

# THE NEUROTIC PERSONALITY IN THE MONASTIC LIFE

by **Thomas Merton**

Edited by Patrick Hart, O.C.S.O.

---

## EDITOR'S NOTE

On January 7, 1967, Thomas Merton replied to a doctoral candidate, an Italian priest, who chose Merton as the subject of his dissertation and who had asked for biographical material to assist him in his work. Merton responded in his characteristically modest way: "I would only remark that like every other Christian I am still occupied with the great affair of saving my sinful soul, in which grace and 'psychology' are sometimes in intense conflict."<sup>1</sup> Merton's interest in the relationship of psychology to the religious life can be traced to the early 1950s when he was Master of Scholastics (1951-1955), and later Master of Novices (1955-1965). As with so many other areas of concern, he was in the avant garde in the field of psychological testing for aspirants who were seeking entrance into the monastic life. He felt strongly that mistakes were made in the past due to an ignorance of some of the basic tenets of the psychological makeup in prospective candidates, and that much suffering could be avoided both for the individual and a community if postulants to the monastic life were carefully screened by professionals.

Thomas Merton's encounter with Dr. Gregory Zilboorg at St. John's Abbey, Collegeville, Minnesota, in the summer of 1956, is well known as a consequence of various biographies that have appeared in the past decade, especially Michael Mott's *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, which dealt with the subject in detail.<sup>2</sup> Zilboorg had read Merton's manuscript about the neurotic personality and advised against its publication at that time, encouraging Merton rather to deepen his understanding of psychology and its relationship to the monastic life. He thought

---

1. Thomas Merton, *The School of Charity: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Renewal & Spiritual Direction*; selected & edited by Brother Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1990): p. 326.

2. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1984): pp. 290-299

Merton was rushing into print in a seizure of enthusiasm without really mastering the subject adequately. There were certainly other psychological factors at play which aroused an animosity in Zilboorg toward Merton, as evidenced by his confrontation with Merton in the presence of his abbot, Dom James Fox. Anyone even remotely aware of the situation could see that this was definitely a painful episode, not only for Merton, but also for his abbot who always avoided scenes of this kind.

In any case, the editors of *The Merton Annual* agreed to publish this important text. Apart from its historical value for biographers, it sheds light on Merton's own psychological makeup and reflects some of his difficulties in the monastic life. For over thirty years it has survived in various Merton archives, first at the Abbey of Gethsemani, and then later, transferred to the Thomas Merton Studies Center at Bellarmine College. It surfaced again in 1988 when Jonathan Montaldo was transcribing some of the Merton notebooks in the Merton Center. We are indebted to Montaldo for drawing the manuscript to our attention at a providential moment when we were considering unpublished materials for *The Merton Annual*. Since Merton did not list this manuscript among those which should not be published, but had in fact revised it considerably, we felt that the time had come for this document to see the light of day.

There is an interesting letter of Merton's to Mark Van Doren, dated July 30, 1956, from St. John's Abbey, where he and Father John Eudes Bamberger were attending Zilboorg's sessions. In the last paragraph of that letter he writes of the enormous value of the workshop:

*Zilboorg, the dominant spirit, who has a tremendous mission in this regard, made a statement which has set the tone for the whole business: that the priest cannot be the accomplice of formalists and legalists who use their techniques to destroy human values in the sick individual, or the criminal, or the man in trouble — or the person they do not like. We are being taught that we cannot and must not attempt the kind of thing I think you most object to when psychoanalysis corrupts literary judgment. So you see I am gaining much.*<sup>3</sup>

Merton continued to learn and to grow all his life.

Finally, a word of gratitude is due to the Trustees of the Merton Legacy Trust for allowing this Merton manuscript to be published in the fourth Annual. Appropriately it appears in the same issue as Victor A. Kramer's interview with Abbot John Eudes Bamberger, who was an important witness to the meetings with Zilboorg (both public and private) at Collegetown in 1956. It should be read in conjunction with the interview, which sheds more light on this important episode, and explains in greater detail Merton's growing interest in the relationship between psychology and the religious quest.

---

3. Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: Letters to New & Old Friends*; selected & edited by Robert E. Daggy (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1989): p. 30.

# THE NEUROTIC PERSONALITY IN THE MONASTIC LIFE

by **Thomas Merton**

It is a matter of experience that many of the problems that most deeply affect souls in the cloister are psychological rather than ascetic. Since an increasing number of religious are more or less affected with neurotic anxiety without being subject to a serious neurosis, it is important to realize what the neurotic character is, know how to recognize it, as well as how to help this character in the solution of problems. It goes without saying that, if a director or a superior can, by rightly understanding these characters, help them to keep and develop a genuine religious vocation, a great work will be done for God. Not only the individual religious but the whole community must suffer if an unbalanced character is allowed to become worse. The presence of neurotics in the community adds to the burdens of community life and especially to the problems and difficulties of superiors. There is also a danger of a seriously neurotic person eventually becoming psychotic.

Souls affected with a serious neurosis should not be encouraged to remain in religion. Hysterical episodes, or evidence of a deep-seated obsessive compulsive neurosis, are a sign that the subject does not belong in the cloister. Hypochondria in a serious form, the prolonged and general fatigue which is evidence of chronic neurasthenia, may also be interpreted as counterindications of a vocation if they are constant and cannot be remedied. *A fortiori*, subjects who show signs of schizophrenic withdrawal or, above all, of paranoid delusions or persecution obsessions, are to be excluded immediately from the religious life. Neurotic depressive reactions, if they are not serious, may perhaps not debar a person from the religious life, but a depressive character will nevertheless suffer much more acutely in religion than out of it, particularly in the contemplative life where the suppressed hostility, which is the root of the trouble, will be aggravated by the lack of normal communication with others.

A particular problem is presented by subjects who show a pronounced neurotic immaturity and dependency which is sometimes misinterpreted as a sign of great virtue by superiors who, without knowing it, are flattered by the "childlike" clinging affection of these subjects. If the mental development of the subject is not too severely retarded, he may remain in the cloister even as a choir religious studying for the priesthood, but care should be taken to guide him towards a more mature attitude if possible, and not allow him to waste his life in a helpless emotional dependence which prevents grace from taking full possession of his soul.

Needless to say, whether or not he has a vocation, the neurotic should be considered as a suffering member of Christ and not treated with indifference, patronage or contempt. We have a duty of charity towards others who suffer things that we ourselves may well come to suffer some day. The neurotic should not be made to feel that he is somehow "guilty" or reprehensible because of his condition. He should not be treated as peculiar, as some kind of freak. Charity obliges us to refrain from every psychological device by which we might seek to "cut him off," and excommunicate him from the society of those who appear to be more normal.

### **Psychiatry and Asceticism**

Setting aside the cases mentioned above who more or less clearly have no vocation or who, if they have one, nevertheless need professional attention, we will concern ourselves with those souls who belong in religion but who, afflicted to a great extent with neurotic anxieties, are retarded in their spiritual development. These are souls who are apt to suffer a great deal because they are led, by their own neurotic character and sometimes by directors without understanding, to seek perfection in precisely those ways in which they are bound to be frustrated and in which their neurotic anxiety will increase to the point of becoming serious.

In order to understand this problem, we must first realize the very important distinction between psychiatry and asceticism. The religious life is by its very nature an ascetic life. All religious observances tend, in one way or another, to be "exercises" of the spirit, training man for a life of perfection in Christ. To enter the monastery is then to embrace asceticism, at least in a broad and general sense.

While both psychiatry and asceticism aim at the maturing and perfection of the human soul, they do so in different ways and indeed in different spheres. For although in a sense *they face basically the same*

problem, which we may call the problem of inordinate self-love, they face it on entirely different levels. They approach it from different directions and with different methods in order to accomplish different results.

The aim of asceticism is to enable a man to grow in his supernatural and spiritual likeness to Christ. In other words, it aims to develop a man's personality in view of his supernatural end. It aims to elevate him above the level of the "old man," living according to the world and the flesh, and to bring him to union with God in Christ. Christian asceticism is therefore a way of self-denial, prayer and love which puts into practice the teachings of the Gospels, the Epistles of the New Testament, and of Catholic tradition as a whole.

The aim of psychiatry is less exalted. Rescinding from the supernatural order (into which it can be fitted), it looks solely at the normal, natural maturity of the human soul. Psychiatry aims to make a man function normally and smoothly as a mature human being. It seeks to *liberate him from emotional and mental dysfunctions, resulting from traumatic experiences of the past, and from the wrong attitudes and bad mental habits resulting from these experiences*. The function of psychiatry is to develop a man's personality to the point where he can get along without being a neurotic. For the neurotic is "attached" to his wrong attitudes. He lives in servile dependence upon them. He cannot do without them, even though he may realize that they are warping his life. Asceticism cannot detach him from these wrong attitudes, but psychiatry can. Psychiatry teaches the soul to solve the ordinary emotional problems of life on a mature rather than on an infantile level.

*Asceticism therefore presupposes a normally mature human soul*. It takes for granted that one's ordinary emotional problems are solved in a normal manner. Where the ordinary emotional problems of life remain unsolved, and where the emotional energy excited by these problems is not released, but pent up and repressed in the depths of the soul, then asceticism must be practiced with a certain amount of wariness and reserve — particularly that kind of asceticism which consists in difficult practices of penance and prayer.

*Asceticism aims to make a healthy person become holy and spiritual. Psychiatry only aims at making a sick person healthy and mature*. If the mind of a would-be ascetic is not mature and well balanced, then it is not possible for that person really to understand the problems of the spiritual life, or to make a right use of the means for solving them. He has not yet solved the ordinary problems of mature human existence. *His emotional reactions*

and his judgments and desires are, without his knowing it, fundamentally infantile. He cannot become a real ascetic because he does not know what he is doing. The "attractions" which he feels and the movements which he imagines to be "inspirations" of grace may in large measure be nothing else than the voice of the pent-up infantile emotion which is locked in the depth of his heart. *He is not moved by the Holy Spirit so much as by the energy generated by deep subconscious anxieties and fears.* What he interprets as a desire for prayer, for God, for the ascetic life, is in reality the unrecognized desire for a mature and normal human existence. But because he is a neurotic, he is incapable of achieving this end. His neurosis is, in fact, an attachment to an immature set of attitudes and beliefs. *His desire for an ascetic life and ascetic practices is, in that case, an escape from reality rather than an adaptation to reality.* The tree is known by its fruits. Even though he may be permitted to indulge his desires, he is always restless, anxious, tormented. He cannot have peace. He cannot submit to authority or be guided by his director — or else he clings blindly to authority without understanding anything of what his superiors want of him. He is not adapted to reality. He is led by fancies and illusions. Life is not something that he is content to live: he wrestles with it, never at peace with himself or with others, because he is not at peace with reality. If one who needs the help of psychiatry enters upon the way of asceticism, the result is likely to be a disaster, because he is attempting to run before he can walk.

The impossibility of solving a psychiatric problem by asceticism becomes evident when the would-be ascetic begins to break down under the pressure of his interior anxieties. Then the director, who has perhaps encouraged him on this false path, begins to say to him: "Your problems are all imagination and self-love. What you need to do is ignore them. You are deceiving yourself and trying to deceive others. Use your will." But criticism and reproof are of little use in dealing with a neurotic.

For precisely what is sick is the will of this subject. He is now confronted with the fact that his will no longer works properly, and he is overwhelmed with fear, confusion, shame and feelings of guilt. He has lost the sense that he can understand himself or the meaning of life, and he finds himself helpless in the presence of terrifying forces which he cannot cope with because he cannot see them. *They are the forces of his own infantile emotions, breaking through the resistance of his immature will and darkening the last light of his judgment.* Nothing can be more painful or more disconcerting for such a soul than to find itself reproved, criticized and condemned by a director or a superior on whom it relies even unrea-

sonably for strength and help. A soul that is more or less mature may, in such circumstances, pull itself together under the blows of misfortune and discover unexpected strength within itself. But a soul that is really immature will be left with no escape from itself and its incomprehensible torments.

### Anxiety

It is now necessary to study the important — and universal — fact of anxiety. Anxiety is the center of all psychological problems. What is it? *Anxiety is the psychological tension produced by undischarged emotional energy — that is to say by emotional energy which remains pent up beyond the point at which it should normally and naturally be discharged.*

Felt anxiety registers in the mind as a diffuse apprehension, a vague, inescapable feeling of helplessness and indecision in the face of a real or imaginary danger which keeps presenting itself to the mind. Sometimes the anger is apprehended as something definite and concrete. At other times it remains vague and general. Conscious anxiety is then a general sense of fear, foreboding, hesitation and doubt. It brings with it sometimes acute nervousness, sweating, trembling, dryness of mouth, etc.

*Anxiety is not always felt.* Sometimes, beneath the apparently calm surface of the soul, there is severe anxiety at work, but the subject is not conscious of it. This anxiety may leave its mark not on his soul but on his physical organism. It may be taking effect in a stomach ulcer, colitis, or other psychosomatic sicknesses. It may register as palpitation of the heart, pain in the cardiac area, or other things which the patient interprets as signs of sickness. In such cases, anxiety is objectified as a physical sickness, real or imaginary.

Since the human organism instinctively seeks to reject or temper feelings of anxiety, *man's mind naturally tends to project its anxieties on to others. The burden of anxiety is then "shared" between the subject and another.* For instance, a subject feels in part the anxiety which troubles him about himself, but he projects a large part of his anxiety on to his brothers, the superiors and the community. Then the hidden anxiety finds a partial expression in criticism, murmuring, interior rebellion, and the general sense that everyone else is "wrong." The anxious man finds some release for his pent-up emotions in resentment and the conviction that the superiors and brethren are guilty of breaking all the rules and deforming the true spirit of the Order. This release has the advantage of leaving the subject with some sense of self-congratulation and superiority, a sense which he

badly needs and to which he clings desperately in order to avoid a breakdown. These motives are, of course, subconscious.

Unfelt anxiety, however, sometimes breaks through the defenses that have been raised against it. The projections and other devices by which the subject keeps himself unconscious of his inner fears and doubts suddenly cease to fulfill their function. Then anxiety breaks through and the sudden necessity of facing the hidden emotional power that he had tried to forget plunges the subject into a state of panic. The subject is brought face to face with the emotion he can no longer successfully repress. Yet the emotion is not, for all that, fully released. It is still not recognized. It is felt as an unknown, hostile power, sweeping over the soul like a tidal wave, coming from a source which the mind is unable to identify. Inability to control this force, or to escape from it, produces a painful state of fear and even of prostratis.

It is well known that psychoanalysis has attempted to give various explanations for anxiety. Is there one emotion, one basic impulse which, being denied, produces anxiety? Freud's theory is familiar, in part, to everybody. Psychoanalysts themselves are largely abandoning the so-called "pan-sexualism" of Freud in our day. But we may nevertheless remark that in actual fact a sexuality that is immature and violently repressed, instead of mature and properly accepted and understood, lies at the basis of much nervous and mental trouble in religion. The emotions generated by this basic passion do not necessarily have to express themselves physically in order to find a natural release. They are normally and naturally released in "sublimated" form in our life of work, study and prayer, if we live as mature religious. If these emotions are not properly accepted and integrated into our religious life, our offering of ourselves to God is incomplete, and trouble results.

Psychoanalysts in America tend more and more today to stress the fact that *the basic emotions which cause anxiety are those which come into play in our social and interpersonal relationships: not only the animal passion of sex, but also and especially the specifically human emotions which prompt us to seek support in solidarity with others, to act as productive and integrated members of our society.* In other words, our anxieties are likely to be generated by fear that we will lose the love and respect of those we live with, by fear of isolation from others and from ourselves, by fear of alienation and exclusion. This fear may in turn be rooted in the sense of our own productivity and fruitlessness (a sense that may be objectively valid!), or in the sense that we are repressing a great deal of hostility towards



others which, if it were recognized, might lead to our losing their love and respect. In other words, *the basic emotional conflict of modern man seems to center on his sense of his own worth as a person and as a member of society, and on his ability to harmonize his life with that of others.*

Erich Fromm has pointed out how the psychology of totalitarianism provides man with a refuge from this basic anxiety by submerging him in an illusory "solidarity," the solidarity of the "mass society" in which he can lose his identity and forget his problem.<sup>1</sup> This approach is also taken by the philosopher Gabriel Marcel.<sup>2</sup>

It is possible that certain neurotic types instinctively seek the religious life for the same reason — as a refuge from themselves and from reality. They find themselves a place in a state of life which is highly respected. Everything is arranged and decided for them beforehand. All they need to do is conform to the others. They then feel themselves invested with all the respect and honor which is paid to their community without having the responsibility of thinking or living for themselves. Thus for them the problem of anxiety is narrowed down to a small area: that of *conforming* to the others. If they feel that their conformity is perfect, they enjoy a certain peace. If they feel their conformity is threatened, they begin to worry. The one thing they cannot bear is an explicit or implicit attack on the value of conformity itself. To preserve their peace, they must at all costs cling to the idea that conformity alone brings perfection and happiness. Once this idea is questioned or denied, they lose their peace and become agitated, depressed or even very angry.

These conformists are blind and desperate defenders of the *status quo*. All change upsets them because they have made their whole life depend on conformity to what they have always observed and what has always been observed around them. Any demand that they adjust themselves to something new arouses a more or less acute anxiety. If the demand comes from a legitimate superior, they can eventually accept it because everyone else is also bound to conform, and this universal conformity of all will once again restore their sense of security. But it is to be remarked that these subjects do not enjoy a real, mature security within themselves. Their "peace" is bought at the price of evading a complete and mature gift of themselves to God by accepting *anything* He wills. They will only accept if their acceptance can be fitted into the framework of conformity to the

---

1. Erich Fromm, *Escape from Freedom* (New York, 1941).

2. Gabriel Marcel, *Man against Mass Society* (Chicago, 1952).

people they live with. If God were to ask them to accept something that would fall outside this framework — something that would make them appear less acceptable in the eyes of their companions — they would almost certainly refuse it. This refusal will be rationalized in some way or other to make it palatable to their conscience.

*Anxiety is universal.* It is experienced to some extent by all men, normal or otherwise, and indeed it must be remarked that, in a time like ours and in a society which is fundamentally deranged, *not to feel anxiety would be a bad sign.* Mental health is not to be judged by mere “adjustment” to society. If society itself is unsound, how can adjustment to it be a sign of health?<sup>3</sup> *The anxiety that springs from maladjustment to an unbalanced world can therefore be a means to spiritual progress.* It can contain within itself seeds of a fruitful harvest later on. We must be able to accept this anxiety and work through it. In doing so, we will advance not only towards maturity, but also towards sanctity if we travel by way of the Cross. It is clear then that anxiety is not something we must try to escape at all costs. Whether good or bad, it must be faced and accepted. The neurotic is burdened by an anxiety which he cannot accept.

There is, however, one anxiety which springs from *fundamental maladjustment within the human person — the basic evil which is sin.* This anxiety is the prelude to the sufferings of hell. It comes from the clear-sighted awareness of one’s involvement in evil, the evil of the world and of our time. Existentialism is entirely built on the “acceptance” of this anxiety. *A Christian can never accept the anxiety of sin and separation from God.*<sup>4</sup> Existentialism, in its extreme form, is nothing but the subtle rationalization of neurosis and sin. It makes a virtue out of being sick and counts its heroism to plunge into the abyss of evil and nothingness.

*The “night” of faith and of mystical purification also brings with it the anxiety and anguish of the soul that feels itself cut off from God and from other men* because it is traveling in territory which is entirely unknown to human nature and to man’s natural experience. *This anxiety, too, is healthy and fruitful.* Supremely so, for it is our participation in the anguish of Christ in the Garden of Olives. It is important to realize that in the mystery of spiritual suffering, the traces of a natural and infantile maladjustment are brought to light. The mystic may find himself, for a time, something of a neurotic: both the good and the bad in his nature may have to be “sweated

---

3. Erich Fromm, *The Sane Society* (New York, 1955): chapter one.

4. Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Le Chretien et l'Angoisse* (Paris, 1955): p. 72ff.

out" in the fire of interior tribulation. All must be accepted.<sup>5</sup>

The anxiety of the neurotic may sometimes closely resemble the states described by St. John of the Cross in his "Dark Night" and it is not at all unknown for a spiritual director to class an obsessive compulsive neurotic or even a manic depressive psychotic as a mystic undergoing spiritual purification.

If all anxiety is marked by a general condition of apprehensiveness and anguish in which the will and judgment are somewhat bound in their action and the emotions are under considerable stress, *neurotic anxiety has some special features of its own*. It is important for them to be known. They all spring from an agitation of a soul that flees from anxiety without being able to escape it.

The helplessness and fear of normal anxiety can usually be traced to a more or less rational cause. In neurotic anxiety not only are the helplessness and fear very intense, but they are an almost chronic condition in which the most varied stimuli, even the most harmless, seem to call forth the same reaction. *The first characteristic of neurotic anxiety is then a complete lack of proportion to any visible cause and a constant similarity of responses to all kinds of different stimuli*. The reason for this is that the neurotic is to some extent out of touch with reality. The lack of contact is evidenced by his responses: confronted with an abundance of different situations he shows the same response of fear, or resentment, or abject submission, or depression, or extreme elation and enthusiasm.

*The second characteristic of neurotic anxiety is that it leads sooner or later to a kind of disintegration of the character*. Instead of normal integrated responses to reality, the mind has to concentrate on the task of warding off anxiety. This task becomes more and more important, until it runs the risk of shutting out reality altogether. As an instance of this disintegration we have the compulsive character who *must* count all the steps he takes in going from one place to another, who *must* stop to touch the statue of Our Lady at the Church door, who *must* go back and see if all the lights are out in a certain room, etc. Such tasks, though performed half-consciously, assume such importance that they block out everything else at the time.

*A third characteristic of neurotic anxiety is that it is always connected with some kind of artificiality, either hidden or apparent. The unreality of the neurotic's life, centered on the flight from anxiety, has to be to some*

---

5. M. Eugene de l'Enfant Jesus, *Je Suis Fille d'Eglise* (Paris).

extent hidden or camouflaged or made acceptable to others. Hence the neurotic unconsciously spends much of his time and effort simply "covering up" and producing a "front" behind which he can continue to be a neurotic. Neurotics are not only anxious, but they are very intent upon *justifying* their anxiety, or rationalizing it, or explaining it away, or even on denying its existence.

Finally, one of the most important characteristics of neurotic anxiety is that it leads eventually to the *creation of a false self*. Not only does he try to explain away his anxiety, or avoid it, but the neurotic actively constructs an idealized image of himself which explains and justifies his neurosis and thus enables him to live with it.

The term "idealized image," created by Karen Horney, must not be misunderstood.<sup>6</sup> The neurotic's image of himself is not necessarily "idealized" in a mythomaniac sense of being far above and beyond the reach of reality. It is idealized in the sense of being *unreal*. But it may well be also rather tawdry and shabby, for instance the depressive's idea of himself as a worthless and guilty person form part of an idealized image in which, underneath the pessimism that shapes his ordinary attitudes, is a deep resentment at the frustration of an unconsciously assumed excellence. Both the guilt and the supposed excellence must be taken into account when we study the neurotic's idea of himself. Both go to form the "idealized image" — the guilt feelings are a necessary consequence of his supposition that he *ought to be* able to make everyone see and recognize his excellence, although he does not in fact succeed in doing so. The guilt becomes a means of continuing to suppose *that this excellence exists*. Regard for instance the case of a monk who refuses to sing in choir, and hates himself for not singing, but who cannot bring himself to sing because he feels that he really ought to be a great singer and cannot understand why he is not one. This last basic assumption is, of course, unconscious. But it can be discovered by one who is able to penetrate below the surface of his feelings of guilt, or of resentment, or of fear.

### Self-will

All men have and indeed must have some sort of idealized image of themselves. Rare indeed is the man who sees himself exactly as he is, and we cannot expect to know ourselves with absolute precision. Even the healthy

---

6. Karen Horney, *Neurosis and Human Growth* (New York, 1949).

mind tends to overestimate some of its qualities and underestimate others. The mature mind, however, is able to evaluate its own powers more or less according to their reality and to integrate itself by sane interaction with other members of society.

The immature mind has an immature "idealized image" of itself. That is to say, it expects itself to go on living forever on the level of childhood. The infant, as yet barely aware of external reality, knows the world as a projection of its own self and experiences all events and happenings as centered on itself. Food, care, affection, attention and various comforts all come to it as if by magic from without. All it has to do is feel need, feel an unexpressed desire, and powerful beings hasten to satisfy his desires. If they do not hasten, he can *make* them hasten by a display of passion. Although he does not know it or reflect on it, the crying infant lives in a magic universe of which he himself is the center and in which he can manipulate others by his "omnipotent" desires. And yet this "omnipotence" is a consequence of complete and total helplessness.

The neurotic is one who, while outwardly conforming to the demands of human social living and outwardly acting like a mature man, inwardly in his deepest self, clings to the belief that he still ought to be the infant who reigns as king in a magic world, and this illusory belief is the creature of very real helplessness. Although he outwardly has the beliefs and attitudes of a mature person, these beliefs and attitudes are more a matter of words than of truth. What he actually believes, what he really lives by, is the conviction that everything ought to be arranged to please him. In this sense all of us inevitably retain something of our childhood! But the mature man is able to discount these childish emotions. The neurotic cannot discount them. They are what he actually lives by in the secret depths of his being.

Therefore in some way or other, the neurotic's idealized image of himself always retains something of the "magic omnipotence" of childhood which masks his helplessness, although this may not be consciously admitted. Beneath the surface of his everyday life lies the assumption that he deserves the exclusive love and attention of everyone he meets, or that he can do anything with ease, that he is really a brilliant mind, or a great artist, or a man of phenomenal strength. At least, he *should be* all these things, or perhaps one of them. If he has entered the monastery, then he is or should be already a great saint, able to pray for hours without sleep, to fast on bread and water and work miracles. The fact that he cannot actually do so becomes a source of great anxiety. He constantly wonders what is wrong with him. He blames others, he blames the Order, his superiors, his

brothers, for his lack of success. He does so, of course, unconsciously, for this crude framework is seldom allowed to be consciously realized. But it is the actual structure of his psychic life. It is the sand on which he is vainly trying to build the house of true sanctity. No wonder our Fathers have always insisted that the spiritual life must be built first of all on self-knowledge and humility.

*Self-will is the power by which the neurotic religious clings in desperation to his idealized image of himself. Self-will is the means he takes to fulfill his vain desires against the opposition of God and man. Self-will, finally, is the one thing that the neurotic uses to keep himself from seeing the vanity of his idealized image.* Self-will provides the violence and the force with which he represses his anxiety and hides the truth, but it is also the chief source of anxiety and emotional tension. The more self-will resists the truth, the more the reality of man's nature protests against it. And this is the cause of most of the nervous tension in the monastic life.

St. Bernard said: put an end to self-will and you put an end to hell.<sup>7</sup> We can also say: put an end to self-will and you put an end to neurosis. But in practice it is by no means as simple as it sounds. Self-will can only be destroyed *from within ourselves*. If a man is to cease to be self-willed and embrace charity, he himself is the only one who can do it, he is the one who must will it. The peculiar difficulty of the neurotic is that he is unable by himself to get free from the self-will that binds him to his false image of himself because both these forces constitute what he imagines to be the only effective protection against his anxiety. Therefore to condemn him and berate him for his self-will, which is largely involuntary, is to add to his anxiety. We not only make him feel guilty and anxious about himself without helping him to deliver himself from his psychological trap, but we remind him of all the anxiety that lies behind the facade of his idealized self.

The real problem of the neurotic is by no means that his will is too strong. On the contrary, his real problem, as Otto Rank discovered in opposition to Freud and all classical psychoanalysis, is that his will is *too weak*.<sup>8</sup> The infantile thirst for magic omnipotence in the mind of the neurotic is in fact a *relic of childish weakness* and retarded development. If we look a little closer at the self-will of the neurotic, we will see this perhaps more clearly.

A normal mind can exercise self-will, as we all know. But in a normal

---

7. St. Bernard, "Sermon III for Paschal Time" in Migne, P. L., pp. 183-290.

8. Otto Rank, "The Basis of Will Therapy," in *Outline of Psychoanalysis* (New York: Modern Library, 1955).

mind the exercise of self-will is nevertheless a mature exercise of *will*. It may be wrong, but it is at least a genuine expression of psychological autonomy, of real human independence, an exercise of choice. To make a bad choice freely and knowingly is of course a greater evil than to make it half-consciously and driven by passion. It is the privilege of the mature mind to sin knowingly. The immature mind, however, unconsciously *prefers to sin unknowingly*: it prefers the confusion and the semi-darkness of a judgment obscured by emotion because it instinctively seeks to evade responsibility. This is one of the characteristics of the neurotic, and it is unconsciously present even when the conscience of the neurotic is apparently severe and rigid. The scrupulous mind is, in reality, seeking to evade responsibility for its actions. It wants to do what it feels to be wrong without being blamed for it. Hence the tremendous fuss it makes about every moral judgment — this is only a psychological *trick to give the impression of caring a great deal* about moral issues. The scrupulous soul is fundamentally trying to evade morality, perhaps even, in some cases, to frustrate authority.

The self-will of a neurotic mind therefore creates a smoke screen of confusion and anxiety, and goes about doing what it appears not to want to do with the sentiment of abulia and compulsion. And it is true that morally speaking the confessor must allow that real neurotic compulsion does in fact diminish the morality of action. The self-will of the neurotic operates largely below the level of consciousness, and the problem is to discover *why* this subterfuge seems to be necessary. *The truth is that the neurotic is one who wants to will without willing, because he wants to remain an infant and have everything done and willed for him. Like the infant, he wants to continue to substitute emotion for will and desire for judgment. The function of others is to do the willing and provide the necessary satisfactions for his desires.* His apparent willfulness is a device to reproach them for not doing so.

In relations with superiors apparently rebellious and self-willed neurotics often cause a great deal of trouble. But we must realize that sometimes their rebelliousness is anything but an exercise of will. On the contrary it may be a sign of *lack of real volitional strength*. It may be for instance that a neurotic subject desires in fact to be babied and spoiled by his superior. Failing in the attempt to get the proper kind of attention, he seeks that same attention by trouble-making and rebellion. He seeks it by “doing his own will.” But in fact the things he does are not really things that he wants or wills. His actions are primarily *designed to stimulate the will of the superior*. The magic intervention of the superior’s will is then supposed to provide what he really desires: namely, attention. The superior often

responds by punishing the subject and trying to "break his will." In fact there is no will there to break. The subject, however, takes a perverse joy in this treatment, although he may seem on a certain level to suffer with it. It is in fact a neurotic substitute for happiness and proper adjustment. No one can deny that subjects like this are capable of giving a superior grey hairs in a very short time. The remedy is to come to an understanding of these neurotic types. The best way to remedy their "self-will" is not to break their will but to develop it, because the self-will of the neurotic is a weak and immature will, not the strong, free and fully autonomous will of a mature person. The only effect of reproaches and uncomprehending opposition is to confirm the neurotic subject in his illusion about himself. His neurosis may thrive, for instance, on the illusion that he is a misunderstood genius or an unappreciated saint, and opposition gives him fresh arguments in favor of his illusion and adding to the feeling that he is a martyr. The neurotic in religion deserves the pity of his superiors and directors more than their anger.

If the superior or director can patiently and sympathetically gain some insight into the unfortunate character structure of such subjects, he may in time communicate that insight to the sufferer himself, and enable him to see himself as he is without the distorting mirror of his own illusions. The chief function of the superior or director should be to help these subjects, as far as possible, to recognize their immaturity and see that they are frustrating themselves by their own "self-will." Then the subject should be led to assume responsibility for himself, for his desires and for his actions, to stand on his own feet emotionally and spiritually — a thing that is not possible without humility and magnanimity at the same time. In this work the efforts of the director are of little importance compared with the work of grace. But the director is usually indispensable — for he alone can see to remove the obstacles which hinder the works of *gratis sanans*.

### **Transference**

Just as in the psychoanalytic situation, the neurotic "transfers" to the doctor his subconscious desires and fears and makes him the object of his infantile emotional drives, so too in relations between religious superiors and their subjects the same phenomenon tends to occur. This "transference" thus becomes the chief obstacle to grace. Many of the difficulties between superior and subject arise from the fact that the subject unconsciously sees in the superior some other person who formerly played a central part in the



development of his neurosis. The subject then "lives through" the old story again in his relations with the superior. The superior unwittingly becomes the heir to fears and suspicions and emotional claims which were formerly directed at an over-severe or over-indulgent parent. Small wonder that the superior fails to understand the attitude of his subject and considers it unreasonable! Small wonder, too, that the superior often develops a counter-transference of his own and burdens the subject with the accumulated fears and dislikes drawn out of his own past with all their emotional implications!

At the same time if the phenomenon of transference is understood, and if by discreet inquiry one learns the pertinent facts of the subject's life and previous formation, one can more easily overlook his eccentricities. If the subject senses that he is understood and not resented, his neurotic sensitivity will be to some extent calmed. He will be more receptive to suggestions and help. However it goes without saying that the superior or director should not take upon himself the work of a psychiatrist, and attempt to analyze all the facets of the neurotic character.

Not without reason does St. Benedict stress the fact that the abbot is a father who must adapt himself to every character in order to win souls for Christ. All fatherhood is from God, and human beings instinctively tend to act towards God as they act towards their human father. They create for themselves a God made in the image of the father they know on earth. If the superior meets the neurotic with kindness and understanding and infinite patience, with a detached, calm and objective response to his irritating behavior, he will do much to win his soul for God, the Father of all, and prevent the neurotic from eventually transferring all his infantile drives to God Himself!

Our monastic fathers were blessed with a deep wisdom that intuitively penetrated into these mysteries of character long before the coming of psychiatry. Nevertheless, the clear, scientific findings of our time can offer us considerable help in solving the problems of the eccentric, immature, or hypersensitive religious, provided we have the humility to remember that no one man is expected to solve all problems — even his own.

