

PSYCHOLOGY OF HUMILITY, BASIS OF ALL TRUE SPIRITUAL AND MENTAL HEALTH¹

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CHRISTIANITY has produced without any doubt men and women who have fulfilled in themselves the greatest potentiality of the human personality. In all the centuries of the Christian era there stand out men and women, and no small number of them, whom everyone felt were fully developed and integrated and whom mankind could take as patterns of the mature and developed personality. This has been more so than in any other period of history.

It is very true that it is the triumph of the life of Christ in these men and women that has brought them to holiness, maturity and integration; but in the process their psychological development has taken place. The life of grace does not by-pass nature but adds to it, and lifts it on to another plane. 'Holiness', says St Thérèse of Lisieux, 'does not consist in one exercise or another, but in a disposition of the heart which renders us humble and little in the hands of God, conscious of our weakness and confident even daringly confident in his fatherly goodness.' St Vincent de Paul writing to one of his priests says, 'It is essential for you to empty yourself of yourself, that you may put on Jesus Christ. You know that ordinary causes produce their natural effect: a sheep begets a sheep, a man another man, etc. So too, if he who guides others, trains them, converses with them, is animated only with the human spirit, those who will see, listen to, and strive to imitate him, will become utterly human . . . he will convey to them only the spirit by which he himself is animated.' St Leo says, 'The whole discipline of Christian wisdom consists in true and willing humility which the Lord Jesus chose for himself and taught to others, from his Mother's womb till his death on the cross.'

At the basis of the Christian life therefore is the virtue of humility. It is not the greatest of the virtues but it is the most necessary. It is not simply something which is imposed from without or a series of external acts. It is essentially an interior spiritual transformation which is at the same time an interior psychological transformation. St Bernard defines it as a virtue whereby a man

¹ A paper read at a Catholic Psychological Congress in Madrid, September 1957.

through a true knowledge of himself becomes despicable in his own eyes. St Thomas says, 'The virtue which restrains a man's mind from aiming at big things against reason, is the virtue of humility'.

I would like to show as far as is possible within the limits of this paper that the psychological operation which humility is—man's emptying himself of himself—is also the necessary basis of mental health integration and maturity. The better to do this I would like to present two dreams of St John Bosco. The first was in 1876 and was related by him as follows.

'It seems to me as if we were all together going from Lanzo to Turin. We were in some kind of vehicles—I couldn't say whether it was a train or buses—but anyway we were not on foot. At a certain point, I don't remember where, the vehicle stopped. I got out to see what was happening and came face to face with a person I find it hard to describe. He seemed to be tall and short at the same time, both fat and thin, pale and yet ruddy complexioned, walking on the ground and yet in the air. I plucked up courage and asked, "Who are you?" He simply answered, "Come". I wanted to know who he was and what he wanted, but he went on, "Come quickly. Let us turn the vehicles into this field." The funny part about it was that he was speaking quietly and loudly at the same time, and in different voices. The field was a very big one and stretched out level as far as the eye could see. It was not ploughed in furrows, but all flattened like a threshing-floor. I could see the strange person was very determined, so I had the vehicles brought into the field and called to everybody to get out. No sooner were they all down, than the vehicles disappeared.

"Now that we are all out", I said to my strange companion, "perhaps you will tell me why you have made us stop here." "For a very important reason", he replied. "To make you avoid a very big danger." "What danger is that?" I asked. "It is the danger from a very ferocious bull that leaves nobody alive in its path. *Taurus rugiens quaerens quem devoret.*" "Just a moment, my friend", I said. "You are saying about a bull what St Peter said about a lion, *leo rugiens.*" "That doesn't matter", he retorted. "It was a lion there, but it is a bull here. The fact is that you had all better keep a good look-out. Call all your people round you and tell them very seriously to be on the alert. Very alert. As soon as they hear the bellowing of a bull—not an ordinary

bellow, but a tremendous one—they are to throw themselves on the ground and stay that way until the bull has gone past. Woe to those who will not listen to you. If they do not lie face downwards they will be well and truly lost. It says in the Bible that he who lowers himself will be raised up, but he that raises himself up will be brought down. *Qui se humiliat exaltabitur, et qui se exaltat humiliabitur.*”

“Then he went on again, “Quick! Quick! The bull is just going to come; call to them to lie down.” I shouted, but he said, “Louder! Louder!” I shouted so loudly that I believe I even frightened Don Lemoyne who was sleeping in the next room to me. The next moment we heard the bull bellowing. “Look out! Look out!” cried the stranger. “Make them get into two lines close together so that the bull can pass down the middle.” I passed on the order and in the twinkling of an eye they were all on the ground; we could see the bull charging along furiously in the distance. There were some who wanted to see the bull and would not lie down with the others.

“The stranger said to me, “Now you will see what will happen to them because they don’t want to throw themselves down.” I wanted to warn them, to run to them, but he would not let me. “You must obey as well. Throw yourself down.” I was still not on the ground when a terrible bellowing was heard. Everyone was afraid and wondering what was to become of them. “Don’t be afraid”, I shouted. “Get on the ground.” Meantime the stranger was calling out all the time, “*Qui se humiliat exaltabitur, et qui se exaltat humiliabitur . . . qui se humiliat . . . qui se humiliat . . .*”

A thing that struck me as most remarkable was that although I was flat on the ground with my face in the dust, I could still see very well what was going on around me. The bull had seven horns arranged almost in a circle. There were two horns on his nose, two by his eyes, two in the usual place, and one right on top of his head. These horns were very big and strong and he could move them in any direction he liked so that when he was charging he did not have to turn to knock anyone down but just had to go straight on and turn his horns as he went. The horns on his nose were the longest and he was making tremendous sweeps with them.

“The bull was already very near when the stranger called out, “You will see the effect of humility”. To our great astonishment

we suddenly felt ourselves lifted a considerable height into the air, so that the bull could not reach us. Those who were not lying down were not lifted up. In a moment the bull arrived and tore them to pieces. Not one escaped. Meanwhile we were afraid, suspended as we were in the air, and some cried out, "What will happen to us if we fall now?" The bull was furiously trying to reach us, going round in circles and making terrific leaps into the air. He was not able to hurt us. In the end, more ferocious than ever, the bull, *habens iram magnam*, went away making a gesture as though to say, I will go and get some others.

'Suddenly we found ourselves on the ground once more and the stranger shouted. "Let us turn round to the south." Straight away, without knowing how it happened, we saw that the scene in front of us had changed. The Blessed Sacrament was exposed in a big, beautifully decorated church, with great masses of candles on either side of it. As we knelt down to adore the Blessed Sacrament many other angry bulls arrived, all with frightful horns and blood-curdling appearance. However, as we were in front of the Blessed Sacrament they could do us no harm, and we started to pray. After a while we saw that the bulls were no longer there, and turning back towards the altar we found that the lights and the Blessed Sacrament were gone and the church had disappeared.'

The second dream was in 1871 and is recounted by Dom Bosco as follows:

'A few days ago when I was away from home I had a very frightening dream. I was getting ready for bed thinking about the man I told you about not so long ago, the one who took me round the dormitories with a lamp and showed me the guilt-stained consciences of some of the boys, and wondering whether he was a man like us or a spirit in human shape. Before I could decide I had fallen asleep.

'Almost immediately I found myself at the oratory. To my surprise however I saw that the oratory was no longer where it is now. It was at the opening of a large, long valley stretching between mountains, which were more like rambling hills than peaks. I was with a lot of boys but not talking with them; we were all in deep thought. Suddenly the sky became brilliant with a light so dazzling that it blinded us all for a moment and made us keep our eyes down, not daring to look up till gradually the

brilliance faded, leaving us in a darkness so impenetrable, that the boys could only with the greatest difficulty see each other, even though they stood very close together.

'The sudden change from such brilliance to so deep a darkness made us very much afraid. I was wondering how on earth we could escape from this darkness, when I saw a pale green light appear at one corner of the valley. Extending itself stripwise it remained suspended over it, and by forming an arc rested on the two peaks. This light lit up the darkness somewhat, radiating streams of coloured light much like the rainbow after a shower or heavy storm. While we stood there enjoying such a pleasing sight, the coming of a second phenomenon made the first disappear. There, suspended between earth and sky, was a great ball or globe of light sending out rays of such splendour and intensity, that no one could look directly at it without being in danger of falling senseless to the ground. The ball came down nearer and nearer to us, lighting up everything more brilliantly than ten natural suns at their zenith. As it came ever closer, boys here and there touched by its rays fell flat on the ground as if they had been struck by lightning.

'Looking about, I began to get very frightened indeed, and didn't know quite what to do. However after a little while, I pulled myself together and forced myself to watch the globe of light with all the attention I could, till it stopped in its descent about four hundred yards above us. Murmuring to myself that I must get a good look at so extraordinary an object, I examined it carefully all over, and despite its distance from us I could make out some letters carved on the great dome: *He who can do all things*. All around, raised in tier upon tier, was an immense crowd of people, men and women of all ages, all glorious and exultant; dressed in robes of many colours and indescribable beauty, they smilingly appeared to invite us in a very gentle and friendly manner, to join them in their glory and triumph.

'From the centre of this heavily globe came a rain of dazzling, almost stabbing, rays of light, so brilliant, that striking the eyes of the boys it dazed them and left them staggering, till no longer able to stay on their feet, they were forced to the earth. Unable to stand such brilliance, I cried out, "O God, please, I beg of you, either take this beauty away or let me die: I cannot resist beauty so impelling". My strength began to fail me after this, and falling

to the ground I shouted to the boys, "Let us ask God to have pity on us".

'After a few moments I roused myself, got to my feet, and began to move round about the valley to see what had happened to our boys. To my great surprise and wonder, I noticed them all stretched out on the ground, quite still and in an attitude of prayer. I wanted to make sure however, and I nudged one or two of them with my foot. "Come along, what are you doing? Are you dead or alive?" I asked. They each replied, "I am begging God's mercy". And this was the reply I had from all of them lying on the ground.

'Further down the valley, however, I came with sorrow upon many of them stubbornly standing upright on their feet, with their heads high and turned towards the globe of light, as if defying the majesty of God. Their faces had become as black as coal. I approached them and called them by name, but they showed no sign of life. They were rigid and stiff as though frozen, having been struck by the rays and shafts of light, as the result of their obstinacy in not being ready to bow down and beg the mercy of God with their companions. I was very distressed to discover that these unfortunate ones were not few.

'Just then, from the other end of the valley, a hideous deformed monster appeared. Never had I seen any creature so mis-shapen, so ugly, as with huge loping strides it came towards us. I made all the boys get to their feet, and when they saw the horrid beast they were shaken with great fear. I looked round anxiously to see if there was any of the staff about whom I could get to help the boys climb the mountainside and defend themselves from the fangs of this savage beast when it would try to attack them; but there was nobody.

'It came nearer and nearer, and was only a little way from us when the great shining globe, which till now had been immovable above us, moved quickly to meet the oncoming monster so that it came between us and it, so as to prevent the beast doing us any harm. It was almost touching the ground. At that moment a voice like a peal of thunder reverberated through the valley with the words, "*Nulla est conventio Christi cum Belial*. There can be no agreement between Christ and Belial; between the sons of light and the sons of darkness . . . between the good, and the wicked whom scripture calls the sons of Belial."

'I woke at these words, numb with cold and shaking from the fear I had experienced. Although it was only midnight I could not get to sleep again, nor could I get myself warm, no matter what I did. And if I felt great consolation from the fact that I saw most of our boys ask God's mercy in all humility, and saw them correspond with his divine grace, I was very sad at having seen the by no means small number of those who, because of their stubbornness and hardness of heart, resisted all grace, were struck by the divine power and deprived of life.'

Within the limits of this paper it is only possible to open up avenues of thought without being able to go along them; but from the consideration of the dreams there is no doubt that in them we are dealing with the reality of life. In the one case it is a journey, in the other a large, long valley—the whole setting has the vastness of the span of life with its past, present, and future. Brilliant light and darkness, half light, indeterminateness of place, wonder, a guide who is everything at once—how much these provide the atmosphere of life. In the two scenes the human beings are face to face with destruction. It is a destruction that comes from the supernatural powers of evil, but it is also without any doubt the destruction which comes from the depths of their own *psyche*. For while the bull itself represents the devil, the seven horns represent the seven deadly sins, and these are *inside* man in germ in the depths of his *psyche*, each containing great dynamic force which can be unleashed.

This is the same destruction which faces every man in life; destruction, which not only can come to him from the powers of evil and from the depths of his own being, but also from the dazzling light that comes to illumine and save him. Destruction comes hurtling along with a terrible roar. St John Bosco looks for means of escape for his boys up the side of the hill—but there is no escape. The forces of destruction must be faced. They are not to be met, however, by violent opposition, but by getting down on the ground. This is outwardly an exterior action, but is in reality the accomplishing of an interior transformation. It is not a running away from reality, but a facing up to it. Although the human being is prostrate on the ground, he is not like the ostrich with his head buried in the sand. St John Bosco remarks that although prostrate on the ground with his eyes in the dust, he could see very well all that was going on around. The human being

on the ground is facing up to *the* reality, his own powerlessness, and his need of help to accomplish that which he cannot achieve by himself. As long as he remains on his feet he is in danger, great danger. St John Bosco is warned that the danger is very great, and that the important thing is to be very much on the look-out. The danger is, that the human being wants to remain on his feet at all costs, to be his own centre and god, gradually lifting himself up more and more.

The primordial temptation of both angels and men is the desire to raise themselves above their state—to want to be as God. This sets going the basic conflict between the two dynamic forces in man. If the force of nature is not going to succeed, it is prepared to destroy. Hence the force of self-destruction which is so often evident in the neurotic and psychotic, and at the least, the reluctance to be cured. A man must therefore empty himself out or he will work consciously or unconsciously for his own glory. The story of mankind shows what follies this leads him to; follies which may not only lead him to destruction but can drag with him countless others (cf. the tyrants and dictators).

Men can avoid this by dedicating themselves to a cause which is outside themselves. But it must be really outside and distinct from themselves, and not simply a golden statue of themselves which has been set up to be worshipped and worked for. In this dedication to a cause a man can 'get down on the ground' and find salvation on the natural level. So can the true artist, craftsman, musician, scientist, poet, save himself; he can humble himself before that which he finds greater than himself, and this is his salvation on the psychological level.

This is a free act which he alone can perform. Man is free, like the boys in the dream, to stand stubbornly gazing at the light or remain in the pathway of the raging bull. It is a free act to get down on the ground, but man has also to set himself free. He is hedged in and besieged in so many ways but he must work towards freedom or suffocate. The worst enemy of freedom, says St Thomas, is ignorance, and the greatest ignorance of all for any man is ignorance of himself. This lack of self-knowledge makes him also ignorant of many other things, and most of all of the danger in which he stands. It is easy to see how humility, by enabling a man to see himself and accept himself as he really is, makes possible his becoming free.

A detailed examination, which is not possible here, could show how humility is a necessary condition of all the psychological mechanisms of both the normal and the neurotic. By means of it a man can accept his shadow instead of repressing it. The whole mechanism of repression can become one of control instead. It opens up the way to throw off the tyranny of the *super-ego*. The humble man is no longer driven by fear to conform to the opinions and standards of his fellow men. When faced with his own errors and sins he can accept his own responsibility, and not be put into a panic by the human conscience established within him in the years of his childhood.

The humble man does not need a person to hide behind: he has nothing to hide from men, being concerned only with God, or his substitute (in the case of humility on the natural level). How valuable this is for a harmonious and integrated personality, preventing the living of a separate life in the secret kingdom of the imagination. How many there are who have presented to the world a pleasing exterior, but who in their thoughts have gratified themselves in a way they could never admit to others, and could never accept themselves. How many cedars of Lebanon have fallen, through the undermining of their lives in this way.

Humility flowers into patience—the sustaining with equanimity and a peaceful heart of the storms, upsets, and trials of human life. Where there are humility and patience, there is no frustration, and where there is no frustration a neurotic state will not easily arise.

The archetypes and the *id* likewise cannot daunt the humble man. They may seek to overthrow him in a furious rush, but he is already on the ground. They may seek to blind him with light, but his eyes are already elsewhere, and although they are in the dust his heart is lifted up to the mountains whence comes his help. Always there rings in his ears the warning words, 'He who lifts himself up will be thrown down, and he who throws himself down will be lifted up'.

It is rightly insisted upon that all analysts should themselves undergo analysis before practising as such. One great necessity for this is in the transference situation which arises in the process of analysis. If the analyst is not aware of his own conflicts, the result may well be that which ensues when the blind leads the blind. The clash or otherwise which ensues between the two

personalities underneath is largely eliminated, or at any rate kept in the right proportions, in a humble analyst, because he has, or is trying, to empty himself of that self or force which comes into collision with the self of his patient ('self' is not here used in the Jungian sense).

With regard to the psychology of Adler it is easy to see how humility provides a solution for the superiority complex. Superficially it might be thought that it provides little help for the inferiority complex which Adler maintains is usually hidden in all problem children, no matter what type of problem they present on the surface. Humility also might be thought to be something which is hardly possible for children. We would venture to suggest that it is possible and also supremely necessary. Adler says that the child who grows up interested only in himself and not in others, cannot be expected to change his character overnight with the maturing of the physical sex instinct; and hence will be unprepared for love and marriage.

How many such there are today! They still get married, with results that are well known to all here present. What advantages in the education of the child over and above the solution to these problems could there not flow from grounding him in humility. The formation of a tyrannical *super-ego* could be prevented. The child finding its true centre and source of security in God would have the law of God operative in its mind and heart, and not that of human authority. It would also make it possible for him to weather the storms he inevitably encounters among his companions, and have a defence where the ordinary child finds himself defenceless—the fear of being laughed and jeered at, and of being drawn into dangers, because afraid of what the others will think or say.

But the supreme achievement of humility is that it makes love possible. Without it, one never knows whether what is thought to be love is only self-love. The *anima*, the *animus*, are always round the corner, hidden away, working unseen. So much that was thought to be for the glory of God and the good of mankind, turns out to be only for the doer's own glory and his lust for power.

What a marvellous picture St Francis of Sales gives us of the spiritual and psychological effects of humility in his exhortation to St Jane Francis de Chantal: 'I desire that you should be

extremely humble and small in your own eyes, gentle, gracious, and guileless as a dove. That you should cherish your own insignificance and try to increase it, using every possible opportunity of doing so with good will. Be forbearing and long-suffering with your neighbour in all tenderness of heart. Never brood over the mishaps that befall you; don't look at them, look at God, taking all things without exception as from his hand, agreeing to everything quite simply. Whatever happens, do not lose your inward peace, even when everything capsizes; for what are all the things of this life, in comparison with peace of heart. Confide all things entirely to God and find your own security and rest in his fatherly protection. God accepts your nakedness and simplicity; so remain and be at peace in a spirit of humble trust.'

May we not say in conclusion, that whenever anything is out of order, it is because we have got off the ground where we belong, and lifted ourselves up in exaltation? And because we have no means of keeping ourselves up indefinitely, we come crashing down—not to the ground where we belong, but to the depths of the pit we have opened up for ourselves, where the snakes abound, and the bull waits to devour us. Little wonder that Jesus asks us to learn explicitly only one thing from him—to be meek and humble of heart—'Learn of me for I am meek and humble of heart', and he adds a promise, 'You will find rest to your souls' . . . the rest, integration, peace, which all men are seeking for, and which so few find.



GAMALIEL

(Questions should be addressed to Gamaliel, c/o the Editor, 'The Life of the Spirit', Hawkesyard Priory, Rugeley, Staffs.)

Q. Are the angels, strictly speaking, members of the mystical body of Christ?

SCHOOLTEACHER

A. Yes. St Thomas Aquinas touches on this point when he considers the headship of Christ, and asks himself whether Christ as man is head of the angels (*Summa Theologica*, IIIa, q.8, a.4).

He must be, he says, because where there is one body, there can only be one head. And we call a multitude of beings one body,