

# *My Father's House*

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## **The Priest as Counselor**

by

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Every priest in Pauline words should become competent in counseling. We have the truth, the principles of truth, the gift of prophecy, the gift of healing, the gift of love, the gift of discernment, plus the vocation to be shepherds of the flock entrusted to us. Many priests need to stir up the spirit of counseling within them through prayer, study and working with others more competent than we. We are God's shepherds of the soul. Yet so many priests do not fulfill the vocation to counsel.

### **What is Counseling?**

Bishop Fulton Sheen, in a wonderful chapter, "The Spirit and Counseling," from his book, "The Priest is not His Own," states, "The aim of counseling is to move the person from the realm of the flesh to that of the Spirit." In short, counseling has more to do with spiritual direction than with more secular, psychological advise.

### **The State of the Union**

Today, spiritual directors are rare, and very much psychology is in a state of disarray. One major study stated that most of psychology is counterproductive to mental health. The reason for this is that much of psychology has distanced itself from traditional psychology that relies heavily upon prayer, discernment, Eucharist, confession, and battling temptation. Since only faith can truly heal worry and fear, and only hope can truly heal depression and only God's love can truly heal a poor self-image and loneliness, and only his forgiveness can truly heal guilt and sin, and the giving of his forgiveness really heals bitterness and hatred, a psychologist needs to be into not only prayer but also faith, hope, love and forgiveness to really heal wounded souls.

Yet the truth of the matter is that most psychologists are not people of the Spirit. Many if not most are dealing from a false anthropology that considers the human person as a Pavlovian dog, a cesspool of libidinous instincts, or the very least, a person who could lift themselves by their own bootstraps into mental and spiritual health with the aid of a counselor and pills. The results are devastating. Many doctors and psychologists end up supporting radical feminism, pagan secular education, contraception, abortion, promiscuity,

satisfied in a fixed order. Firstly, the most basic needs are physiological such as food and comfort and they must be met, together with safety and security. Then, and only then, can we proceed to the needs for belonging, for love, self-esteem, and status. Finally, we can then reach the highest needs of all that are for *self-realization* or *self-actualization*. Notice the basic anti-Christian principle here. Apparently, we cannot look for our highest needs until we have met the basic needs for food, comfort and so on. This contradicts the Christian doctrine on suffering and it is contradicted by the countless numbers of Christians who in spite of tremendous deprivation and even torture have risen to the highest levels of holiness. Needless to say, Maslow would scoff at the Christian notion that our highest need is for God, the *summum bonum*. Maslow stated, "A few centuries ago, these self-actualized people would all have been described as men who walk in the path of God, or as Godly men. A few say that they believe in God but describe this God more as a metaphysical concept than as a personal figure." I would regard that statement as a rewrite of Church history.

### **A New Definition of Religion**

He then goes on to say, "If religion is defined only in social behavioral terms then these are all religious people, atheists included." Now how can an intelligent man regard atheism as a religion? That is an oxymoron more expected from the mouth of an ox or moron than from the mouth of a university graduate. But then he says "but if more conservatively we use the term religion as to include and stress the supernatural element and institutional orthodoxy, then our answer must be quite different, for then almost none of them is religious."

### **Even Words Lose Their Meaning**

What does that mean? He has naively dismissed religion by simply redefining it to suit his own preconceived and biased conclusions. As Humpty Dumpty said, "Words mean what I choose them to mean."

### **Rollo May**

Rollo May exemplified the influence of existential philosophy on American self-psychology. He received a bachelor of divinity degree from, guess where – Union Theological Seminary in New York City – a hot bed of liberal Protestantism, which seems to have spawned the thinking of the secular psychological movement. *Existential* therapy starts from the concept of the self, aware of its basic existence, but living in dread of non-existence or annihilation. This self is encouraged by the therapist to develop decisions that will bring his potential to fulfillment. When this process succeeds, the individual who initially only had existence, has now created his or her own essence. Again, this violates Christian belief that from the moment of conception we all have essence, an essence that was lovingly and freely given to us by a loving God. Rollo May believes that we do not have essence until we self-actualize and the process by which we achieve that is purely a human-driven effort and does not need God at all.

### **Assorted Others:**

A whole litany of schools of thought have arisen in this century, which, since they are so diverse, need to be dealt with in a general way for the purposes of this talk. They include

their dysfunctional personalities whenever they are in a low mood. They, too, are mood driven.

### **Self-Esteem**

I'd like to expand on the concept of self-esteem. It has become the buzzword of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Low self-esteem has become a universal epidemic of our society. Apparently everyone should have high self-esteem and if they don't, they are defective. But what is it? According to the masters of ego therapy and pop psychology, it is a high regard for oneself, taking pride in one's talents and achievements, and drives us on to perfect realization of our full potential as independent, autonomous units. Dependency of any kind is, therefore, pathological. Are we to conclude then that all babies and young children are dysfunctional since they are all totally dependent upon their parents?

### **The Christian Virtue of Humility**

This is a far cry from the Christian virtue of humility, which recognizes the truth that we are nothing alongside a perfect and infinite God; and that we are totally dependent upon Him and His grace for our existence and for our salvation. Therefore, modern *secular psychology* and Christianity are not only incompatible but are at war with one another. The high priest of psychology promises fulfillment, happiness and peace without God. Christianity offers these only by dying to self, taking up the cross and putting on the mind of Christ. The psychologist says that fulfillment, happiness and peace can only be achieved by swelling the ego, becoming more self-focused and developing the self. Christianity says the opposite. The ego must shrink; we must become more other-focused and we must develop Christ in us not the self. St. John the Baptist knew this when he said, "I must decrease while he must increase."

### **Children Taught Self-Esteem**

The concept of self-esteem has no clear intellectual origins, yet it has become a dominant theme in the education of North American children, at least in the United States. Today, in many U.S. schools, students are told how wonderful they are and they are made to perform exercises whereby they must say and write all kinds of positive things about themselves. A major project in this field was carried out in California. These educators believed that low self-esteem was the major cause of everything from drug use to teenage pregnancy to low reading and math scores to discipline problems and high dropout rates. The techniques used to raise self-esteem were to give prizes to all students regardless of performance. Self-esteem was, of course, not linked to performance since this would raise the possibility of failure, which would then perpetuate the low self-esteem.

### **Self-Esteem – No Indicator of Integrity**

But scientific studies show that there is no evidence that the level of one's self-esteem helps us to predict important behaviors. There is no reason to believe that high self-esteem causes anything. Lots of people with low self-esteem have achieved great things (e.g., Albert Schweitzer, Vincent Van Gogh, St. Thomas Aquinas, Mother Teresa). By contrast, many people with high self-esteem are content to be rich, beautiful or socially connected. A study on inner-city drug dealers showed that they all had high self-esteem.

Christian therapy, on the other hand, would certainly investigate the past, but with a view to locating those experiences which the patient has yet to forgive. If his parents have abused him, then he may still need to go before Jesus and forgive them from his heart. Only in this way will he ever be free of their abuse. Yet in all of my textbooks of psychotherapy, I have not once read of forgiveness as an essential tool in the healing process.

Ellen Bass, an expert in the treatment of survivors of sexual abuse states vehemently that the victim should not forgive the perpetrator, but rather confront the perpetrator and take punitive action against him. The teaching of Jesus Christ stands in opposition to this posture of vengeance. He asks us to turn the other cheek and to return a blessing for an insult. What would a modern psychiatrist say about our Holy Father visiting the cell of Ali Agca, the man who shot him, and offering him his heartfelt forgiveness? Had Pope John Paul II gone for non-Christian counseling beforehand, he would not have been advised to go and forgive. As to the present, we teach that the client is now an adult, called by Christ to mature in his faith, to grow in virtue and to rise above his feelings by an act of will. In other words, he has *free will*, the ability to choose, and he must take responsibility for his choices and actions. He can no longer blame the ghosts of his pasts.

### Summary

To sum up, then, today we have in North America and Western Europe a cultural self-centeredness, much of it directly due to psychology. We have successfully instilled a "me" ideal which leads us to regard success as due to our cleverness while failure is the fault of someone else or is due to bad luck. Psychology has become committed to narcissism "self-worship", or as Professor Vitz calls it, *selfism*. As a result, Vitz states, "Countless Christians worry more about losing their self-esteem than about losing their souls."

The fact is that psychology has become a religion even though the gurus of psychology would cringe at the idea. God is me and my dogmas derive from what is good for me. And only the priests of this religion can tell me how to realize my full potential, and tell me what my full potential can be. A Catholic priest mediates between me and God. The psychotherapist priest mediates between my present self and the god-self which I can become.

Professor Vitz argues for five principles:

1. Psychology as religion exists and is growing in strength in North America.
2. Psychology as religion can be criticized on many grounds quite independently of religion (i.e., scientific, humanist, common-sense).
3. Psychology as religion is deeply anti-Christian.
4. Psychology as religion is extensively supported by schools, universities, and social programs that are financed by taxes collected from millions of Christians. This use of tax money to support what has become a secular ideology raises grave political and legal issues.
5. Psychology as religion has for years been destroying individuals, families and communities.

aged to be immersed in cares and the old to grow avaricious?

Our time may well witness a phenomenon of alarming proportions: a growth in diabolical possession and a renewed interest in Satan. Play, novels, books and movies can be expected to use his name more and more, not as something evil, but as something fascinating, to play with the flames of hell as children will play with fire. (FS pg. 150)

### **A Spirit Inhabited World**

Every priest must come to recognize that we deal from a Spirit-inhabited, world; that is, a world of angels and demons. St. Paul warns us that our battle is not against flesh and blood but against the mighty Satan forces. We have to use the equipment that St. Paul tells us to us (Ephesians 6) in putting on the armor of God. First, we put on the armor of salvation, that God has come to live in us through Baptism in the power of His Spirit. He who is within us is greater than the Satanic forces that surround us. Secondly, we are to put on the breastplate of righteousness, that is to confess all known sin so that we can become truer vessels in the deliverance of others. Third, we are to put on the belt of truth to help people come into the light, realizing that most people have minds somewhat distant from the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth of our Catholic faith.

Fourth, we are to meditate daily upon the word of God and the new Catechism. This, Paul calls the sword of the Spirit. Next, we are to take up the shield of faith, realizing that there is nothing that can truly harm us if we are walking with God. And finally, we are to do our best in spreading the good news that God is our father, that Jesus is Lord and Savior, that the Spirit is among us, that Mary is our mother, and that we are members of the one, true mystical body of Christ - a formidable array, to be sure.

### **To Be Ignorant of Christ Is to Be Ignorant of the Truth**

The metaphysics of counseling means to get the mind and heart to correspond to reality as it is with love. That is no small feat in today's world. Many people have given up their quest for truth and rely upon the false opinions of men. In short, not to believe in God or not to believe in a God who is actually involved in our lives is a very serious form of insanity; that is, a cutting off our minds from the ultimate reality. Not to believe in the length, breadth, height and depth of Catholic wisdom is also a form of insanity because, once again, the mind is cut off from infallibly-revealed truth. So therefore, a person who believes in abortion, promiscuity, contraception, pornography are to the extent that they really believe in them, insane. That is, their minds are cut off from reality. In the moral realm, this is known as sin. In the psychology, it is known as schizophrenia, that is the splitting of the mind from reality. Most illness, therefore, is spiritual-psychosomatic. As the mind is cut off from reality, the emotions are cut off from valid, rational response. All of this produces physical effects in the body, as well, which leads many in Christian counseling to estimate that up to 90 percent of all physical ailments are caused by not walking in the Spirit, that is the spirit of reality and the realm of love.

questions. Holiness draws penitents to holy priests. The attraction of such priests is the attraction of Christ Himself.

"If only I am lifted up from the earth, I will attract all men to Myself" (John 12:32).

No priest sees problems so sympathetically as the priest who is standing on the watchtower of Calvary. Like the sun, it cannot be seen, and yet it illumines all else.

How many souls say of that great army of saintly priests: "He showed me my heart" or "He showed me the loveliness of Christ" or "It was like talking to Our Lord." It is not possible for a priest, at one and the same time, to be clever and to show that Our Lord is mighty to save. With noble iteration, no less than thirty-three times does Saint Paul use the expression "in Christ". To him it is the secret of "encouragement, loving sympathy, common fellowship in the Spirit" (Phil 2:1). The priest imbued with this concept, because he has "crucified nature with all its passions and all its impulses" (Gal 5:24), always directs others in the shadow of the Cross and the light of the Spirit.

### **Counseling and the Conscience**

Priestly counseling is basically the application of the Redemption to the individual. It is not just preaching to one person instead of preaching to a crowd, for in counseling the individual presents his problem as does a patient to a doctor. The priest establishes the facts, as the doctor does; then he presents his diagnosis and treatment, always mindful of the words of Our Lord. "Only the Spirit gives life, the flesh is of no avail; and the words that I have been speaking to you are Spirit and Life" (John 6:64).

The Spirit is particularly important when the priest is dealing with a problem of behavior rather than an intellectual problem. In almost nine cases out of ten, those who have once had the faith but now reject it or claim that it does not make sense are driven not by reasoning but by the way they are living. Catholics usually fall away not from any difficulty with the Creed, but from some difficulty with the Commandments. When this happens, the priest's task is to arouse the conscience through the Spirit. There is not much reference to the conscience alone in Scripture, but there is abundant testimony that the conscience is aroused by the Holy Spirit. Saint Paul tells us that it was his conscience that was illumined by the Holy Spirit, making him ready to be doomed in order to save his brethren.

"I am telling you the truth in Christ's name, with the full assurance of a conscience enlightened by the Holy Spirit" (Romans 9:1).

It is the work of conscience to witness to our fulfillment of our duty toward God but it is the work of the Spirit to witness to god's acceptance of our faith in Christ and our obedience to Him. Thanks to the Spirit, the testimony of conscience and the declaring of Christ in our life become identical. Conscience alone in a person may be likened to a room that is very poorly lighted and in which the Commandments are printed on the wall in small characters. when the Holy Spirit illumines the conscience, a brilliant light is shed upon those characters. The Holy Spirit restores consciences, so that they accept the guidance of

the young would seek us out, hearts unnumbered would seek comfort in our confessionals did we but realize the extraordinary powers of direction, counseling and guidance that come from living in the Spirit of Christ.

### **Counseling Through Sympathy**

Compassion is identification with others, whether they be laughing or weeping. "Rejoice with those who rejoice, mourn with the mourner," (Romans 12:15).

Such heart-unity with the woes of others, as the parable of the Good Samaritan teaches, is independent of our natural feelings. The psalms also inspire us to a like sympathy for everyone we meet. "Time was, when these were sick; what did I then? Sackcloth was my wear; rigorously I kept fast, prayed from my heart's depths. I went my way sadly, as one that mourns for brother or friend, bowed with grief, as one that bewails a mother's loss" (Psalm 34:13-14 [35:13-14, RSV])

When Elizabeth, after being long childless, finally brought forth John the Baptist, "her neighbors and her kinsfolk, hearing how wonderfully God has showed His mercy to her, came to rejoice with her" (Lk 1:58). Did not the woman who had lost her piece of money and found it call in her neighbors to rejoice, as did the shepherd who found the lost sheep? Did not Our Blessed Lord weep over His enemies, whom He knew were about to stain their hands with His Blood (Lk 19:41)? Did He not say also that the angels in heaven are not indifferent spectators at the conversion of sinners (Lk 15:7-10)? When Our Blessed Lord saw the tomb of His friend Lazarus, did He now weep so that the Jews exclaimed, "How he loved him" (Jn 11:37)?

The weddings and the funerals in the parish, the converts and the fallen-away, the faithful young and the juvenile delinquents, the bigots and the men of good will -- to all of these the sympathy of Christ goes out in the priest as he fulfills the words of Paul: "Bear the burden of one another's failings; then you will be fulfilling the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2).

Everywhere in the Bible, the priest is pictured as binding up the broken, bringing back those that have been driven away, carrying lambs in his bosom and gently leading those that are with young (Ezek 34:2, 4; Is 40:11). This is a great worry to a good priest, and he may feel the burden so much as to cry out as Moses did:

"Lord, he said, why dost Thou treat me thus? Must I carry a whole people like a weight on my back? I did not bring this multitude of men into the world, I did not beg them; and Thou wouldst have me nurse them in my bosom like a child ... I cannot bear, alone, the charge of so many; it is too great a burden for me" (Numbers 11:11-14).

At other times, the spiritual priest, full of anxiety for his converts, will compare his feelings to the pangs of a woman in childbirth: "My little children, I am in travail over you afresh, until I can see Christ's image formed in you" (Galatians 4:19).

Such a priest will express a special sympathy on sick calls to those who suffer. No priest

No matter how strong the grip of vice, the penitent must still be assured that no mountain of guilt is so great as not to be removable by the Blood of Christ. Ever mindful of the treasures of mercies he has received from the Sacred Heart, the confessor will assure every sinner that "even lame folk shall carry plunder away" (Is 33:23), as the people of Jerusalem were told when victory seemed impossible.

Many sinners, particularly those guilty of sins that cause excessive introversion, are prone to adopt the language of Cain: "Guilt like mine is too great to find forgiveness." Genesis 4:14

They may even curse the day of their birth, as did Job (3:1; 27:2) and Jeremiah (20:1-18), or even ask God to take away life, as did Elijah (3 Kings 19:4 [1 Kings 19:4, RSV]). But did not Our Lord Himself on the Cross, shutting out the consolations of divinity, cry out (as He suffered for the darkness of atheists and agnostics): "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34; Psalm 22:1 [22:1, RSV]

Such souls must be assured: "Was there ever such a God, so ready to forgive sins, to overlook faults?...He loves to pardon." Micah 7:18:19

And after all, if they had never sinned, or we had never sinned, how could we call Jesus "Savior"?

We come from a world where God is ever working in love, where His sympathy never grows cold, where His mercy never tires, where His tenderness never wearies. "My Father has never ceased working, and I too must be at work." John 5:17

He makes use of every faintest hope, waterpots at a marriage feast, loaves and fishes in a boy's basket, a Matthew at a desk, a man sitting under a tree, a student with the Book of Isaiah in his hand--He notes them all in compassion. The key to his apostolate is not "the human touch," but the Christ-touch. "He held out His Hand and touched him." Mark 1:41

Close, intimate, personal contact with affliction and grief is the key to counseling in the Spirit. The spontaneous impulse of pity breaking through the barriers of disease and disgust is the Christ-touch continued in the priest. Christ touched the leper and was unpolluted, as He took on sin and was without sin; so the priest, like a sunbeam, passes through a fouled humanity without stain.

Counseling is touching where there is disease or misfortune; it is not the simple giving of advice. A shake of the hand could be more of an occasion of grace than a meal sent superciliously from an agency. The priest takes the hands of the diseased whom he wishes to help; he goes down to their level, sees the old with their eyes and the cancerous with their thoughts, knowing all the while that he can make them holy only to the extent to which Christ has already touched him.