content of their descriptions of these experiences. That is to say, they are generally quite sure whether or not they are having or feeling the immediate contact with God. If we trust them as to the fact, we must also rightly trust them as to the manner of the factual experience.

Let us now hear from the mystics themselves. St. John of the Cross:

"For if the will can in any way comprehend God and be united with Him, it cannot be through any capacity of the desire, but only by love; and as all delight, sweetness and joy, of which the will is sensible, is not love, it follows that none of these pleasing impressions can be the adequate means of uniting the will to God; the means are an act of the will, And because an act of the will is united with God, and rests in Him; that act is love. This union is never wrought by feeling, or exertions of the desire, for these remain in the soul as aims and ends.


This one text shows the difficult language used by the mystics. Let us hear Theresa:

"O my daughters! Their value (the mystical experiences) cannot be overrated, for though the recipient is incapable of describing them, they are deeply imprinted in the center of the soul and are never forgotten... I too do not understand this, but I know that certain truths of the greatness of God remain so impressed on the spirit by this favor, that, did not faith teach us that He is God, it would henceforth worship Him as such, as Jacob did when he saw the ladder.

St. Theresa, Interior Castle, Mansion VI, Chapter IV, paragraph 6, quoted by Howley.

This text is particularly pertinent in that is shows how the reader, not prepared for the ineffable mode of expression of the mystics, could hardly gather that this sufferer, passing from the third purgation into the state of Union with God, would be at the pinnacle of peaceful experiences. Some writers say that in order to understand the quotation better it would be well to remember that the union involves a total annihilation of the self, and a new creation of the human person now totally immersed in the Divine; he lives, now not by himself but God lives in him, with a new celestial life, experienced almost first hand as it were.

J. Marechal (1927), a learned writer on mystical phenomena, gives us the following quotation in his Studies in the Psychology of the Mystics, Page 34.

...let us interrogate the subject (mystic) on his spontaneous convictions. In so far as he lives an interior life of medium intensity he will tell us of his conviction of a constant compenetration of his action by the Divine action: this persuasion constitutes the greater part of his confidence in his moral future and in his firmness of conduct; when he prays he does not doubt, in practice that God answers his prayer by the gift of more peace, light, and courage; when he acts, when he struggles to maintain his moral ideal, he believes himself to be leaning on a powerful arm which sustains him...
humbler phenomena of which we are here thinking are the direct and normal manifestations of sincere religious feeling... SERENITY and force under trials: the specifically Christian humility of mind and heart.

The ordinary Christian has probably learned at a fairly early age to live the mystery and apparent contradiction of the Gospel, when it tells him that the precept is not restricted to followers of the Christian denomination either; universally valid principles of humanity, fortitude, and patience which describe peace as the absence of disabling conflict is not won without a continual brave enduring, a long-suffering, the not meaning of Patience.

Turning from the great psycholotic of our time to a few of the modern mystics, let us write a line or two from each. In all of them we shall see a great and burning desire to abandon self in the service of God and humanity. I end with the scientist-ascetic and mystic Teilhard de Chardin:

May the Lord only preserve in me burning love for the world and great gentleness; and may he help me persevere to the end in the fullness of humanity!

The English poet Gerard Manley Hopkins speaks in language which savors of mysticism, as William James thought the psychologist, could not fail to notice. We quote in part:

When you ever, Peace, wild world, do dive, thy wings that. Your round roaming soul, and in such boughs? When, when, when, will you Peace? I'll not play hypocrite to own my heart: I yield. You do come sometimes; but That piecemeal peace is poor peace. What pure peace allows Alarms of wars, the daunting ways, the death of it? O surely, rising Peace, my Lord should leave in love. Some good! And so he does leave patience exquisite, That phumes to Peace thereafter. And when Peace does come, she comes with work to do, he does not come to coo. Peace comes to brood and sit.

In conclusion one must not overlook that elegant lover saint of the people of the seraphic Saint Francis of Assisi with those memorable words:

Lord, make him (the priest) an instrument of peace. Where there is hatred, let him sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy.

It will be relevant here to quote one of our most renowned non-Catholic writers also on this question of mysticism, William James in his Varieties of Religious Experience (1902) p. 225, describes peace as "Equanimity, Resignation, Fortitude, and Patience which it brings." Then he quotes that remarkable English poet, himself no stranger to spiritual struggles, Gerard Manley Hopkins, as coming close to the same idea in his sonnet, Peace, in the last quatrain of which the poet says: "The Lord leaves patience in lieu of Peace, and patience 'plumes to Peace thereafter.' And when Peace does come, she comes with work to do, she does not come to coo."

So Patience is still present, along with Fortitude and Resignation, as James says in a vein very similar to that of the great Thomas Aquinas in speaking of the same subject. One really must read Hopkins' sonnet for the thrill of the Muse.

The point of all this is that peace, the absence of disabling conflict is not

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no one seek to attain such experience by his own efforts. Such experiences could be harmful, especially if one is not adequately prepared for them.

**PATHOLOGY AND THE VIRTUES**

We have felt the need of this last section to round out the notions concerning the relationship between religion as practiced by Catholics and mental health. A few of the notions used here may appear rather technical to the lay reader but this is because of the manner of speech which characterizes the theologian, even in modern time. We shall try as we go along to bring the terms somewhat up to date, but all the same, we shall probably find that there is no really adequate set of words or phrases which bring out the meaning of such concepts as virtue, potency, habit in a manner intelligible to the majority of English-speaking persons.

Much pathological behavior comes from spiritual unrest, and this in turn is comparable to sadness, the opposite of happiness or peace in human experience. Sadness may follow from hopes or ideals doomed to disappointment. Where there is no proper balance between humility and self-confidence, there is not likely to be enough of self-acceptance.

Psychotherapy aims at realizing character through what might be called the essentially human virtues, and these are nothing more than dynamic habit patterns, inculcated in the human powers, especially those known by philosophers as the rational, the intellectual and rational will or appetites. Thus psychotherapy has much in common with religious education. Virtues are by definition enduring expressions of reason, in and through the other powers of man. Misgivings about notions of virtue, such as that of Puritanism and Victorianism, lead to abnormal behavior. This idea can be found in Terruwe (1958) who is a fully trained practicing psychiatrist.

Virtue consists in sublimating, that is to say, transforming other energies, not merely in expressing the lower through the higher forms. It consists in the higher powers taking up and changing most radically the energy from the lower, and thus giving it a new form and determination. This new form implies a new direction and proportion to a higher end or goal. Virtue makes one's lower nature share more fully in the nature of reason.

For example, the virtue of continence or chastity keeps the sexual passions in restraint and moderation. If passions were to be compared to wild animals, as St. Paul sometimes seems to do, one would say that they might become wilder and more ferocious, when they are looked up or restrained. But if passions are normal human emotions and can be conditioned, trained and guided, then they can become powerful tools for achievement, through the reinforcement of healthy habit patterns. After all, passions, in the strictest sense of the term, are nothing more than powerful and persistent emotions.

In the process of acquiring virtues, both moral and theological, all the higher powers of man are channelled into courses of action which lead to the actuation of the self and its fulfillment. And this means the whole self, with all its powers. Man's spiritual life, that is supernatural life has often been compared to his natural life with powers or functions on every level of complexity, from the simplest vegetative growth processes to the highest inductive-deductive intellectual creative processes. Through divine aids and graces this whole set of powers will be transformed into a kind of divine life, even before one passes to the eternal life that is to come after death. One participates in this divine life both in this and in the next life, in proportion to the degree to which he chooses to cooperate with God's plan for him on earth. Notice we say that God chooses to help in accordance with man's cooperation, but this does not mean that man merits this help in any real sense; it is a free gift of the Almighty just as it is freely accepted by the decisive acts of men.

The virtues are conferred by sanctifying grace and aid man in all his strivings and they are called infused, which means supplied gratuitously by God. Other virtues acquired more directly for specific occasions in the life of man, the so-called moral virtues regulate his dealings with one another and life situations. These latter are called prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance. The former are those which deal mostly with man's relation to God, and they are faith, hope and charity, the theological virtues. But even the roots of the moral virtues are laid down through the aid of God, and are therefore infused.

Nevertheless, in spite of a certain passivity which might be implied in the word "infused" the teaching of the church from time immemorial has been that human efforts and decisions count largely in the plan which divine providence has for each one of us. It is by diligently trying to follow this divine plan (shown in his laws and counsels) that each person perfects his whole self, acts in as many as possible of his potentialities, in any one time and place. The relative efficacy of the human efforts compared to that of divine intervention has been the subject of much discussion between theologians from the earliest days of Christianity. They still are— but we now choose to call them Dialogues.
During the process of growth in virtue, man perfects and fulfills himself in a way unique to himself, but virtue, from the angle of the Christian commitment, is really the incarnation of the spirit of Jesus Christ, who assumed into his human nature which became the instrument of expression of his divine personality and will. By means of virtues, which really are facilitators or activators of good deeds, we gain a relish and thirst for spiritual things, a nature which became the personality and will. By means of knowingly of course, since with which the virtuous will of man shares itself with sensory appetites, activators of good deeds, we gain acquisition and accomplishment, as is Saints and apostles of God. Virtues mechanisms of behavior have no real voluntariness about them. By deliberately practicing, bringing the passions under control of reason and volition is the connection between virtue and the heatlhy self-confidence and cheerfulness of the truly practicing Christian.

Now to connect the notions of virtue with those of the appetites or instincts. The virtue of hope is a modification of the appetitive apprehensions, in the same way that love is a modification of desire, and joy is that of striving to accomplish. During life human beings need something to love (some one); also some assurance of gaining it; otherwise they succumb to torpor and depression. Persistent deep anxiety may be an intermediate state which it can be handled in a sick person the therapist can show him a way not to succumb to negative or help from us; our salvation IS HIS EXTERNAL GLORY. His plan is what we and He and they all want. This is what life means to the Deist and Christian.

The higher mystical experiences are different from our own, by means of God's special favors. Think of St. John of the Cross or of St. Theresa of Avila. Their experiences are upward and forward looking, and fulfilling the basic needs of human nature, giving satisfaction to human striving. The experiences of sick persons, while possible means to desirable ends, are in themselves emaciating, damaging, deteriorating, even death-dealing at times. May it be said in conclusion that God gives us saints who in every era are living examples of how people ought to live. The doctrine of the Little Flower might be summarized in the two ideas of confidence and surrender. In our own case we need the former in these disturbing times, to help get rid of or to diminish the anxiety of living. We need the latter since it implies a realization of the meaning of life than which there is no higher — a devotion to a cause and the dedication of self thereto, a worthy cause, that of self-annihilation and self-abdication in pursuit of a worthwhile and true lifetime goal.

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