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PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS IN MARIAN DEVOTION

The topic assigned, "Psychological Factors in Marian Devotion," can be considered obviously from a wide variety of points of view. Just the idea of Mary as Virgin and Mother contains within it a long and complicated history of popular devotion. This alone, considered either in the present or the past, would make a fascinating study of psychological factors. We have chosen, however, to limit ourselves to one precise point in our psychological treatment of Marian devotion—a point suggested by the following comment of the Protestant theologian Paul Tillich. In a paper entitled, "The Impact of Psychotherapy on Theological Thought," the author writes:

One can say that psychotherapy has replaced the emphasis on the demanding yet remote God by an emphasis on his self-giving nearness. It is the modification of the image of the threatening father—which was so important in Freud's attack on religion—by elements of the image of the embracing and supporting mother. If I were permitted to express a bold suggestion, I would say that psychotherapy and the experience of pastoral counseling have helped to reintroduce the female element, so conspicuously lacking in most Protestantism, into the idea of God. The impact of psychotherapy and the experiences of pastoral counseling on the idea of man and of God necessarily have consequences for an understanding of the relation between God and man.¹

The point of this paper will be to consider this relationship between God and man under the aspect of the feminine element represented by Mary and the Church and to trace some of its

¹ Paul J. Tillich, Address delivered at the *First Annual Meeting of the Academy of Religion and Mental Health*, New York City, January 14, 1960, published by *Academy of Religion and Mental Health* (New York, N.Y.) 5.

possible psychological implications. In Catholicism, the feminine religious element, what Tillich describes as "this self-giving nearness . . . of the embracing and supporting mother," is most sharply focussed on the concept of reaching God through devotion to Mary. While Mary is obviously not to be identified with God, yet, in Tillich's terms, Catholicism, through this special devotion to Mary, would seem to have a greater "female element" than Protestantism. We will address ourselves, therefore, to the consideration of some aspects and meanings of this feminine element of which Tillich speaks, as we see it psychologically in itself, in the devotion to Mary and in the concept of the Church.

We propose to treat this topic in four separate but inter-related ways: (1) the feminine element as we see it functioning in counseling and psychotherapy; (2) Mary seen scripturally both in herself and as Woman who is at the same time the People of God and the Church; (3) the way studies of creative people show that feminine as well as masculine components, functioning constructively in the same person, constitute the creative dynamism; and (4) the degree to which, in marriage counseling, a continuum is formed which begins by emphasizing masculine and feminine differences and contrasts and moves towards a sense of unity, of persons and of mutual regard and respect.

Finally, we would like to conclude with the suggestion that the psychological and theological dynamism involved does not end with devotion to Mary. Rather, through Mary we are led beyond her, to the unified communion of the Trinity Itself. Here at the center of the Triune God, the psychological concepts of masculinity and femininity both give way to and are suffused in the concept of loving Persons who are the eternal and complete fulfillment of their own Personality and are at the same time perfectly related in an infinite, timeless and unending unified love in perfect equality.

I

We can begin by taking up briefly some of the implications of Tillich's remarks related to what he calls the "feminine element" in counseling and psychotherapy.

The term, "feminine element," and its counterpart "masculine element," are obviously not used here literally but analogously. In recent psychological literature dealing with personality assesment, counseling, psychotherapy and related areas, the human person is being considered not simply as either exclusively masculine or feminine, as his sex might designate. Rather qualities, tendencies and characteristics considered analogously as either masculine or feminine, are now seen as interwoven in varying degrees in the same person, in himself and as he relates to others.

Recent psychological and psychiatric research is revealing, for example, that dialogue and profound commitment are both essential to any significant counseling and psychotherapy. Earlier ideas of helping people were, in Tillich's terms, much more masculine; that is, they centered on instructing, lecturing, directing, guiding, reprimanding and similar confronting or advice-giving relationships. They *told* people what to do—in a somewhat masculinely oriented way. These kinds of relationships are, of course, often of real value, and they therefore continue to be necessary in a wide variety of circumstances. But recent research and development has stressed an entirely different kind of relationship. It has focussed on words like "understanding," "sensitivity," "reflection"—words which in Tillich's sense, suggest a more "feminine element."

To be deeply understood by another person not simply at the level of my ideas but at the much deeper level of my emotional, instinctive and somatic reactions is a most salutary kind of communication. One way of illustrating this difference is contained in the complimentary phrase, "He is an understanding person." When I say of someone, after an interview, that he was most understanding, I imply a deep communication which

brought me a profound personal relief and fulfillment. Everyone hearing me understands my meaning here. But this sense of being understood does not of itself imply that the counselor, therapist, or the friend offered me any solution, or even any advice. He did not suddenly rescue me from my personal turmoil or even try to. No, this does not happen in "understanding," as such, and it is precisely here that the feminine element is most evident. What we see in counseling and psychotherapy and in the experience with an understanding friend, is that somehow we are strengthened, encouraged and even profoundly helped by a sensitive kind of acceptance and sharing which, however, does not try to tell us what to do or even to change us. Yet this can enable us to begin to change ourselves, often more effectively than advice or reprimand—more masculine forms. These, on the contrary, may only make us more resistant and fix us more firmly in our state of conflict.

The person is better able to handle his situation as a result of this kind of understanding dialogue, is stronger and more perceptive of himself when he leaves. Much more could be said, of course, of the extremely complicated interweaving of masculine and feminine elements that inevitably enter into a counseling-psychotherapeutic process, just as they go into any significant friendship. But in these qualities of the loving acceptance, of "unconditional positive regard," at moments of deep and sometimes even shameful communication, we have one of the most subtle demonstrations of how the feminine element operates to facilitate therapy and personality growth.

II

Moving now towards the scriptural picture, André Feuillet points out in a recent article that, "Man's greatness is focussed by the Bible on the fact that he can enter into dialogue with God, as contrasted with the Greek stress upon his abstract reflection on what God is in Himself."²

² André Feuillet, S.S., *The Era of the Church in St. John*, in *ThD* 11 (1963) 4.

In our consideration, Mary and the Church enter into this dialogue as the feminine element. We have deliberately used the singular here because, again quoting André Feuillet, Mary and the Church are seen as Woman, in one unified concept. Speaking of the symbol of Woman used in the Fourth Gospel and the Apocalypse to represent the Church, he says:

In recent times much has been written about the woman in Apoc. 12. Some authors like to think that this symbol represents primarily or even exclusively the Virgin Mary. The references to the Old Testament (the Isaian texts of the glorified Sion giving birth: 66:7-8; 26:17-18; cf. Songs 6:10) show clearly, however, that the woman of this wonderfully enchanting vision is the ideal Sion of the prophets who, once she has given Christ to the world, becomes the Christian Church. Like the people of the old covenant, she lives in the desert protected and fed by God while awaiting the parousia (6:14). If the Virgin Mary is seen here secondarily (and we think She ought to be, at least in the first verses of the Chapter) this can be only as an incarnation of the people of God; in fact, it is through her that the Church has given the Messia to the world. As Mother of the Messia, Mary is simultaneously the image of the Christian Church through which her Son is daily given to souls through preaching and the sacraments. . . [but] chiefly it is through Mary that the Church is already triumphant in heaven. . . . Even a Protestant like Hoskyns, however, does not hesitate to admit that here Mary stands for the Church, in perfect keeping with the spirit of Apoc. 12.³

Considering Marian devotion from this point of view, we can see it as an encounter, psychologically and theologically with Woman. This encounter with Woman is not only in devotion to Mary herself but also in the devotion to the Church as the People of God. Biblically considered, therefore, we see the suggestion that God's dialogue with man introduces, as do other forms of deep psychological dialogue, a feminine as well as a masculine element. In this dialogue, devotion to Mary and

³ *Art. cit.*, 9.

the Church represents qualities of feminine sensitivity, understanding and love. These are the same qualities which modern psychological research is revealing as basic elements to any complete and profound human dialogue. It is this psychological element of femininity in man's approach to God that Tillich finds so conspicuously absent in what he calls "post-Reformation Protestant moralism."

III

Using the principle now that "whatever is received, is received according to the manner of the one receiving," let us examine further how this interweaving of masculine and feminine elements in devotion to God through Mary in the Church, may also have human counterparts. One recent emphasis in psychology has been to interview in exhaustive detail those people in our society that have produced unusually outstanding achievements in significant fields of endeavor. These reports are then carefully analyzed. These studies have come to be called "Studies in Creativity" and such people are called "creative" persons.

According to studies of the most creative people in our society recently published by the Carnegie Foundation,⁴ we discover "that creation is clearly an expression of the inner states of the creator." In other words, creativity seems not to depend so much on environment or external opportunities as it does on an inner blend of subtle characteristics in the personality of each creative person. When we examine what these creative inner states are, it is interesting to note that they too are characterized by the same blend of masculinity and femininity that we noticed in the successful counseling and psychotherapeutic relationships and that we see symbolized theologically in the relationship of Mary and the Church to God. "All the highly creative male groups studied," the survey goes on to

⁴ *Creativity*, in *Carnegie Corporation of New York Quarterly* 9 (1961) 2.

say, "scored high on a femininity test. They were more open in their feelings and emotions, more sensitively aware of themselves and others possessing a wide-range of interests—traits which in our culture are considered feminine. On the other hand, most of them were not effeminate in manner or appearance but instead assertive, dominant and self-confident."⁵

We see here a balance between characteristics that are open, loving, accepting, and those that are closed, determined and definite. A contrast, in other words, between feminine and masculine characteristics. Creative persons, therefore, do not predominate either in masculine or feminine characteristics exclusive of one another but in a subtle and balanced polarity. Evidently the tensions produced in such personalities by somewhat opposite characteristics in greater or lesser degree, are accountable for the creative achievements of such people. As these tensions are resolved in the process of a significant achievement, the creative person's peaceful fulfillment, inner-balance and outstanding accomplishment seem to result. "Other findings," the study continues, "support the hypothesis that creative individuals are more able than most to give expression to opposite sides of their nature, to achieve a reconciliation of the conscious and unconscious, reason and passion, rational and irrational, science and art."⁶ We do not have, in the creative person, a simple picture of a purely masculine dominant personality nor a feminine reflective one. It is rather the integration of these apparently conflicting attitudes that seems to characterize a creative person at his highest levels.

So, whether we think of the psychological relationship that Tillich stresses or the creative relationship in the Carnegie Foundation report, we see that successful personal development brings forward in a bellows-like movement a sensitive unfolding and developing of both masculine and feminine characteristics. Here we can think, for example, of a symphony or a con-

⁵ *Op. cit.*, 3.

⁶ *Ibid.*

certo where the audience, the players, the conductor, the pianist all blend together in a balanced fulfillment. We can propose that the pianist and the conductor represent masculine qualities, while the orchestra and, in particular, the audience demonstrate more the feminine element. There are times when the pianist recedes and the orchestra comes forward. Often, too, the sensitive reception of the audience stimulates orchestra, pianist and conductor to far greater fulfillment than might otherwise have occurred. Once, when Paderewski was asked to explain a brilliant performance of his, he is said to have remarked, "Sometimes the pianist is at his best, the conductor and the symphony are less atuned. Sometimes these three may be at their best but the audience is less receptive. Tonight was one of those rare occasions when all four reached an unusually high degree of intense engagement together." This might catch something of the way masculine and feminine elements interrelate in creativity.

IV

There is yet another way of considering this relationship of masculinity and femininity as it furthers psychological growth and development. This subtle inter-relationship of masculine and feminine elements not only extends upwards through creative psychological experiences to parallel and illustrate in some manner the place of Mary and the Church in the dialogue with and creative relationship to God. It also can be seen as having rich implications for the relationship of men and women themselves. In his Epistle to the Ephesians St. Paul suggests that the relationship of the husband to the wife is as Christ's to the Church, that the man should love the woman as he loves his own body.⁷

Here we see the interesting implication that the mature man psychologically extends himself to the woman. She is not seen,

⁷ *Eph.* 5:26-28.

therefore, as something completely removed from man. Rather at the highest level of the marriage relationship, she is presented as, in a sense, the extension and completion of his own body. He loves her, not as something external to himself, but with the same intimate identification that he loves his own members.

We see here, too, the contrasting masculine and feminine qualities in the way Christ purifies and sanctifies the Church and in the way this is held up as the model whereby the man purifies and sanctifies the woman. Implied here, therefore, is the idea that the way a man sees a woman, will be the way he radiates this conception to her. She, in turn, absorbing his attitude towards her, will then also tend to look at herself in the same way. The feminine element is here seen as empathetic and reflective, as the highly sensitized response of the beloved to the lover. It was Juliet who, at the high point of her love, saw Romeo not simply as another man but as a kind of god capable of turning her into his image of her. It is this kind of subtle reflective feminine quality that Mary and the Church have in their relationship with Christ.

This can, however, also work negatively. The British novelist J. B. Priestley has recently pointed out the exaggerated tendency towards what he calls "eroticism" in the masculine outlook of our present society. Priestley defines "eroticism" as:

...the twanging of a single nerve concentrating on a certain kind of excitement and pleasure to the exclusion of everything else. It is solitary and self-regarding, other persons involved in it being treated as instruments, things. Nothing worth calling a relationship can be created by it. One sex cannot do the other sex any good in eroticism. The opposite sex is not really there, so to speak, in its true complementary character... It must be clearly understood that on this level [of eroticism] we are discussing there is not relationship of persons but simply a relationship between the sexes as sexes, not this man and that woman but man and woman; when we come to persons we arrive at love.

Eroticism, closing in on itself, wanting a sensation and not another person, bars love out.⁸

In understanding this in greater detail we can turn to St. Thomas who says that we love ourselves and one another on three levels. First, there is the instinctive level of the self as a primitive creature. This is common to men and animals. It involves the instinct of self-preservation, all the clawing, protective, controlling defense urges in us. Sex drives at a lower level are primitive forms of self-love.

The second level, and here he quotes St. Paul, is that of the "outer man," the level of sensation derived from the five senses. This is the level of food and drink, of much of television and other entertainment, of reading the kind of thing that satisfies in the realm of materiality. It is the level of physical appearance, beauty, strength; the level of material possessions, a car, a house etc. These external things are powerfully reassuring. Although they are not on the low level of the primitive food, sex and self-defense drives, they partake of the same animality because they depend upon the five senses. We do not mean to disregard this interest in the external world of man; it is in all of us and basic to much of what we do. But St. Thomas says there is an even higher way to love ourselves and one another.

The highest form of self-love—that of the truly rational man, the one who has reached the highest level of his humanity—is the love of one's inner self. One who has attained this stage of development loves those things in himself that are both reasonable and voluntary. In a psychosomatic sense, he has, through deep and painful struggle with himself, arrived at control over the primitive drives of his animality, over the disordered urges of his senses and emotions at the level of external man, and has reached a prudential awareness of self-control. At this level, a man can become truly supernaturalized by the gift of God's love. When one's inner man has asserted his

⁸ J. B. Priestly, *Eroticism, Sex and Love*, in *The Saturday Evening Post* (April 29, 1963) 14.

control over the id-man in the Freudian sense, the erotic man in Priestley's sense, the primitive man in St. Thomas' sense, and over the more sophisticated, sensual, external man, and has imprinted this control on human action, one has reached the moment of right love to oneself and another.

It would therefore seem to be at these two lower kinds of self-love that masculine and feminine differences would be most heightened. These differences would tend to disappear or at least become less important, as people begin to look upon themselves and others at their highest level of persons.

In the light of this, we can see a further aspect of capital importance in the way the image of Mary and the Church relate to Christ. The theological image of woman thus presented can occupy a pivotal position in elevating a man's regard of woman above both eroticism and mere sexuality to the highest level of her state as a person.

Such high regard of herself, reflected to the woman by the man, can in turn be an effective element in elevating her own self-regard. Moreover, her increasing awareness of the tremendous feminine dignity in the relationship of Mary and the Church to Christ, would, of necessity, have an inestimable and profound influence on her attitude towards herself and her role as a woman.

One final point in this discussion of masculine and feminine elements as they relate to persons, is the experience that seems to reveal itself in many instances of marriage counseling. One frequently observes that the process of marriage counseling forms a kind of continuum. This continuum begins with two people who feel quite distant from one another in a variety of ways. In this distance they seem focussed on the degree of difference between them. They have comparatively little in common. Most often the focal point of these differences will consist in the highly accentuated masculinity of the one, contrasted with the accentuated femininity of the other. It may be sexual incompatibility that is one of the strongest differences

they first emphasize. This also will be evident in many other ways even when they insist on a strong sexual compatibility. Sometimes the sex difference may assume a reverse emphasis—the woman complaining that she is forced to be too masculine because of the man's passivity. Alternately the man can resent the woman's aggressiveness, excessive sexual or affectionate demands, etc. which he feels threatens and thwarts his normal masculinity. But whatever form such opening interviews take, they generally seem to center on this sense of difference and distance between man and wife.

As the counseling process continues, however, there is a clearly marked line in the direction of quite different attitudes. From eroticism and sexuality, to use Priestley's terms, or from the primitive and outer-man view of St. Thomas, there is a slow but steady movement towards attempts to regard one another as persons. They begin to see one another less superficially. With greater depth and subtlety they move from an "outer" to an "inner" view. From this, mutual respect begins to grow again and with it comes a far greater sense of unity, belonging and mutual commitment. Marked differences still remain but they are less differences of masculinity and femininity and more differences of the uniqueness of two persons communicating themselves through their predominating masculine or feminine elements.

One sees, too, a delicate sensitivity beginning to develop between them. Somewhat like an American married to, say, a French woman, may gradually acquire an ability to understand and speak French as she learns to understand and speak English, so man and wife speak of really "understanding" one another, sometimes for the first time. But this "understanding" cuts through exaggerated sex differences to become a mutually shared double language of personal commitment and communion as well as communication. We are moving therefore beyond the contrast of their masculine and feminine elements to a more unified image of their belongingness as persons.

Yet this unity heightens rather than diminishes their sense of and respect for the unique qualities of each. Often they say they never realized this kind of uniqueness in one another before—they were too focussed on sexual differences. Yet interestingly—and even strangely—this increased recognition of themselves as unique persons does not separate them, as earlier sex-differences did, but brings them to a greater sense of unity, belonging and mutual commitment.

In this process, as in other forms of psychotherapy and creativity, the model seems to begin to shift from masculine and feminine elements to another model where these differing elements are fused into the concepts of personality at an increasingly higher level of internalization.

The marriage counseling continuum, then, seems to have as its ultimate goal, this love of self and of one another at this highest level of the "inner man." At this level, it seems we have moved steadily and in marked contrast, from a model centering on masculinity and femininity to a quite different model—one suggested by the profound mystery of the unity and personality in the Trinity.

What we see suggested here is a process that transcends the contrasting differences that might be considered masculine and feminine elements and emerges finally in unity—a unity that does not erase but embraces and harmonizes these apparently opposite characteristics. Aristotle remarks that God is what man is (and for our purpose we can add woman) at his very best, and that infinitely more. At their best, psychotherapy, creativity and marriage, beginning in the tension of diversity, end in the direction of the harmony of unity. But this unity heightens the uniqueness of each person and quality. It is therefore a unity of persons. Seen this way, then, the feminine element of devotion to Mary and the Church—in the dialogue between God and man—would in no way encroach on Divine prerogatives. Rather it would heighten the sense of Divine Plenitude and Completeness in us. In place of a "demanding

and remote God," as Tillich suggests, there would be in harmonized balance the sense of God's "self-giving nearness"—seen through Mary and the Church. As an antidote to the "image of the threatening father," that some persons may, as Freud suggests, project on God because of a negative father transference, there would always be the image of the "embracing and supporting mother"—in Mary and the Church.

This feminine element in Marian devotion would therefore in no way take the place of the uniqueness of Divine Fullness. Rather it would lead to a deeper, more complete and more sensitive awareness of what this Fullness really contains. For in the Triune God, Persons are recognized in their most complete fulfillment and yet are perfectly united in Infinity—and the intense bond of Love which unites Persons is Itself a Person. We are here infinitely beyond the contrasting qualities of masculinity and femininity, in a plenitude of Persons that carries these contrasting qualities into a perfect Unity and Equality. This, filtered down to created human awareness, heightens the limited human understanding of the pristine Fullness of God—containing in infinite degree and perfect unity all that is best in man and woman.

We can conclude by pointing out that what we are suggesting here needs, of course, to be further verified by subsequent research and study. But in our discussion of the "feminine element" in counseling and psychotherapy, in creativity, and in the marriage relationship, it already becomes apparent that to allow for and realize this "feminine element," involves a highly complex process. To establish a profound relationship in counseling, psychotherapy or friendship; to be a significant creative person; to achieve a successful marriage of persons; all these pose real difficulties as well as exciting challenges.

It is not surprising, then, that the devotion to Mary in the Church—seen biblically as the Woman—also meets with some complicated psychological reactions in both men and women. In the light of these psychological awarenesses we can see how

such a devotional encounter with Woman, in a religious way, also poses similar difficulties and challenges. As the psychological process of understanding and integrating the feminine element makes high demands on individuals and relationships, so the theological process must make equal if not even more exacting demands. There is here, therefore, much more than simple sentiment or emotion. A purely sentimental devotion to Mary would only barely suggest the complicated psychological process we are treating here. It would, at best, probably be an early stage. This helps explain why the concept of devotion to Mary in the Church is often not easy for people to accept and practice. Such devotion, as we see it psychologically, calls into play, at its deepest level, a person's whole relationship with himself and others because it would seem to imply not only a highest regard for femininity but as well a profound sense of persons. One would have to have this both towards himself and others, for an adequate theological encounter with Woman in Mary and the Church.

Until this is reached, one could envision a somewhat similar conflict and tension—confronting the feminine element—as we witness in beginning counseling or psychotherapeutic relationships, in the initial stages of creativity, and in the early periods of marriage conflict and tension. We are describing, therefore, not a static state but a dynamic process involving—if our psychological analysis is correct—the same or similar factors as those that lead to psychological maturity and fulfillment in in each individual person. One can see then how demanding, difficult, challenging and yet profoundly rewarding this process of accepting and absorbing into oneself a feminine devotional element could be.

Pope Paul has recently suggested that Christians are no longer to think of "conquest but of service," that they can convert the world only "if first they learn to love the world." "This is the genius of the Apostolate," he says, "knowing how

to love."⁹ In this transition then from conquest to service, from aggression to love, we must await God's will in humble prayerfulness. In our striving for Christian unity, then, and in our first loving the world we wish to convert, we can have no more resplendent image than the *Fiat* of a humble Handmaiden. This is a long way from a victory anthem and a cry of conquest. Rather, when at last God's will is done for all us Christians and for the Mission to the World we love, I believe we must and will imitate the feminine sensitivity of this Maiden who, at the very height of her awareness of her own magnificence, could say with effulgent grace, "He who is mighty hath done great things to me!"¹⁰

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⁹ Pope Paul VI, quoted in *Time* (June 28, 1963) 42.

¹⁰ *Luke* 1:49.