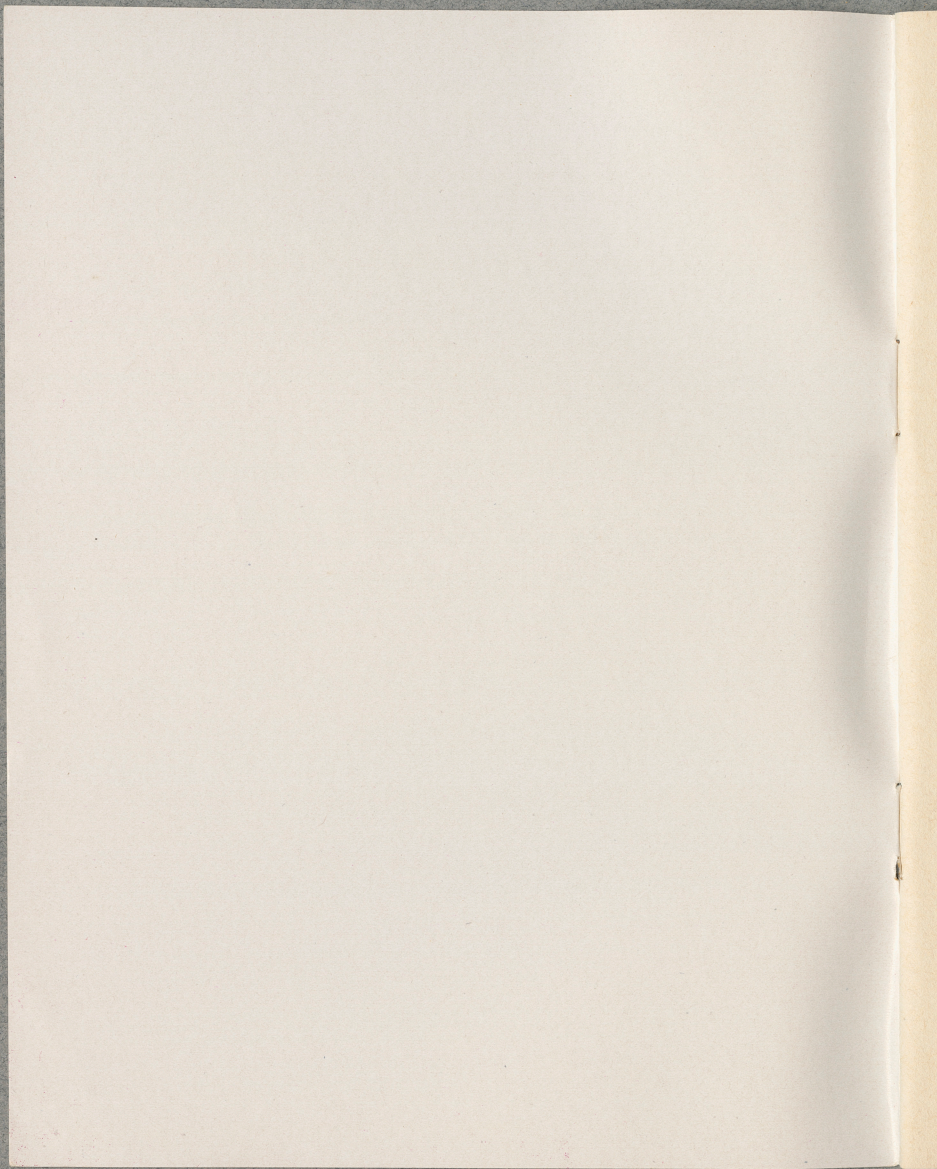


*Psychiatry*  
AND  
*Confession*

*Light* ON THE TALKING CURE OF  
PSYCHOANALYSIS

By  
*John A. O'Brien, Ph.D., LL.D.*



# Psychiatry and Confession

Light on the Talking Cure of Psychoanalysis

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John A. O'Brien, Ph.D., LL.D.

The University of Notre Dame

Confession makes not only for a *happy* life  
but for a *better* one as well

THE PAULIST PRESS  
401 WEST 59TH STREET  
NEW YORK 19, N. Y.

*Nihil Obstat:*

T. E. DILLON,  
*Censor Librorum.*

*Imprimatur:*

✠ JOHN F. NOLL, D.D.,  
*Bishop of Fort Wayne.*

*June 19, 1948.*

Spec  
CAPAM

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THE STATE OF NEW YORK

PRINTED AND PUBLISHED IN THE U. S. A.  
BY THE PAULIST PRESS, NEW YORK 19, N. Y.

## Psychiatry and Confession

“**L**OVE is in the air today,” runs a song of perennial popularity. It might be paraphrased to run, “Psychoanalysis and psychiatry are in the air today.” No longer are they the exclusive terrain of the esoteric rich, drawing their patients from Park Avenue. They are of interest to the inhabitants of Sauk Center and their techniques, spread on the pages of Sunday supplements, are being gossiped about in every home. Their findings supply material for plots in novels, short stories, and for dramas made into movies and broadcast over the air.

Since more than half the sickness today is recognized as chiefly mental, the science of mental hygiene is looming up large in modern life. The multiplying of tensions from the increasing complexity of congested urban life, the growth of fears and phobias from world wars and the dreads of still more terrible conflicts are causing millions to flock to medical offices of various kinds to seek relief. Psychasthenia is the prevailing malaise of our day. Mankind stands in desperate need of whatever help mental hygiene can provide.

Scientific research in this important field has thrown new light upon the origin of many of the fears, phobias and dreads, upon the neuroses and the psychoses which afflict people today. Like leeches, they fasten themselves upon us, sucking our courage and vigor and crippling us with nameless fears. The battle against these maladies has brought forth new techniques and new methods of treatment which have achieved some valuable results. Society owes a great debt to the pioneers who blazed new trails in this delicate and difficult field.

### **Dr. T. V. Moore's Influence**

In 1916 we had the privilege of doing graduate work with Dr. Thomas Verner Moore, O.S.B., in a clinical course in psychiatry at St. Elizabeth's Hospital in Washington. Dr. Moore, who had then but recently returned from research work in Germany, was the first priest psychiatrist in America. He has exercised an enormous influence by his teaching and writings in deepening the appreciation of the American people for the new findings of psychiatry and psychoanalysis. We learned from him the important lesson of distinguishing the established facts and principles from the frills, the unsubstantiated guesses and the exaggerations which were tending to discredit the new science in the eyes of many people. That lesson stood

us in good stead when later we went to the University of Illinois to complete our research for the Ph.D. in psychology.

We stand in need of more Catholics who will devote themselves to psychiatry as a consecrated profession in which they will be able to render valuable service to the mind and body as well as to the moral health of patients. Our representation in this field is indeed meager. We would direct the gaze of many of our gifted youth, aspiring to the practice of medicine, to the specialty of psychiatry as the domain where they are most needed and where they will render the greatest service.

## I

### HISTORY

Psychoanalysis is the newest branch or division of psychiatry. It is also the one which is the most misunderstood. It stems largely from the writings of Sigmund Freud, an Austrian neurologist, who is generally regarded as the founder of psychoanalysis. Before presenting in detail the historic case from which the new science developed, let us say a brief word about Freud, who has long been a subject of discussion and controversy among the workers in this field.

Born in 1859 in Freiburg, Moravia, of Jewish parents, Freud studied medicine at the University of

Vienna and received his M.D. in 1881. He began in 1883 as a privatdocent and studied in Paris under Charcot from 1885 to 1886. From 1902 to 1938 he was professor of neuropathology at the University of Vienna. In 1938 he was forced to leave Vienna by the Nazi regime and went to London, where he lived until his death in 1939. He worked with Dr. Breuer on the treatment of hysteria by hypnosis. Later he developed with Dr. Breuer a method of treatment in which he replaced hypnosis by the free association of ideas, or the calling up of one idea by another previously linked to it. This method became the basis of his psychoanalysis. Freud held that a complex of repressed and forgotten impressions underlies all abnormal states such as hysteria, and that the mere disclosure of these impressions often effects a cure.

He considered infantile mental processes to be of particular importance in later development. He developed a theory that dreams are an unconscious representation of suppressed desires, especially those of a sexual nature. Freud wrote numerous works on psychoanalysis and occasionally entered the fields of philosophy and religion. Many authorities think that he overstressed the role of sex and minimized the role and power of other drives.

A Catholic will differ radically with him in philosophy and religion. But such differences, radical and profound though they be, should not obscure our vision



nor dim our appreciation of the many fresh and brilliant insights which he brought to the understanding of the forces moving in the subconscious areas of our mental life and exercising their pull upon us.

### An Analogy

The fact that Freud and some of his disciples present the phenomena of our instinctive and emotional life against a backdrop of crude materialism, in which spiritual and religious values are conspicuously absent, has tended to discredit the whole science of psychoanalysis in the eyes of many religious people. They think of it as a ritualistic abracadabra of paganism, a psychic regurgitation of all one's sex experiences and memories to satisfy the curiosity of the psychoanalyst and especially to fatten his pocketbook. It is necessary to distinguish between the facts of our mental life and the unwarranted philosophical and religious inferences which some writers have drawn.

An analogy will help us here. The scientific data on evolution were brought to the English speaking world largely through the writings of Thomas Huxley and to the German speaking world through those of Ernst Haeckel. The agnosticism of Huxley and the monism of Haeckel gave their writings a distinctly anti-religious bias and caused great numbers of religious people to reject evolution, lock, stock and barrel.

So violent were the reactions against the crude materialism of many of the early exponents of evolution that many Christian people still regard evolution as incompatible with belief in God, in the Bible and in the spiritual nature of man.

The simple fact, however, is that evolution is a *process*. It demands a cause just as truly as direct and immediate creation demands a cause. When the scientific data of evolution are carefully studied and their philosophical implications are properly interpreted, it is found that evolution offers an unanswerable argument for the existence of an all-powerful Designer and is simply God's *method* of creating. The scientific evidence of organic evolution is so overwhelming as to carry conviction to more than 99 per cent of the scientists. We do not advance the interests of religion when we make the rejection of established scientific evidence a necessary condition for religious faith.

We hurt it and tend unwittingly to estrange educated people from it. Why? Because some Christian apologists have failed to distinguish between the established data of science, the proven facts of evolution, and the unwarranted philosophical and religious inferences which certain materialistic writers have drawn from them. It is to be hoped that we shall profit by that experience and not make the same mistake in regard to the scientific data of man's mental life, as disclosed by the findings of modern psychiatry.

## Origin of Psychoanalysis

Psychoanalysis seeks to relieve tensions, to dissolve complexes, to release strangulated emotions and thus to restore mental calm. We can probably enable a reader to secure the best insight into the nature of this new science by showing how it arose. Psychoanalysis had its origin in the discovery of the therapeutic effects of confessing or revealing the secret causes of inner discords to a sympathetic auditor or father confessor.

In 1880 a young woman, Anna O. aged twenty-one, came into the office of her family physician, Dr. Joseph Breuer of Vienna. She was an intelligent and refined young woman suffering from a severe case of hysteria. Though a man of great learning, recognized in Europe for his scientific attainments, Dr. Breuer found the case an exceedingly difficult one. His patient suffered a paralysis of the right arm, disturbance of eye-movements, a loss of the power to drink, almost complete aphasia, and states of "absence."

Briefly, Anna's story was this: She had been in almost constant attendance at the bedside of her father during a long illness which proved fatal. While waiting one night for the surgeon who was coming from Vienna to operate on her father, she fell asleep, exhausted, with her arm hanging over the back of her chair. When she awoke, the arm had become numb. She could not move it or feel it. Paralysis set in.

Her visual disturbances were traced to a painful experience in which a strong emotion was repressed. With tears in her eyes she was sitting at the bedside of her dying father when suddenly he asked what the time was. Trying to suppress the tears which blinded her and to conceal them, she raised her watch very close to her eyes, so that the dial seemed very large and distorted. The resultant symptoms were an abnormal enlargement of the objects she saw and severe strabismus.

### **“If You Would Let Me Talk”**

After diagnosing the case as hysteria, Dr. Breuer tried to remove the symptoms through hypnosis, but with no success. Treatments by some of the most prominent neurologists in Europe brought no better results and the patient returned to Dr. Breuer. Noting that the patient in her states of “absence” mumbled strange words, Dr. Breuer hypnotized her and had her repeat those words many times causing her to reproduce for him the fancies which dominated her mind in her “absence.” After relating those fancies she would be restored for several hours to a normal condition.

One day she said to him: “Dr. Breuer, if you would only let me talk to you and if I could tell you how my difficulties started, I think we could do something.” The doctor was sympathetic and encouraged her to

talk freely, unbosoming herself of her inner discords. They commonly had as their starting point the situation of a young girl confined to the sick bed of her father. She narrated not only the circumstances leading up to the various paralyses she suffered, but gave him an intimate account of her life, revealing her secret dreams, her frustrations, her repressions. She went into matters which a doctor would not generally think of listening to. After such visit, wherein she simply talked freely, she manifested an appreciable improvement.

When reminded that her talking was consuming much of his valuable time, the patient would make an appointment for another "talking" hour. She called it the "talking cure" and insisted upon calling on him just to talk. Despite the tax on his time, Dr. Breuer permitted her to return repeatedly, and sympathizing with her emotional difficulties was rewarded by seeing her symptoms gradually disappear. It all seemed very strange to Dr. Breuer. He had given this woman all sorts of medicine. Another distinguished neurologist had given her hot and cold baths. A third had treated her with electricity. Now he merely listened to her talk and she was getting well!

### Why the Cure?

As Dr. Breuer pondered the significance of this case, he found himself asking repeatedly: Why should

this woman be getting well by merely talking? Gradually he became convinced of one fundamental principle, namely, the importance of getting the patient to go back to the origin of the symptom and to relieve the experience with the proper emotional expression. For the strangulated emotion would thus be released and the symptom would disappear. This constitutes the basic principle underlying psychoanalysis as well as that part of psychiatry which deals with the removal of phobias, complexes, tics and other forms of *Lebenswund*.

Applying this principle to the case already cited, Dr. Breuer found that Anna's inability to drink vanished entirely and without recurrence after the incident connected with its origin had been told in detail and with a great deal of emotion. Thus Anna related that as a little girl she had an English governess whom she greatly disliked. The governess had a little dog which Anna abhorred. One day she saw the governess permitting the dog to drink out of a glass. The sight aroused in her an intense disgust which she repressed out of conventional respect for the governess. After giving complete expression to her disgust at the dog's action, the patient was relieved of that phobia and was able to drink from a glass without disturbance.

The paralysis of her arm was traced to an emotional experience she suffered when she dreamed that she saw a black snake coming out of the wall and

creeping toward the bed. She endeavored to frighten the snake away by a motion of her right arm, only to discover that the arm had "gone to sleep" and that she could not move it. Looking at the fingers of her right hand she perceived them transformed into little snakes. Terrified at the combination of the dream and the anesthesia of her arm, she tried to pray but was able to mutter only an English prayer in the form of a nursery rhyme, presumably taught her by her governess. She was unable to speak or to understand her native tongue, which was German. Out of this momentary limitation, her hysterical self elaborated the conviction that she could speak only English—an impairment which continued for one and a half years.

It was only by having her recall the scene repeatedly, and by explaining to her the sources of these impairments that Anna regained her native German and the use of her right arm. The impairment of her right arm illustrates how a momentary incapacity was accepted as real, and while there was no organic impairment she was nevertheless unable to move it. What a constricted circulation started was fixed by her emotional excitement. Such is the mechanism of hysteria which converts a psychic idea into a bodily symptom.

The numerous cases of "shell shock" suffered by soldiers during both World Wars illustrate the psychogenic character of maladies which paralyze a victim

who has experienced no physical impairment. Thus some shell-shocked soldiers suffered the loss of vision, though there was no injury to the ocular mechanism at all. The impairment was of a purely psychic origin, resulting from the conflict of motives—the desire to obey orders to go “over the top” struggling with the desire to live, the deep-rooted instinct of self-preservation. The solution was sometimes found in temporary blindness, deafness, or paralysis of the limbs—functional impairment imposed upon the physiological organism by means of ideas and feelings.

### **The Cathartic Method**

As a consequence of the success which crowned his treatment of Anna, Dr. Breuer developed a technique of relief for psychogenic maladies by the “talking cure” of explanation, a variety of catharsis. The “cathartic method” calls for the individual to unburden himself with complete candor, to expose foci of infection buried in repressed memories and strangulated emotions, and effects a form of psychic housecleaning. It reflects the conviction that every hysterical symptom embodies some mental or emotional disturbances in the patient’s past which needs to be rationalized and liberated from its prison in the subconscious. These experiences were of a disagreeable nature and were never properly reacted to. Dr. Breuer’s idea was that if the patient



could be prompted to recall the unpleasant situation and live it over again, he would thus release the strangulated emotion and the hysterical symptom would disappear.

Dr. Sigmund Freud developed the cathartic method of his older associate, Dr. Breuer, and has applied it so universally to the treatment of cases of mental pathology that the method is now usually associated with his name. Convinced that all phobias, tics, spasms, pseudo-paralyses and selective anesthetics are situation-scars which demand that their psychic origin be probed, Freud said: "Let us trace the hysterical vagaries to their source in personal, intimate emotionalized situations, and these in turn to whatever motivations may lie behind them." Freud then set forth the three principles underlying the use of the cathartic method. First, the symptoms are not haphazard or meaningless, but have a psychic cause. Second, the origin of the symptoms is hidden from the patient and operates underground—in the cellar of the subconscious. Third, the reason for the suppression is that the memories were disagreeable, or at least heavily charged with conflicting emotion which worked havoc with normal peace of mind.

## II

### APPLICATION

The successful results achieved by the cathartic method furnish additional clues to an understanding of the causes of the snarls and twists projecting themselves into the emotional and mental life of the individual when the memory of the circumstances leading to their formation has faded or has been buried deep in the subconscious.

"Hypnosis," observes Joseph Jastrow, "had shown that the strangle-hold of these hysterical and related impairments and distresses could be released by disengaging the subconscious tentacles. The procedure of hypnosis was uncertain and limited the relation of physician and patient. Breuer and Freud sought and found the effective release of subconscious secrets by inducing their patients to assume a passive attitude and talk about themselves freely and intimately; this was the talking cure or chimney sweeping, or psychic housecleaning or catharsis. This discovery, that symptoms could be banished by giving free vocal play to the affect, came upon them with the greatest surprise. It raises an important question for later consideration: why consciousness cures, why talking things out helps, why confession is good for the soul."

## Removing Neuroses

It is to be noted that the cathartic method is often helpful in the treatment not only of pseudo-paralyses, deprivations of function, hysterical impairment of sense or limb, but also of compulsion neuroses—intrusive bits of behavior, tics and habit-spasms, curious rituals, wayward impulses or obsessive thoughts which play havoc with the individual's behavior problems and his peace of mind. Under this general head would come likewise the anxiety neuroses, constant disturbing fears and doubts and hesitations, feelings of restlessness and frustration, marked ennui, losses of zest, exhaustion states and panicky attitudes which project themselves at times in pronounced bodily symptoms.

All these interfere with the maintenance of a serene outlook, with normal absorption in one's work and throw him out of adjustment to the tasks of daily life. Neuroses such as these twist the cogs in the wheels of life and throw them out of gear. If the complicated machinery of the psychosomatic personality is to function smoothly, these irritants, these foci of friction must be eliminated. Otherwise the abnormality becomes more pronounced and a psychic cripple results.

In the cathartic method of dealing with such psychic irritants, there is perceptible, points out Jastrow, "the

first stage of the protracted confessional technique which today supports the profession of psychoanalysts. This free-lance probing became in Freud's hands a divining-rod, and eventually uncovered the underground currents that issued in nervous handicaps and the conflicts behind them—what by way of anticipation may at once be called the 'complex.' Once discovered, its very acknowledgment, the recognition of the need of its dissolution, its *abreaction* by such skill of persuasion and authority as the analyst possessed, determined the course of release, and paved the way for the patient's readaptation to his circumstance and the attainment of normality—all this potentially for normal as well as neurotic case-histories."

The motto which might well be carved over the door of every psychoanalyst is: "All hope of reticence abandon, ye who enter here." For unless the patient lays bare the secret causes of the disturbance, and narrates frankly the circumstances leading to the complex, there can be no effective treatment, no release of the congested emotion. The discovery of the real cause of the psychosis, often buried deep in the subconscious memory, and its removal by skillful therapeutic treatment is as necessary for mental health as the discovery of carcinoma and its eradication is for physical health. It should be added, however, that psychoanalytic treatment offers no exemption from the law of modesty in thought, word and deed.

### III

## CONFESSION—THE BEST CATHARSIS

From what has been said it is evident, first, that it was the unbosoming or confessing of certain unpleasant experiences in the past by his patient that revealed to Dr. Breuer the rich therapeutic effects of the cathartic method, the housecleaning of the soul. Psychoanalysis may be said to be but the confessional technique developed by the psychiatrist in the probing of psychic disturbances and in effecting their removal. Secondly, it is evident that the ideal agency for obtaining such disclosures with complete candor is the confessional of the Catholic Church. Here the patient is conscious that his revelation is protected by an inviolable secrecy. He knows that the confessor would gladly sacrifice his life rather than disclose one single word whispered in the confessional.

Furthermore, he is free to enjoy a complete anonymity by going to a confessional where both confessor and penitent are perfect strangers. Every human consideration calculated to prove helpful to the penitent in unbosoming himself of his troubles, sins and disturbances will be found in the regulations governing the administration of the sacrament of confession.

In addition, there are spiritual considerations which no psychoanalyst can provide. There is the religious faith which reminds the penitent that he is confessing

to God, and that the confessor is acting merely as the human ambassador of the Most High, extending mercy and forgiveness in His name. He realizes that the concealment of a grievous misdeed would not only nullify the confession but would add to the penitent's soul the guilt of sacrilege. That is why the confessional in the humblest Catholic Church in the world is a more efficacious agency for a complete catharsis than the office of any psychoanalyst, no matter how many technicians it may have and no matter how persuasive they may be in pleading for a frank dislodgment of the disagreeable and painful out of the buried past.

### **Increasing Recognition**

This is the conviction not only of those who have had actual experience of the sacrament, such as priests and penitents, but it is also the conclusion reached by those outside the Church who have made careful observations on the effects of the confessional upon the lives of those who frequent it.

Thus the Rev. Dr. Harry E. Fosdick, pastor of the Riverside Baptist Church of New York, speaking before more than 1,000 ministers at the annual meeting of the Greater New York Federation of Churches, strongly urged the restoration of the confessional to Protestant churches. "We Protestants are losing

more," he said, "than we have any business to lose by not coming in closer contact with the individual. When a Catholic would take his mental troubles to his priest, the Protestant would go to a psychoanalyst or like specialist, and the church would gain nothing in experience. . . . The confessional, which Protestantism throws out the door, is coming back through the window, in utterly new forms, to be sure, with new methods and with an entirely new intellectual explanation, appropriate to the Protestant churches but motivated by a real determination to help meet the inward problems of individuals.

"Clergymen are giving different names to this form of activity, such as 'trouble clinics,' 'personal conferences on spiritual problems,' 'the Protestant confessional.' The name makes little difference. What does matter is the renewed awareness in the churches that they are in danger of surrendering to the psychoanalyst that vast field of human needs where the confession of sin and spiritual misery is met with sympathetic and intelligent treatment. To be sure, a wise minister will work with a psychiatrist, not without one, but if the churches substitute any other kind of success for the successful handling of the spiritual aspects of individual problems, they will be vacating their most obvious functions."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Literary Digest*, Dec. 17, 1927, p. 2.

## Psychiatrists Pay Tribute

In recent years not only religious leaders but professional psychiatrists have come to recognize more clearly and with increasing appreciation the wholesome and healing influence which the confessional exercises upon the mental health of the hundreds of millions of people who find in it relief and encouragement. Thus such noted psychiatrists as Groves and Blanchard, in their recent volume on *Mental Hygiene*, pay the following high tribute to the therapeutic value of the confessional:

“The Roman Catholic Church’s provision for oral confession to the priest has a moral and therapeutic value which Protestant churches generally lack. The psychiatrist is frequently called upon to act the role of priest, listening to revelations of guilt that the patient dare not share with any one except when protected by the professional code of secrecy, and assuring the patient that the guilt need not longer be carried as a hidden burden. Protestantism needs to develop a better method of dealing with personal guilt than public confession of general sinfulness. There is a craving to particularize the guilt to get definitely rid of the burden, and this impulse at present is adequately recognized only by the Roman Catholic confession.”

That is why so comparatively few Catholics need



the services of a psychiatrist. Thus the eminent psychiatrist, C. G. Jung, speaking from the experience of a busy professional life says: "During the past thirty years, people from all the civilized countries of the earth have consulted me. I have treated many hundreds of patients, the larger number being Protestants, a smaller number Jews, and not more than five or six believing Catholics. Among all my patients in the second half of life—that is to say, over thirty-five—there has not been one whose problem in the last resort was not that of finding a religious outlook on life. It is safe to say that every one of them fell ill because he had lost that which the living religions of every age have given to their followers, and none of them has been really healed who did not regain his religious outlook."<sup>2</sup>

While the mere disclosure of sin to a sympathetic friend has a therapeutic value, confession in the Catholic Church has a far greater and more beneficial effect because it not only permits the confession of sins but gives to the penitent that which he craves above all else—the assurance of God's pardon. It is this latter element which, far more than the former, restores peace and tranquillity to the troubled soul. Why should he worry, when because of his sorrow and purpose of amendment he has received through the ambassador of

<sup>2</sup> *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, Harcourt, Brace & Co., N. Y., 1933, p. 264.

God the pardon of the Most High? There is a craving, it is true, to confess one's guilt. But the far deeper and more insistent craving is for the *remission* of the guilt. This is the real reason why the confessional exercises such a marvelous influence upon the mental health of the hundreds of millions of people who use it.

### An Important Difference

This fact was recognized and frankly acknowledged by the late Shailer Matthews, Dean of the Divinity School at Chicago University. Referring to the movement among Protestants to restore the confessional, the Dean remarked to the writer: "Protestants will derive some value from talking over their troubles and their sins with a minister in a trouble clinic or Protestant confessional. It is the relief which comes from sharing one's troubles with another. But they will never derive the distinctive relief which the Catholic penitent secures, namely, the relief which comes only from the feeling that the sins are actually forgiven and the guilt actually removed. That flows from the Catholic doctrine concerning the power of the priest to forgive sins from the soul of a contrite penitent."

Similar too is the observation made by Dr. John Rathbone Oliver, a noted psychiatrist, in commenting on the marked trend among Protestant leaders to restore the confessional because of its therapeutic value.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> *Scribner's*, July, 1930.

“Our Protestant brothers,” he says, “are doing something of the same kind. But it is an utter misunderstanding of the situation to imagine that the Protestant can ever undo the damage of the ‘outlawing of the confessional.’ It is possible that a Presbyterian or a Methodist pastor might set up in his church a so-called ‘confessional box’; he might sit on one side of it behind the grating, and might listen to the outpourings of the sins and troubles of some members of his congregation. No doubt the person who there poured out his soul might be benefited by the procedure; might get helpful advice and go away feeling happier. But all the confessional boxes in the world could not bring back to the Protestant bodies the one thing that really matters—the one thing that is more important than confession—than all the confessional boxes in the world—the thing we Catholics call ‘absolution.’

“It is the ‘absolution’ that gives to the confessional its great power to help and to heal. It is the Sacrament of Penance, in which by the ‘power that our Lord Jesus Christ has left upon earth to absolve all sinners who truly repent and believe in Him,’ the priest, acting in Christ’s name and by His authority, ‘absolves from sin’—in which he, as it were, pours upon the head of the penitent the precious blood that was shed upon the cross, in the one perfect sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world. And where there is no priesthood, there is no absolving priest;

where there is no absolving priest there is no absolute blotting out of all past sin, no complete restoration to God's grace and to complete forgiveness. To the Catholic, every confession and absolution is a fresh start. He begins his Christian life all over again. All past guilt is wiped out. And fresh grace is given him to start on the road of life once more."

In Great Britain, Dr. Martensen, a distinguished Protestant theologian, pays tribute to the confessional not only because it ministers directly to the social welfare by insisting upon truth, honesty, and justice, and upon restitution when the latter is violated, but also because it ministers directly to the hunger of the individual soul for personal spiritual regeneration. "Absolution," he says, "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, derived from the full power of binding and loosing which the Church has inherited from the Apostles is not unconditional, but depends on the same condition on which the gospel itself adjudges the forgiveness of sins, namely, change of heart and faith. . . .

"It cannot easily be denied that confession meets a deep need of human nature. There is a great psychological truth in the saying of Pascal, that a man often attains for the first time a true sense of sin, and a true stayedness in his good purpose, when he confesses his sins to his fellow man, as well as to God. Catholicism has often been commended because by confession it

affords an opportunity of depositing the confession of his sins in the breast of another man, where it remains kept under the seal of the most sacred secrecy, and whence the consolation of the forgiveness of sins is given him in the very name of the Lord.”<sup>4</sup>

### Restoring Peace of Mind

Every confessor can recall numerous instances where the relief experienced by the penitent has been indeed remarkable. Penitents at times enter the confessional so visibly disturbed in mind that their voices quaver and break, sighs of anguish escape them, and tears even course down their faces. After their confession is completed, and they receive the absolution of God’s ambassador, and hear from him words of counsel and encouragement to rise and strive again with renewed courage and faith in God’s abiding help, they leave the confessional enjoying a calmness, a peace of mind, and a courage that has transformed them into new men and new women.

Familiar as such occurrences are to priests and to members of the Catholic laity, it is interesting to note that even non-Catholics have observed the visible effects of the confessional upon people tortured with the guilt of grievous sin. Thus Dr. John Rathbone Oliver, who was kneeling in a Catholic church on

<sup>4</sup> *Christian Dogmatics*, p. 443 ff.

Saturday afternoon when confessions were being heard. narrates the following striking instance of such a transformation:

"A few weeks ago, I was kneeling at the back of such a church. In front of me there knelt a girl of perhaps sixteen or less. She was tense—tormented, apparently. She twisted about; she could not keep still. The glimpse that I caught of her showed me the face of a person in great mental distress. I could not take my eyes from her. She seemed anxiety personified. A few moments later, she got up, and went into the confessional. I also got up, from my knees, and walked up to the high altar to kneel before the Blessed Sacrament. Time passed quickly there. Then some one pushed by me—and knelt down on the altar steps, just a few feet away. It was the same girl. But I have never seen such a change in any human being. All her tenseness was gone; the lines of worry had been smoothed from her face. No signs of mental torment now; no anxiety—only perfect relaxation—peace—and, apparently, a great happiness—for her lips were parted in a smile. If I, as a psychiatrist, could have done for that girl in three hours what had been accomplished in fifteen minutes, I should have thought myself a clever physician indeed.

"I watched her make the sign of the cross, from forehead to breast, from shoulder to shoulder, with a hand that was steady, co-ordinated, efficient, exact. Then she

folded her arms on her breast, and lifted her face to the Tabernacle. That face still bore traces of dried tears; but the eyes were bright—unclouded. I left her there—with a prayer of thanksgiving—left her there at peace with man—and, if I may say so without irreverence—at home with her God.

“‘All magic—all superstition—all emotional self-hypnosis,’ my materialistic friends may say. Well, let them say so as often as they please. I shall begin to listen to them when their own particular type of magic and hypnosis gets the same results.”<sup>5</sup>

### **In a Nutshell**

To sum up: Whatever light psychiatry and psychoanalysis can throw upon the causes of mental ills is to be welcomed with eagerness and gratitude. Their findings offer relief in many cases. The results come slowly as a rule and only after long tedious sessions over considerable periods of time. We need more Catholics to devote themselves to psychiatry as a consecrated life work. It has a close kinship with morality and religion.

While acknowledging cheerfully the many valuable therapeutic treatments worked out by experts in mental hygiene, we point to the confessional as offering a relief from the sense of guilt which surpasses any medicine or remedy developed by the psychiatrist or the psycho-

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* p. 66.

analyst. For the removal of guilt and all the brood of fears, worries, dreads and anxieties stemming from it, confession is the unfailing remedy. A good and sincere confession begets a peace of mind and a serene joy which nothing else in the world can give. Psychiatrists frankly acknowledge that it accomplishes marvelous results with a sureness and a speed which they might well envy.

Catholics should thank God for this wonderful gift and make generous use of it. Great as is its influence in restoring peace of mind, that is only incidental to its primary and spiritual effect—the actual remission of sin from a contrite and humble soul. Confession demands as a necessary condition for its validity, sorrow for sin and the determination to avoid the sin in the future. That firm purpose of amendment is best demonstrated by the keeping of one's resolution to avoid sin and to grow in holiness—in the love of God and in the service of our neighbor. The sacrament of God's mercy makes therefore not only for a *happy* life but for a *better* one as well.



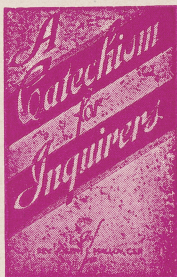
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