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A Study in Normality

by **KILIAN McDONNELL, O.S.B.**

WE hear so much these days about complexes, compulsions, phobias, and anxieties. A curious world of words is no longer the private property of psychiatrists but has entered into our thinking and speaking. The magazine section of the Sunday newspaper carries an article, "Are You Afraid?"; a do-it-yourself book is written, "Be Your Own Analyst"; there are psychological plays which unravel the dark motives of twisted souls. It is all bewildering and we wonder about that elusive something we label normality.

We cannot say that personality abnormalities are the result of a person's sins. But we can say that if Adam had not sinned there would be no diseases, either bodily or mental, and no personality disorders. So when we want to study normality in its perfection, we go to one who has inherited no original sin, who has committed no actual sin. We go to the Sinless One, Jesus Christ.

What strikes us about the personality of Christ is His self-possession. Sureness of purpose, fixity of intent mark His every action. Nothing can deter Him from the work He has come to do. Even at the age of twelve years He has a clear consciousness of His mission in the world. When, after three sorrowful days of searching, Mary finds her Son in the temple, Our Lord does not hesitate to remind her with an abruptness we find a little disturbing, "Did you not know that I must be about My Father's business?"

Peter learned the hard way, as Peter usually learned, that Christ's work on earth entailed death on a Cross. When Peter attempted to turn Him from the road to Calvary, he heard Our Lord call him "Satan." If Peter would not follow Him, if none of the Apostles would follow Him, He would go on alone. We might add in passing that the power of Our Lord's constancy must have shown even in His physical appearance. Little evidence of it is seen in the thin-skinned, sensitive Christs of many holy pictures and statues.

Fear Our Lord knew, but not anxiety,

that small pit of terror in the depths. The anxious person trembles before minor difficulties as well as major evils and is everlastingly hurried and harried by everything. Anxiety is not violent. It does not tear out the power of loving. Rather, anxiety is a well-mannered paralysis which renders the power of loving at first dull, then impotent. Anxiety does not destroy the freedom of personality with one fell blow. Anxiety wears it away. Christ had no anxieties and therefore enjoyed the full capacity of loving and freedom.

TO say Our Lord enjoyed freedom of spirit does not mean that He stood aloof from tensions of human existence. No, He is subject to all the pressures of life: political pressure, for while still an infant He must flee to Egypt; domestic pressure, as His own relatives say, "He is mad," and attempt to put an end to Him by throwing Him off a cliff; religious pressure, for the Scribes and Pharisees pursue Him and send spies to watch Him in His movements; the pressure of interpersonal relationships, for Peter is slow at learning, Thomas doubts Him, James and John are ambitious, Judas betrays Him; pressure from the business of living, for the crowds are so demanding that He does not even have time to eat; pressure from the elements, for He lives in the open air as one without a home.

Though there was fidelity to work that meant agony and slow death, it would be to dehumanize Our Lord to say that He had no fear of a painful death. Fear is a human thing, and, surprisingly enough, a rational thing. Man acts the way he should as a thinker when he fears something which threatens physical or spiritual harm. The man who does not fear an evil which threatens him is not courageous; he is merely stupid. Christ's fear of the Cross was great. Calvary was to be His place of agony. The intensity with which He feared that hill and the wood that there awaited Him caused Him to sweat blood. Though Christ is a Man among men,

He is not anxious. His Heavenly Father knows and cares. For Christ that is enough.

The brutalities of life never paralyzed Our Lord's power of loving and of giving Himself to others. If you have ever known a bitter man who could not rise above a slight, or even if you have known a man who could not rise above a great injustice, you know one in whom the power of loving is stunted. Such persons feed on themselves and claw at old wounds. They have rendered themselves incapable of giving themselves. And because they cannot love, they are not loved.

WE might say because Our Lord came to His own people and His own people would not receive Him, He had ample reason to be bitter. They finally did Him to death, and still He loved. He loved the great mass of sinners because they were like sheep without a shepherd, because they had so little love and were capable of so much. He loved Magdalene because there was purity and passion in her tears. He loved Peter because even Peter's three denials proceeded from what He knew was a great blundering love. He loved a city, Jerusalem, and wept for it, because it would be guilty of His blood. He loved a traitor because there was much good in Judas and because He was Judas' friend. He loved His executioners because they were ignorant men and because they acted in ignorance. Surely here is a love stronger than bitterness and injustice and hate. Here is a love stronger than death.

To subject Our Lord to an exhaustive personality analysis would be a pious species of blasphemy. We cannot exhaust the inexhaustible. Before the infinite we bow down in worship. The mind no less than the body bends low in worship, because it realizes that what we do not know and cannot know of Christ is greater than what we know. But this much comfort we do have. In the God-Man, Christ, we have normality in all its grandeur and simplicity.