

II

FR ALAN KEENAN, O.F.M.

NEUROSIS is a state of mental illness due to the absence of integration or harmony in a personality. The reasons for such lack of balance and harmony are always multiple and complex, the factor of faulty early relationship to parents being of major significance. No neurotic really knows why he is out of tune with reality and neither do his neighbours. Charitable people cannot cure him and he cannot cure himself.

Obviously there are different kinds of neuroses and any one neurosis can exist in different individuals in degrees varying from the very mild to the very severe. How prevalent is neurosis in the population? One estimate (1947) based on the findings of the National Health Service recorded that one out of every three patients seen under the Service was found to be suffering from mental malaise in forms varying from the very mild to the very severe. The severe forms of mental malaise constitute the classical types of neurosis. These classical, severe types of mental illness are readily discernible, for those who suffer from them are very badly adjusted to their environment. Their emotional life is tortured, they are parasitic on the affections of others and they are usually very self-centred. All of us are these things at some time; the neurotic is all of them all the time.

What are our obligations in charity towards these severely tried individuals? Your correspondent supplied the correct answer. It is to convince them of their need for treatment. True charity not only commands this but it forbids us to assume the presumptuous role of endeavouring to train highly unstable personalities in the art of walking the thin-wire of reality. Should we find that a neurotic has made us a substitute for the specialist who could cure him, we must withdraw our company from him.

True charity towards ourselves bids us to avoid neurotic company if we genuinely find there is proximate danger of psychic infection. We can give our counsel and give our comfort to the neurotic so long as we are not assuming the role of his mental specialist, or not confirming him in his neurosis, but the amount of time or energy we can give is relative to the patience,

endurance and stability we possess ourselves. No one obviously is obliged to go beyond that level of charity where through too close proximity with morbid emotions he is in grave danger of serious uncharity in himself.

Within such limits there is every reason to give our neurotic neighbours what kindness we can. In a way they bear the mental Passion of Christ; and it is not impossible by the light of 'faith to love in them the Christ of Gethsemani.

III

DR CHARLES BURNS

YOUR correspondent, G.H., has raised a very pertinent question when he asks what should be the attitude of a Christian layman towards neurotic individuals, who seem, in our day, to multiply in our midst.

His letter raises two main issues. One: is it helpful and right for a neurotic to be listened to sympathetically, even by persons with no professional knowledge? Two: is it advisable for such a listener to run the risk of contamination, distress of mind, and waste of time, by giving charitably of his sympathy; is it even his Christian duty so to do?

To answer the first, one must have some notion as to the nature of neurosis. Is a neurotic person essentially selfish, as G.H. suggests? A neurotic may be said to be egocentric or egoistic (which is not the same thing) because, being rebuffed and thwarted in his relationships with others, and frustrated in his life activities, he is driven back on himself; he is at the same time desperately trying to find his way out of the impasse into which he has been driven by his anxiety, his inferiority, and feelings of tension, lassitude, and ill-health.

Fr Keenan, O.F.M., in his book *Neuroses and the Sacraments* gives good definitions of neurosis from a layman's point of view: 'The distinctive mark of the neurotic is that he tries to adjust himself in the wrong way'; and again: 'The neurotic does not adjust himself to reality properly. He is out of tune rather than out of touch with reality.' The reasons for this failure of adjustment lie in the emotional sphere of the mind, are both past and