

**THE BROKENNESS  
OF THE HUMAN PERSON AND THE  
HEALING POWER OF DIVINE MERCY**

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In the 20<sup>th</sup> century much attention has been paid to the psychological brokenness, to the mental illness and dysfunction of human beings. Before that time attention was generally focused on physical illness, disease and circumstances that caused blindness, lameness and other severe bodily problems that often lead to death. Mentally ill patients were simply assigned to asylums, and often thought to be possessed. Gradually people with less severe psychological symptoms received therapy and assistance from the newly emerging psychiatric professions with varying results. More and more people especially in the more affluent nations realized that they suffered from such problems as depression, anxiety, self hate, guilt and even scrupulosity. All of these symptoms lead to the breakdown of human relationships, the weakening of family life, an inability to do ones

vocational work and general unhappiness, which seem to have been the root cause of the problems.

In a startling study done two years ago by the World Health Organization, and the Medical School at Harvard University, it was discovered that the most depressed land out of the 16 countries studied was the United States of America with 10% of Americans suffering from depression or bi-polar personality disorder. The least depressed country of the 16 studied was Nigeria, a land racked by political turmoil and conflict and with a high level of poverty in many areas. While the United States had 10% of its people depressed, Nigeria had less than 1%. Italy was about 4%. This study was only about depression, but there are other forms of brokenness like substance abuse and alcoholism, and self destructive tendencies, such as acute anxiety disorder and many sexual disorders.

All of these problems are less acute than what are generally called mental illnesses like schizophrenia. If you look within yourself you will probably recognize at least some of these less serious symptoms in yourself.

That great psychologist of human history, St. Augustine, rightly saw these problems as a direct result of original sin and often rooted in sinful tendencies. We Catholics usually don't make much of the distinction between neurotic traits and the old list of the seven capital sins. The question now arises, is any one perfectly well balanced and sane? It is my belief that there were only two perfectly well balanced people who ever lived and they both lived with St. Joseph who was reported to have apparently wisely said nothing.

The world into which St. Faustina was born was a simple and unsophisticated place where few people paid much attention to their neurotic tendencies. The poor in this sense are usually happier than the rich. When she entered religious life, St. Faustina became aware of the emphasis on self-knowledge and self-examination, and also of the challenges of community life where people's psychological problems become more obvious. Life in a community is generally more of a challenge than simply living with your own family.

No one could foresee in the 1930s that Christians of all denominations, as well as a large number of Jews and Buddhists and non religious people, would be so interested in their mental health and psychological well being. It was only in the second half of this troubled century that human problems and the techniques for ameliorating this brokenness took up so much attention, proving the validity of

an observation that psychologists often make that neurosis is the price of civilization. All of these influences were very far from the thinking of the humble Polish lay sister who would experience mystical encounters of Our Savior under the aspect of Divine Mercy. In a remarkable and even astonishing way, this humble visionary spoke of the mercy of Christ in response to human needs, especially psychological needs. The very things that modern psychiatry has focused on: fear, guilt, anxiety, self-hate, hostility, distrust of others, would be themes that would be taken up by the revelations of Divine Mercy, which have had such an incredible impact on Catholic life in our times.

Probably the most psychologically revealing passages in the *Diary* are in notebook five, beginning with the "conversations of the merciful Savior". These conversations enlighten us about Christ's relationship with various categories of people. The sinful, the despairing, the suffering souls are all encountered in these conversations, as are the souls striving for perfection and even those rare people who are in some sense perfect.

Looking at these "conversations" from the view point of psychology, we see that they are a profound response to what even secular psychology has come to see as the most consistent problems of human beings; neurotic guilt, self-hate, feelings of frustration and hopelessness. These problems are described and directly confronted in the conversations with the Divine Mercy.

It is important to point out that it is only recently that the world of psychology has become aware of the importance of religious values and virtue. The new positive psychology which is sweeping through the United States at the

present time, the psychology of virtue, dovetails very surprisingly with the Gospels and the spiritual life, and even with the revelations of St. Faustina.

It has been well known in psychology for a long time that pathology may result from feelings of rejection, uselessness or even a conviction on the part of persons that they are bad or evil. A deep hopelessness, often unacknowledged, is often the root of neurosis and other problems of personality adjustment. Often these destructive tendencies are the result of damaging relationships in early childhood, especially with parents

The whole message of Divine Mercy, including the image of Divine Mercy, communicates an acceptance on the part of God Himself of the individual. Not only an acceptance but a care, a love, and a great compassion are described. In the "conversations" given in the fifth notebook, particularly the conversation with the despairing soul, the message is communicated that God cares more about our salvation and our happiness than we ever could of ourselves. He counteracts the very negative and self-destructive aspects of the despairing person and the

sinful person. He encourages and gives meaning to the sufferings of the person in pain.

We who are believers find it hard to adequately assess what such a message means to persons who have only superficial or mediocre faith. If they suddenly come to the realization even by a private revelation like Divine Mercy that God cares about them, it can transform their lives.

It has long been recognized in the world of psychotherapy that the Catholic sacrament of reconciliation with confession of sins provides great help to the individual and often might make psychotherapy unnecessary. It seems to me that this also can be said of the message of Divine Mercy. To rebuild the inner convictions of an individual's relationship with the loving God and the merciful Savior is one of the strongest, if not the strongest

motivation for overcoming serious psychological problems of a neurotic sort and making a better adjustment in life.

As the new positive psychology focuses on the importance of virtue, including the moral, as well as the theological virtues, there is every reason to expect that the significance of the Divine Mercy revelation will be more and more recognized.