

The Vatican versus Freud

Ronald Singleton, Rome correspondent of the Daily Mail, reports on the fortunes of the Belgian priest who brought psychoanalysis into his monastery to strengthen faith and help the search for God.

At St. Jerome's Abbey in Rome ended one morning in the last days of May what celestial punishment-recorders might note as the most curious penance of the century.

A greying, 54-year-old cleric was meditating on order of the Pope how to get Sigmund Freud not only out of the minds of the monks he has had psycho-analysed by a distinguished Jewish woman, but also how to purge his own brain of such poison.

The man is Gregoire Lemerrier, the sixth of an artillery officer's thirteen children who feared his father and at the same time wanted to emulate him. When he became a priest he transferred his complex to God. His autoanalytical sermons bloom with double feeling for his Creator and they will be published in England next year as 'Dialogues With Christ'. Psychoanalysis came into his prayers: 'Father forgive me my sins, as I forgive you your sins.'

Father Lemerrier, a Belgian, became a brilliant teacher and was appointed prior of St. Mary of the Resurrection monastery at Cuernavaca, Mexico. He realised his monks bore a heavy burden of sexual and emotional problems and believed they could find release in psychoanalysis.

They certainly did, for half of them left the monastery and most got married. He felt those who remained had purified faith, those who left were all the happier.

But the Holy Office, headed by aged Cardinal Alfredo Ottaviani to whom psychoanalysis is unmentionable sent three investigators to the monastery over a period of three years. All had only praise for what was happening. They were present when monks discussed problems openly with Professor Frida Zmud of Buenos Aires.

Secret court

In spite of this, last year the Holy Office banished Father Lemerrier to cloisters in Belgium and told him to forget about such unorthodox pastoral care. He appealed and so the Pope last autumn convened a secret ecclesiastic court to find if he had violated a Church Law of July 1961 which forbids anyone to say psychoanalysis is necessary for priests.

For eight months the prior has been a virtual prisoner of the Vatican which, on one occasion in December, had to issue him with a rubber-stamped 48 hours leave pass to visit his Paris publisher.

He lived in a small hotel near the Pantheon and the Vatican paid his daily bill of £1.14.6. for a single room with shower, and a few minor expenses. He never met his judges but eventually was allowed to appoint a lawyer to defend him.

For eight months the agony has been shared. His judges, all aged men who had never read a word of Freud had to discuss with each other in Latin complex Freudian therapeutical theories. Indeed, these eminent judges—Cardinal Francesco Roberti (77), president of the Supreme Court of the Curia, Cardinal William Theodore Heard (82) of Edinburgh, and Cardinal Efreim Forni (77), became so involved they had to send out for an analyst to come and help them. Professor Luigi Frighi, who teaches Mental Health at Rome University, was called in.

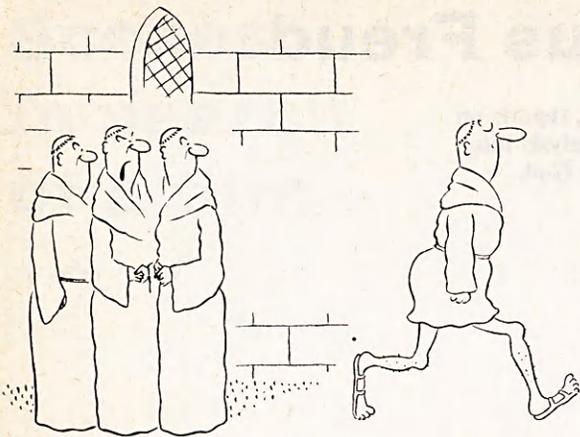
Forbidden to think

The Papal Court finally overruled the Holy Office and told the prior he could return to his monks but the Pope's sentence forbade him to think of Freud, sent him on an eight-day retreat at St. Jerome's to ponder the evils of psychoanalysis, gave him a bill for £550 for Vatican court fees and cautioned him.

His sentence, which went to the Pope for approval, read:

'You will not maintain in public or in private, psychoanalytical theory or practice, under threat of suspension as a priest, and you are rigorously forbidden under threat of destitution to suggest to candidates for the monastery they should undergo psychoanalysis.'

The experiment in psychology was approved by Cuernavaca's Bishop Sergio Méndez Arceo who sanctioned the formation of the Emmaus Psychological Centre, where monks could continue their studies of Freud. The monks who remained at the monastery and some of those who left would still meet. 'All who heard them were thrilled by the prior's sermons which described what psychoanalysis had



Webdale

“ . . . that’s what all this Freud and free association has led to—Mini Habits . . . !”

told him about himself and how much closer he felt to God because of it. He saw in his monks, ‘new creativity of spirit and improved physical health’.

Now all this is finished.

Light sentence

When he packed his bags for Mexico after finishing his meditation and penance for teaching Freud, the prior was calm. He smiled and told me: ‘After all it is a light sentence.’

Was it? The conflict had been simple on the face of it. Loyalty to the Pope, or loyalty to pastoral work which had produced only good. It was a terrible crisis of conscience. How could he pray and ask for release from a pastoral, healing belief such as that he had found in Sigmund Freud?

Father Lemerrier confided in me many months ago that he would never interrupt the psychological pastoral work he had developed at his monastery and its nearby study centre, should the Church sentence go against him.

Left priesthood

Within a fortnight of his return to Cuernavaca, he left his Benedictine Order, left the priesthood, and, as a grey-suited layman, founded a new order of monks. Twenty young men joined his group. He said he would remain a Catholic, and cited monastic history when monks were not necessarily priests but often laymen.

‘After careful, soul-searching study at my monas-

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**Resident psychiatrist: T. E. Burrows, B.A.,
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tery’ he writes, ‘I decided there were two essential conditions required for true monastic life:

- ‘1. All men wishing to lead a monastic life—that is alone—without women—should take no definite vows banning them from eventual marriage;
- ‘2. Every monk should be free to create his own inner structure, free from rules or discipline hindering his growth and his loyalty to himself.

‘In advocating these steps, I seek to change the ideal of the Roman Catholic priesthood, to make it more universal, simple and human. I shall continue my experiments in psychoanalysis with the men in my new Order.’

Not having conformed to the decisions of the cardinals’ commission and the Pope’s ruling, Father Lemerrier automatically ‘incurred the suspension *a divinis ipso facto*’. That is, he is forbidden to say Mass. The Vatican said that if he wished to remain a member of the Church he must present a request to the Pope accompanied by documents giving the opinions of the Primate of the Benedictine Order. The Congregation of the Religious could accept this or not. If he wanted to be released from celibacy vows, he would then have to apply to the Holy Office.