

# Psychotherapy and Catholic Confession

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The problem of easing human anguish and guilt most often falls upon two categories of individuals—psychotherapists and the clergy. As the problems present themselves in increasing proportion and complexity, both psychotherapists and clergymen are forced to examine their calling a little more closely. How does the role of the psychotherapist differ, for example, from that of the priest hearing confession in terms of guiding the individual who comes to him with a pressing problem that has instilled much guilt? Carl Jung was perhaps among the first to examine critically the suppositions of Catholic confession and psychotherapy. His article, "Psychotherapy and the Clergy,"<sup>1</sup> represented a composite of positive values of both disciplines. He concludes that:

1) The Catholic Church possesses a rich instrument (in the form of confession) that can be utilized as a ready-made pastoral technique.

2) The Catholic form of penance serves as a source for immediate release of tension, however temporary.

3) The Catholic Church is rich in symbolism that appeals to the unconscious mind and thereby makes it more accessible.

4) Psychotherapy involves no direct condemnation for any "bad behavior."

5) Psychotherapy is more objective and easier to handle because of its comparative simplicity and lack of ritualism.

6) Psychotherapy can speak to almost every person on some level or other (in contrast to confession, which, as an activity, actually speaks to a few willing people).

There remains, however, the problem as to how the two disciplines are truly comparable in terms of contributing to one another. Psychotherapists struggle under the light of recent research that reveals that many of their clients could have progressed effectively without their therapists. In a similar light, the priests struggle under the laymen's constant demands for the church to help them find meaning in life.

Bringing together the potentialities of psychotherapy and confession to

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produce a possibly more dynamic approach seems to be an insurmountable problem. An even more critical problem is the necessary understanding of those Catholics who choose to use both methods—for it requires that the psychotherapist have full knowledge of the Catholic history out of which the client speaks, and that the priest have sufficient knowledge of the therapeutic process so that he may guide the client toward the “wholeness” that both Christianity and psychotherapy strive to achieve.

The basic questions to be asked are: 1) What are confession and psychotherapy? 2) How is confession comparable to psychotherapy? 3) Can the two be resolved into one, more efficient, method?

### *Definitions of psychotherapy and confession*

Confession is said to be “the accusation that a man makes of his own sins to a priest, with a view to necessary absolution.”<sup>2</sup> Confession, or more correctly, the sacrament of penance, is sought when man has made an offence against God, or, in other words, when he has denied love of God. Confession is then seen as a necessary condition for receiving the forgiveness of God (1 John 1:8 ff) and represents the necessary link between that sin and forgiveness.

Originally the Jews set aside a special day in which confessions were made to the person against whom the sin had been committed and from whom the offender desired and needed to receive forgiveness. Jesus emphasized this tradition, and Catholic doctrine that came into full bloom in the sixth century expanded and clarified the sacrament. Stott clarifies the sacrament of confession by basing its source and continuance on the doctrine of Catholic priesthood itself. He writes:

This is still the official teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, which (it is important to grasp) rests on their doctrine of the priesthood. Their view of confession arises and depends on their view of absolution. According to Ludwig Ott's book *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, the argument runs like this: when Jesus was on earth He forgave sins, Mr. 2:5 f.; Lk. 7:4 f (p. 419). This very same power to forgive sins He bestowed “on the Apostles and on their legitimate successors” (p. 417) who are not “all the faithful indiscriminately, but only . . . the members of the hierarchy” (p. 439)—that is, Catholic priests. He promised it to them in His words about the keys of the kingdom and about binding and loosing, both of which include “the power to forgive sins” (p. 410) and then actually transferred it to them “on the evening of the day of the Resurrection” when He said to them “As the Father hath sent me, I also send you . . . ; whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them; and whose sins you shall retain, they are retained” (p. 410 ff). This “power to forgive sins involves not merely the power of preaching the gospel of the forgiveness of sins as the Reformers interpreted it, but also the full power of really remitting sins” (p. 417). Again, “the Church firmly insists that the power of absolution is a true and real power of absolution, by which sins committed against God are immediately remitted. The Proof derives from John 20:23. According to the words of Jesus, the act of the remission of sins, performed by the apostles and by their successors, has the effect that sins are remitted by God. There is a causal connection between the active

remitting and the passive being remitted" (p. 422). Priestly absolution "does not merely indicate forgiveness of sins, but also effects it" (p. 436).<sup>3</sup>

The deep meaning by which this sacrament is carried out is, therefore, understandable. The priest plays the important role of mediator between the sinner and God and acts in a jurisdictional capacity—penance implying a penalty imposed by the priest for a committed unconscious sin.

The sacrament of penance involves a threefold process. First is that of contrition or the sinner's acknowledgment of his grief or hatred of the committed sin with a strong resolve not to repeat it if at all possible. Second, the confession proper is heard by the priest. And third is the element of satisfaction or the "willing acceptance or performance of some task imposed as compensation and as a token of good faith and willingness to accept the penal consequences of sin."<sup>4</sup>

In comparison, psychotherapy is the process by which emotional and mental disorders are alleviated as a result of recalling material from the unconscious. Maher states that "psychotherapy" as defined by the American Psychological Association is "a process involving interpersonal relationships between a therapist and one or more patients or clients by which the former employs psychological methods based on systematic knowledge of the human personality in attempting to improve the mental health of the latter."<sup>5</sup> The key phrase in this definition is "interpersonal relationships"; the process of psychotherapy involves confrontation on a one-to-one basis, the same element that exists in Catholic confession. Here, however, conscious recall is stressed only in the beginning stages of therapy with the ultimate goal being that of recalling unconscious motivating material. The means by which the unconscious motivating material is laid bare are diverse and varied. Yet the ultimate goal, that of improving the mental health to maximum efficiency, is the same regardless of how the problem is approached. Psychotherapy is based not only on the principle that "something is wrong in my life," as is also found in confession, but also on the fact that "much of what is wrong lies beneath hidden motivation."

Before proceeding to examine these two disciplines more closely, I wish to make an abbreviated comment or two on the definition and dynamics of "sin" as viewed by the psychotherapist and the priest-confessor.

Thurian states that:

The Church recognizes, in fact, that *sin—which is essentially a revolt against God* [my italics], that is to say a lack of love for him and for what he has created—brings in its train a whole series of psychological and even physical consequences. . . . Within its own limits psychoanalysis, whether practiced by a Christian or an agnostic, is not called upon to consider the theological or metaphysical causes of what we call sin.<sup>6</sup>

It can be further pointed out that psychotherapy seldom goes beyond the consideration of sin as an act that is looked upon by society as morally wrong or damaging to the patient and his contacts. Indeed, some psycho-

therapists even go so far as to encourage "sin" if it will ultimately benefit the total growth of the person, (e.g., such as having premarital intercourse to overcome childhood fears of sex). White says:

For all this is not of course to say that no good and no integration can come as an indirect consequence of sin, of willing and doing evil. Indirect, because directly and in itself sin is wholly destructive of good and of integration. But indirectly, good can and has come of it ever since the *felix culpa* (the "happy fault") of Adam, the *certe necessarium peccatum* (the "truly necessary sin" of Adam). Where sin abounds, there does grace the more abound; though we may not sin *that* grace may abound. The neurotic, all too often, is unable to sin freely: his very repressions and fears of the "shadow" prevent it, and the same fear can produce an equally compulsive and largely spurious "goodness." Just for this reason, the Christian Gospel and the rites of the Church have no real meaning for him, for they presuppose the experience of sin and the power to respond to them freely. The actual experience of having sinned may (as, according to the Epistle to the Romans, it did for the whole Gentile and Hebrew worlds) enable him to appreciate his need for faith and the healing Christ. But sin remains sin, and the end does not justify the means. Psychotherapists who assure their patients that their sins are no sins, because of the benefits to their health which may come from them, are not only transgressing their professional competence; they are encouraging the accompanying guilt-sense to be repressed into unconsciousness, and hence, likely to form another, and even more intractable "shadow."<sup>7</sup>

It would appear that the priests and psychotherapists have two completely different approaches. Yet a closer look might suggest otherwise. For the priest, sin is a turning away from God's love and a corresponding lack of love for Him. It is both an intensely personal conflict between "I" and God, but also a conflict between "I" and community. While the word "sin" would rarely be used by psychotherapists, the conflict of any one individual is ultimately "I" and community. For psychotherapy the often missing link here is the conflict between "I" and Him.

This does not, however, destroy any commonality between the two views of sin, for one important element is clear. Whether one is speaking of sin in terms of turning from God, or in terms of a break from society's moralities or the development of conflicts, both views are firmly based on the notion of egocentrism—the turning from Him and from the community to the selfish "I." In this respect both the psychotherapist and the priest look upon sin as corruptive. It is crucial to the Catholic view of sin and to the psychotherapeutic view that conscious sin or shortcomings not only produce pathological attitudes for the person involved, but ultimately adversely affect the peace and joy of the community at large. Thurian states: ". . . not only has it [sin] psychological consequences which shed abroad some degree of disorder and suffering; any sin, however secret, since it is a sin of a member of the body, is a drag on the Church because it causes a rupture in her relationship with God."<sup>8</sup> The same is true of the conflict of psychopathology as viewed by the therapist. Egocentrism has a negative effect on the "I" and on the community.

The subtleties of the topic of sin are many and are further compounded by the fact that man is none too eager to express the guilt behind sin and so consistently covers up his tracks and sidesteps sin by stating that 1) it is morbid to concentrate on sin; 2) man is perfection, since he was created in the image of God, or 3) man was meant to hide his sins or guilt in the same manner that Adam hid from God after the Fall. Or man can attempt to avoid sin altogether and lead a truly neurotic life lacking any form of unity.

It is possible, no doubt, to be afraid of God's punishments in such a way that sin is avoided simply because of the penalties attaching to it, so that the sinner remains with all the will and the desires of sin, if only he could escape from the consequences. This, as most people would admit, is a wholly unworthy state of mind, and is not the sort of fear that the Council would accept as sufficient for true sorrow.<sup>9</sup>

Understandably, even as psychotherapists and priests try to struggle with the apparent similarities of their disciplines, the confusion deepens when one tries to tease out the implications, motivations, and defense of sin.

#### *Confession vs. psychotherapy: a comparison*

Of prime consideration is the attitude by which one approaches the problems of the client or penitent. Belgum writes:

The role in which a person perceives himself will greatly influence how he reacts to his situation in life. For example, two roommates in a hospital are incapacitated by a physical or mental illness. One considers himself the victim of an impersonal disease over which he has little or no control; the other views himself as a sinner who is receiving just reward for his evil life. Such a basic difference in viewpoint has profound implications for diagnosis of the disease, responsibility for the cure, type of therapy to be used, the locus of the problem, as well as for the question of one's philosophy of life.<sup>10</sup>

What, specifically, are the "contemporary" comparisons in viewpoint established by these two professions that deal with this issue?

1) Although the basic aim of psychotherapy is to aid the individual to function better in his environment, therapy is, for the most part, individualistically oriented. The community is seldom involved in the process of therapy. The very nature of psychotherapy implies that man can "determine" his fate. Confession presupposes that a transgression is not only against God, but is performed in a manner that necessarily affects all others in the community. Restoration with the community and the grace of God are necessarily "predetermined" by God's own free will to impart grace and reassurance.

2) Psychotherapists do not have a universal format of procedures to follow such as the Catholics have. The sacrament of penance is based on an almost universally accepted procedure; a penitent entering the confessional in almost any country can be assured of the same basic procedure.

3) The priest-confessor views sin as a weak human act that lacks the ultimate goodness—that of striving to attain conformity with the divine mind. Sin is the *cause* of the unhappiness. The psychotherapist often views sin or egocentrism as the end *result* of an involuntary process contrary to the individual's will. It is more a question of something that happens to the client (i.e., puts him in a bad position that forces him toward egocentrism), rather than something he succumbs to himself.

4) It is often stated that confession deals with the evils of human freedom while psychotherapy deals with the results of human compulsion. Contrary to this statement, however, there is really no difference between the confessing individual who is fighting problems of human freedom and the neurotic individual who must necessarily deal with the choice of freedom, too. It can be just as vicious and evil not to choose as to choose.

5) The sacrament of penance is called upon to deal with *willful* misdeeds and thoughts while psychotherapy most often sees itself dealing with dynamics of unconscious motivation.

6) The "confessing act" in psychotherapy and confession differs in content. The psychotherapist is not normally concerned with the confession of a moral offense, but rather looks for causes of the problem. The Catholic confession requires the priest to act as a judge of subjective moral rightness or wrongness.

7) While the sacrament of penance was not ordained to cure, it may help prevent problems if the individual keeps a continual open heart in speaking to his confessor. Similarly, psychotherapy, while not ordained to forgive sins, does much to free the individual from those compulsions that make sin, and repentance of sin, difficult.

8) Sheerin states: ". . . it is not enough simply to remember that you did such and such a wrong act. The core of the sin is in the intention and unless you had a sinful intention, the external act was not a sin."<sup>1</sup> The intention, or egocentrism, is equated to the conscious cause of the problem. Psychotherapy also endorses the view of the intention (i.e., motivation) of the external act as a result rather than as a cause. The sin, i.e., egocentrism, is a result of the individual's inability to cope effectively with outside influences.

These issues are further complicated by the general disagreement within the church itself as to the involvement of the priest in the confessing individual's life and the disagreement among psychotherapists as to the use of techniques and the inclusion of the religious aspect in the life of the patient.

With regard to the first of these disagreements, it is admittedly difficult for the priests to separate the sacrament from personal counseling. Most admit that confession should first be an encounter in the mystery of Christ's redemption. Moralizing and intervention on the psychological level should follow second, if at all. The younger priests who have more education in psychological dynamics tend to concentrate more on this secondary level. Snoeck points out that this is an error on their part since "Much harm has been caused by prematurely drawing a person's attention to those elements

of his unconscious with which he had contented himself to live, even if in an unhealthy way.”<sup>1 2</sup> Elaborating on this point, he writes:

Neither should the examination of the conscience inquire into the hidden structures which influence our lives without our will. This examination is not a consideration of depth psychology in which one traces all the concomitants that had some bearing upon the sinful decision of our acts. Such concomitants as instincts, endogenic drives, fixations, inhibitions, the devious ways of uncontrolled and uncontrollable orientations of sentiment, which run through the obscurity of the subconscious, are things over which the conscious will has no power and of which the healthy intellect knows nothing.<sup>1 3</sup>

He further concludes:

Man has, generally, little or no control over his life of emotions and sentiment. They are passive phenomena usually accompanying man's efforts and strivings. Only over his external will does man have direct control, and it is in this that his freedom consists. Therefore, if it is a matter of contrition insofar as it should be stirred up by the penitent himself, this must be fundamentally in the will and not in the emotions over which man has no control.<sup>1 4</sup>

There can be no doubt at this point that Snoeck represents the more dogmatic of the Catholic priests. He and many others vouch for a belief that a difference exists between moral and emotional problems; emotional problems must be dealt with outside of the confessional.

Haring represents the other side of the above view and suggests that a broader background is necessary for the priest-confessor.

There is a definite need for the priest to study psychology and sociology if he is to be an effective guide in the direction of penitents. Psychology will make him aware of the frustrations, conflicts and maladjustments prevalent in this day and age. Sociology will reveal the impact of the environment on the people. Both will serve to bridle his impulse at times to say: “You have to do this and if you don't obey, you're showing your bad will.”

Finally, there seems to be a need for some sort of common pastoral planning which, perhaps could be achieved through Episcopal Conferences. One of the aims of the Conferences could be to try to reduce the inconsistencies of practice that people meet within the confessional. It is not uncommon to hear people themselves complaining that Father So-and-So says that this is perfectly all right whereas Father Such-and-Such finds it objectionable and wrong. Inconsistencies of this nature tend to make people suspect that perhaps the priest in the confessional does not represent the Church. These people do not understand that there are areas in theology that are open to different opinions. However, each priest should seek to explain as clearly as possible the doctrine of the Church and then let his penitent see that his counsel is based on an interpretation of that doctrine.<sup>1 5</sup>

The problem of what confession truly involves is, as yet, unclear even to the clergy of the Church, particularly with regard to the extent of involvement into the personal problems of the sinner.

Similarly, disagreements exist from within the psychotherapeutic discipline. Not only is there dissension concerning the various types of psychotherapy and their means to ultimate mental health, but there is continuous style concerning the inclusion of religion in psychotherapeutic pursuits. If psychology is to vie with the other scientific disciplines such as medicine, physics, and biology, it often implies that the apparent subjective topic of religion be omitted. Menninger, quoting a speech by Dr. David McClellan, writes:

“Speaking publicly about religious matters presents many difficulties for a behavioral scientist today. To admit to a religious point of view, to some personal commitment, is to violate the most fundamental rule governing the behavior of a scientist—namely, to be objective. Personal bias serves only to distort the search for truth. So it is part of the professional role of the scientist, particularly if he is interested in human affairs, to keep himself free from entangling commitments, to remain in a state of suspended judgment so far as many of life’s most serious issues are concerned.

“And most of my colleagues live up to their professional role with great strictness so far as religion, and in particular Christianity, is concerned. I can hardly think of a psychologist, sociologist or anthropologist of my generation who would admit publicly or privately to a religious commitment of any kind. . . .”<sup>16</sup>

Menninger continues:

This, I think, is a startling statement and one I find a little difficult to accept literally. I myself know quite a number of psychiatrists and psychologists who “admit” both privately and publicly of religious commitments.<sup>17</sup>

Psychology is at present finding the dissension quite strong on both issues—a fact that further complicates the comparative study of confession in psychotherapy and religion.

### *A potential resolution*

The history and background of psychotherapy and Catholic confession share many similarities and conflicts. Both include as a goal (or one of several goals) the healthy restitution to community life once sin or egocentrism is re-directed or eliminated.

Psychopathology not only hampers man’s attempt to eliminate egocentrism and attain wholeness in life; psychopathology also hampers man’s ability to acknowledge his real guilt before God in true contrition. In counteracting these unhealthy tendencies, successful psychotherapy attempts to give freedom to the inner man and enables him to respond fully to his environment in a wholly integrated, realistic manner. The Church sees as its function the mediation between God and man: the Holy Spirit seeks through the sacrament of penance to order the whole of man’s physical, psychological, and spiritual life, i.e., coming to internal truth before God and



before the community. Snoeck comments that "... while psychotherapy tries to integrate personal structures, spiritual direction tries to enable a person to find his calling and to fulfill his personal response to that calling."<sup>18</sup>

Belgum, speaking from a Lutheran background, suggests three steps or "prescriptions" necessary for man to break away from his egocentrism, which includes sin, hypocrisy, and pride. The essential elements for a functional confession include the confession itself, amendment, and repentance.<sup>19</sup>

Amendment, or constructive change, suggests the usefulness or light that psychology might shed on the total adjustment toward the ultimate wholeness of man.

A pattern is beginning to emerge at this point—one that might suggest that psychotherapy and Catholic confession can work in an integrative way toward individual understanding and truth. Psychotherapy can aid the individual to psychological freedom to respond to the environment. Confession (the next level above psychotherapy) can aid the individual in spiritual freedom to respond to the environment and, more importantly, to God. These separate functions of psychotherapy and confession can work on a progression toward the goal of being oneself in truth before God, i.e., wholly integrated psychologically and spiritually.

The working reality of the foregoing discussion can be found 1) in the *integrative* attempts of psychology and religion to come together on what appears at first glance to be uncommon grounds, and 2) in church consultation services in which a therapist can work from within the church setting to aid the individual's total growth and in the growth of the community of the church itself.

### *Conclusion*

Two seemingly different conclusions can be drawn from the preceding presentation concerning the compatibility of psychotherapy and Catholic confession.

First, one could conclude that the two disciplines could never complement one another on an equal basis, since they are based on different presuppositions and, therefore, could not logically come out with the same results. For example, confession presupposes man's conscious sin as a cause, the mediating judgment of the priest, and the restituting grace of God. Psychotherapy presupposes the acceptance of sin as a symptom of some larger problem that is unconsciously motivated. No judgment is involved, and the restituting power depends on the individual's power to pull himself up by the boot straps and accept himself.

The very fact, however, that psychotherapy and Catholic confession deal with the same problem—guilt, anger, hostility, loneliness, jealousy, and so on—would support the conclusion that despite theoretical approaches, these two disciplines share commonality and could meet on a point of common

interest if psychotherapy viewed itself as "part of" a total restoration process of man toward truth. This is even more critical to those Catholic individuals who utilize both psychotherapy and confession to order their lives.

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