

Individual Psychology in a Church School

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Since the publication of the *Individual Psychology Bulletin*, our staff members have been interested in Individual Psychology. More than any other school of thought in the field, it seems to have enough in common with Christianity to be useful to a Church School. Instead of stressing the necessity for the individual to achieve a satisfactory solution for his personal problems, as the Freudians do, it stresses the necessity for the individual to find himself in the life of the group. "Social usefulness" is the criterion of a good adjustment rather than self-expression and freedom from frustration. The ideal of "interestedness" in dealing with others, especially children, is not far from the Christian concept of charity. (And by "charity" the Christian does not mean giving to the poor the clothes he has worn out, or looking down with pitying superiority on the misfortunes or limitations of others. He means the giving of himself for the sake of others, without expecting to get anything for himself in return.)

The Adlerian teaching about guilt, paradoxical as it may seem, is very close to the Christian doctrine of repentance. Adler says, "Don't do wrong *and* feel guilty, life is too short." Christians say, "Repentance is being sorry enough to quit, not just wishing you hadn't done wrong." What Adler calls "feelings of guilt" can be paralleled with what ascetic theology calls "scruples." Scruples are disproportionate anxieties over faults, usually small and insignificant faults. Scruples are substitutes for the facing of really grave faults. They are also devices which minister to a false sense of one's own goodness and superiority. "See how I worry over these little things that others do not trouble about! I must have a very sensitive conscience." Scruples proceed from the human vice of pride. They do nothing towards stimulating better conduct. Neither do "guilt feelings." Both serve as excuses to avoid the business of changing one's conduct.

Likewise the insistence of the Adlerians that the adult's use of punishment and reward is an undesirable technique, especially in dealing with children, can be shown to be consistent with the teachings and practice of Christ, and with the maxims of the saints. "Neither do I condemn thee," Christ said to the woman taken in adultery, "Go and

sin no more." St. Francis of Assisi says in a letter to a superior, written in 1223, ". . . you should not allow a single brother in the world, whatsoever sin he may have committed, to come before your eyes and depart without having found mercy with you. And if he should not ask money of you, then you must ask it of him." In the Old Testament it is written: "To Me belongeth vengeance and recompense"; and in the New, "Vengeance is Mine, saith the Lord. I will repay."

So all notions of vengeance in the dealings of men with each other should be given up. Vengeance is proper to retributive justice, and is no business of man's. Remedial "punishment," however, which is proper to emendatory justice, is necessary in human affairs, whether you like the word "punishment" or not. "Logical consequences" is one way of exercising this kind of training. The great difference is that no one is trying, through logical consequences, to get anything for himself—the bolstering up of his authority, the satisfying of his drive for power over others, or the safeguarding of his prestige. The aim is to help an individual see for himself that an undesirable course of action is undesirable, so that he will himself choose to alter it. Blame imposed from without is demoralizing. It is our self-evaluation that makes it possible for us to face and overcome our weaknesses.

This is not to deny that there are differences between the philosophy of the Adlerian school of guidance and Christianity, but the differences are not so many or so basic that the two cannot work together. The chief disagreements we have met in our work together have been those concerning sin. Christians believe that individuals are born with something called "original sin." It is *not* the same as "total depravity." "Original sin" means that every human individual begins life with the possibility of making wrong choices, and with a need for God's help, or "grace." God is not angry with us because of our weaknesses. On the contrary, He is ready to help us overcome them. We also believe that there is an absolute moral law derived from a personal God, and that breaches of that law are actual sins. The law is summed up in "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God . . . and thy neighbor as thyself." Adlerians would phrase this differently, perhaps, but they do, at least in practice, praise and admire and cultivate some attitudes (loving and generous and courageous and trusting and merciful ones) and condemn and try to eradicate others (envy and anger and pride and the lust for power, etc.). So perhaps here too, as with the concept of guilt, the differences are partly verbal.

So when in 1946, pressing problems with our adolescent girls (boarding school pupils) suggested that perhaps a psychiatrist might help us find our way to some solutions, we turned to the *Individual Psychology Bulletin* for help.

The editor suggested a psychiatrist, who was invited to come to Margaret Hall School. I suppose it was his first intimate glimpse of a convent school. It was certainly our first intimate glimpse of a psychiatrist, and the excitement over his coming was considerable. Some of the staff were skeptical, thinking he would probably "psycho-analyze" us all; others feared he would prove upsetting in a Church School, with whose doctrines he might not agree; some parents and children thought his coming implied that our girls were crazy since such a drastic step as importing a psychiatrist was taken!

A program was set up: faculty meetings, visits of classes, a meeting of the student council, talks with various individuals who wanted—and whom we felt might profit by—a private talk.

One of our chief problems was a group of twelve- and thirteen-year-olds. They disobeyed the rules, dressed like eighteen-year-olds and flirted, were rude to teachers, and flunked their lessons. They were ordinary youngsters, with ordinary intelligence and abilities. No appeals to reason, no threats, and no punishments made any difference in the long run. We could not figure it out. What ailed them?

The psychiatrist had a talk with them, and then came to a staff meeting to discuss the matter with us. He began by complimenting us. He was impressed with the atmosphere of openness and frankness in our school, and approved of it. He pointed out that a visit such as this could be a disturbance rather than a help; that it is easy to come in from outside and change everything around and go off and leave matters in confusion. He emphasized that we had worked here for years and had found some methods that were effective and some that were not, but he did not want to uproot everything. Moreover, he hesitated because he did not know whether what he had to say would be contrary to our religious principles or not. Above all, he did not want to disturb us.

Our reply was that we wanted to hear what he had to say, and were willing to listen. If we came upon disagreements about basic principles we could say so.

So he described his meeting with our "problem children."

"They are in complete revolt," he said, and continued to describe

their attitude of resentment to authority, their feeling of being oppressed by the older group of students and the faculty while not having the privileges of the youngest. They were, he said, reacting like a typical "middle child."

"Then I said to them, 'I'll tell you a secret. There are some people around here who are *afraid* of you, terribly afraid.' They were delighted. They begged to know who, but I wouldn't tell them."

Then, looking round at us, after a pause, he said, "And I was not wrong."

He was not. We *were* afraid that we could not deal with the situation, and we had made the mistake of engaging in a war with them. Our attitude towards them was resentful because of our fears. They had, therefore, no way out. If they gave in, they were defeated; if they did not, they were "bad." They had no way to show us that they could accomplish anything, to demonstrate and experience usefulness and a sense of importance, so long as the tug-of-war went on. The psychiatrist suggested that their ambition should be directed into constructive channels. They needed, also, someone to talk with them regularly about their problems, and to help them become a harmonious and contributing unit in the group. This was more important than the academic problem. Their school work would suffer anyway, it was pointed out, so we should be justified in taking time out for some special project that would interest the group and which they could do for the larger school group.

As we thought this bomb-shell over we realized that we had gone about trying to solve the problem in the worst possible way. We had punished these children for failing in school by limiting their extra-curricular activities, on the theory that school work comes first, and that if the child neglects the task of studies she must forego other things until she is passing in her work. So the problem had become worse and worse.

That particular group of children were interested in dramatics; so the first step in our new start in dealing with them was to give them time to prepare and present a series of plays for the whole school. They took to it at once, thought up their own stories to dramatize, asked for a minimum of help from teachers, and put on several very interesting and amusing short plays. And through the year their problems began to straighten out, and they began to pass in their school work.

Our second full staff meeting was concerned with the whole prob-

lem of rewards and punishments. We became aware of other approaches, particularly three basic principles in dealing with difficulties:

1. Win the child; then he will be willing to cooperate.
2. Encourage the child.
3. Let the child experience the logical consequences of disturbed order.

There is a fine distinction between "punishment" and "logical consequences." Briefly, it parallels the philosophical distinction between retributive and emendatory justice. Punishment is imposed for what is done; "logical consequences" are what happens because of what you did. If the child comes too late for supper, he goes without supper. Logical consequences can be applied in a manner which is friendly. The tone of one's voice, expressing real feelings of friendliness, makes all the difference.

Until we figured out the philosophy behind this and saw that basically it squares with Christian teaching, some of us were very much disturbed.

The practical application of these ideas was not as simple as the stating and grasping of them. In the first place, a genuine attitude of friendliness and objectivity even when one's own comfort is disregarded and one's dignity affronted, is not easy to acquire. But surely it is just exactly what the Christian Gospel requires of us, over and over. The New Testament is full of such teaching as "render not evil for evil, nor railing for railing," "love your enemies," and St. Paul's description of charity says that it "suffers long and is kind, is not puffed up," etc. Respect for others, patience, humility, compassion—all these are necessary in dealing with children if we are to win them.

In an institution it is not always easy to think of logical consequences for every situation. With eighty or ninety children there are a great variety of opportunities!

We tried to work out this principle of "logical consequences" with the Student Council whose responsibility it is to maintain order in the dormitory and deal with problems of student government. Girls who are destructive of the common order are often required to contribute some special work towards the good of the whole—in what are called "work hours." Work hours are adjusted to the individual's capacities and include housework, such as cleaning silver and washing paint, or garden work, raking leaves or weeding, or helping in an office.

Often the Council will simply designate one of its members to talk over some problem with an individual or have a group meeting when

several girls are involved. Those who do not finish the jobs in time for lunch, through appearing too late to begin them, go without lunch. Exclusion from the group is sometimes used; and sometimes the Council asks a girl to write out the reasons for a given rule.

Another important principle in dealing with children was set before us: the importance of encouraging them rather than humiliating them, and their need for warmth and sympathy and affection was emphasized. If we realized *how much* we scolded and found fault, and how often we did it in order to increase our feeling of superiority, we would look for a different approach. But encouraging words that are not sincere, that simply hide our real attitude of impatience or fear, will not convince the child, who is sensitive to the real meaning behind our words. What is needed is genuine love and confidence and hope. As Christians we have all been taught these things as the very center of the gospel teaching. It is the way we believe Christ looks upon us, with compassion for our weakness and with loving trust in us as His children.

The following year we had another visit from the psychiatrist, and again a series of meetings and conferences were planned. This time many of us knew him from his former visit; all of us had been thinking about what we had heard at that time, read since then, and tried to work out in practice. This time our talks covered four chief topics: (1) our biggest current problem that year, the problem of affection and emotional relationship within the group; (2) the need for regular group discussion periods for all classes; (3) perfectionism; and (4) the over-stressing of academic success and failure in our educational system.

Light was shed upon the problem of adolescent "crushes," which happened to be especially troublesome that year. Some of the seniors were plagued by the attentions and demands for special treatment levied on them by some of the younger girls, and they brought their problem to the psychiatrist, as a group. Afterwards he shared with us all some of the things he had said to them in order to help them understand and deal with the situation.

"They are well named 'crushes'!" he told the seniors. "You are the crushed. The younger girls are the 'crushers' trying to put you into their service."

To us he explained that over-indulgence is sometimes at the root of such crushes. An only or youngest child often seeks to put older people in her service. She has learned this technique at home as a

means of finding a place. What should we do about this problem? First we must be humble enough to realize that none of us can avoid mistakes. Only few persons can be kind and firm at the same time. Most kind persons are not firm enough, and most firm persons are not kind enough. Both need a gradual learning, either of warmth, or of firmness, and can help each other. Those who are concerned with order can be helped to warm up a little, and those who are concerned with warmth can be helped to be more concerned with order—not to be “suckers.” We must help each other develop this equilibrium. Too much warmth leads to favoritism. We become prejudiced in favor of a certain child and cannot be fair to the others. There is a thin line between affection and emotional entanglement. We must not fear mistakes. We are bound to make them. We must help each other in the group and not regard these mistakes as matters of personal criticism.

Teachers should not be mother substitutes. When a teacher assumes the role of a mother to any of the students she has to leave the faculty emotionally. It is not possible to be both teacher and mother at once. If we become involved with a child we become a “doormat,” as the seniors are doormats for the eighth graders. If they succeed in making others feel sorry for them, they only get sorrier for themselves. The seniors need to be more objective with the younger children.

The problem of crushes was alleviated that very year, for the “crushed” took the hint, and never since have we had serious trouble with crushes (though we do not expect to be immune forever!).

Group discussions for each class were then once more urged upon us. Our first reply was the stock answer of any faculty to any addition to the school day: there isn't any *time*. Thereupon the psychiatrist resorted to prophecy and bribery. He prophesied that if we gave the scheme a try, scheduling a full period each week for each class for free discussion with a teacher, of whatever problems they might wish to talk over, we would be convinced of the value of the plan by June, and would never abandon it. Then he bribed us: “If you will, I'll agree to answer any letters you may write about the problems that come up, and try to help you with them.”

So our Friday discussion groups were started, and we have continued ever since, even as was foretold. The children bring up all kinds of topics, relationships with adults, privileges, their next party with boys, being “superior,” how to decide upon a college, men versus women, moral standards in college, and how to encourage the fifth graders to empty the trash more tidily. Discussion leaders regard what

is said as private, as far as individuals are concerned, but are free to report to the faculty what sort of problems are coming up.

Perfectionism in a Convent School might be expected to be a problem, since Religious are pledged to seek perfection, and often do so with over-anxiety, worry, and a selfish desire for excellence. Religious are often very ambitious, and do not always recognize that their striving for perfection is based on pride and not on love. On the other hand, Religious, like all Christians, are not unacquainted with the ideal of humility. Humility is not a weak and insincere attitude of "I'm no good, I can't do anything." It is the honest and courageous facing of the truth about ourselves, our good points as well as our bad ones, and the accepting of our status as children in a family, with obligations and needs that arise from that membership. It requires us to remember our frailty, our inability to act alone, our need of others, and our responsibility for others. It forbids us to glory in ourselves. "What has thou that thou didst not receive? Now if thou didst receive it why dost thou glory . . . ?" I Cor. 4:7.

Finally, we had a lively discussion of the importance of academic success and failure in our school. We do give academic "honors" of several sorts to those who do outstanding work, but we do not give "grades," either letter or decimal. The reports use adjectives describing the work, and these are standardized so that the students know how they stand in relation to the school and college entrance requirements. Other prizes and honors are given equal importance, however, and in abundance so that everyone has a chance of winning something during the school year, a medal for sacristy work, an athletic award, a pin for cooperation, books on Prize Day for creative writing, and for good work in special projects, etc.

The psychiatrist's third visit was in April of the following year. This time he found a new problem cropping up over and over: a general lack of integration and harmony within the group. He felt that the lack of harmony among the children reflected lack of harmony among the faculty. His chief concrete suggestion was to have a regular discussion group *for the faculty*, so that tensions and difficulties among them could be brought out and faced and dealt with. One objection to this proposal was that in a boarding school it is very hard to gather *all* the faculty together at any one time. Some are always needed for some kind of duty with the children. But the reply was that it is a poor and inefficient mother who must be on duty all the time. Let the children take care of themselves sometimes.

Once again we succumbed and introduced a regular Tuesday evening faculty discussion group. We were urged to be frank at these meetings, not to be afraid of hurting one another's feelings. "There is no one in this group who would deliberately hurt any of her fellow workers. Yet I am sure I can say that there is no one who has *not* done so." We needed frank discussion so we could help each other.

Such questions as how strong to make the tea (tea-getting each afternoon is a regular faculty "job"), what is the function of the Principal, how can we be sure everyone hears all important announcements, and how can we help new teachers find their place in the school, have been thrashed over at these meetings. The result has been sometimes apparently inconclusive, though we did settle on a certain strength for tea, but on the whole they have helped us to know, to understand, and like each other better, and so these sessions have really fulfilled their purpose.

In his talks with the freshman class the psychiatrist found that the chief complaint of the children was: "we have no fun." He suggested that perhaps the discussion leader could help them find an avenue through which they could have fun and do something useful at the same time. "They have a very poor idea of fun. They seem to expect all their fun from one party, and have no enthusiasm for fun in any other form."

One other new idea was introduced by our guest: the assigning of the oldest students as "Big Sisters" to the youngest. There had been too much of the officer-private relationship between them, with the seniors responsible for overseeing their jobs, their room inspection, etc. If the older girls were expected to *help* the younger ones, their whole relationship would be on a sounder basis. This plan, too, was introduced and has brought about a definite improvement. It has given the seniors an interest in learning how to deal with little children, and they have grown in understanding and skill in their approach to them. We were afraid that the "Big Sister" idea might lead us back into difficulties with crushes, but it did not. The effect seems to be the opposite. The little children appreciate very much the interest and love of the older girls, but do not strive for the attention of a selected victim.

One favorite and unforgettable maxim we heard and which needs a paragraph to itself was, "When you don't know what to do, think up all the things you know you should not do, and don't do them! The rest will be all right."

In June of 1950, one of our staff members made it possible for us

to have a Child Guidance Conference for all our faculty members and a few guests, lasting ten days, under the direction of a psychologist, a co-worker of the psychiatrist at the Chicago Community Child Guidance Centers. The conference was held at the school shortly after the children left for their summer holiday. The general plan was as follows: every morning we had a two-hour session, beginning with a talk by the psychologist on some concept of Adler's theory of child guidance, followed by discussion. Each afternoon there was another two-hour session at which each member of the conference presented at least one "case," followed by discussion. In the evenings we spent another hour on some special topic: interpretation of painting, psychodrama, a sketch of the Child Guidance Centers, dream interpretation, etc.

It was a strenuous conference, but a most stimulating and profitable one. The atmosphere was informal as we sat in a circle, out of doors usually, and divided our time between listening and learning, on the one hand, and developing or trying out our own responses and ideas on each other. The whole group was skillfully introduced to such basic concepts as organ inferiority, the importance of the family constellation, early recollections, and the life-style, etc., and many discussions arose in which school problems were brought up. At one session each member told two or three of his or her earliest recollections, beginning with the leader, and then listened to the interpretations. This experience brought the group closer together in understanding, and was an important part of our work, since in any school the teachers and pupils alike form the whole group, and no one can expect to understand others who does not have some measure of self-knowledge. Nor should anyone who refuses to give up his isolation and separateness, and chooses to stand apart as critic and mentor, himself uncriticized, be given the job of trying to guide others, especially children. So each of us tried to face with some equanimity, frankness, and tranquility, such sayings about ourselves as "She wants what she wants when she wants it!" "She thinks everybody picks on her. She is a martyr." "She is still the little girl doing dishes." Such analyses should not be made, of course, without the supervision of a trained practitioner.

It would take a whole paper to do justice to that conference. Only a few things can be mentioned specifically here. One important discussion was on "sex education." By this we do not mean the proper manner of introducing the biological facts about reproduction to children,

but the importance of helping the students to understand and accept their sex role. In a girls' school the phenomenon of "masculine protest" is very evident. Many girls wish they were boys, because of their conviction that boys are stronger and have more fun and more privileges than girls. Here again we found some slight disagreement between our Christian philosophy and some of the emphases, at least, of our leader. We, on our side, feel that while the sexes are "equal" in the sense of being equally valuable and equally honorable, they are not equal in the sense that their functions in society are interchangeable. We cling, in fact, to the old idea that the biological and social functions of men condition them more than women to action and initiative and judgment; that in women special gifts of receptivity and intuition are developed, and that these differences should be balanced by generosity and mutual self-sacrifice between man and woman. We could not accept altogether the theory of the "equality of the sexes" as it was presented. But all that was said on the subject helped us to realize how much suffering and distortion is caused in human relationships by the rejection of one's sex role and the struggle for superiority, and how important it is to give the children a right impression of the dignity and worth of being a woman. Even our standard jokes in this country—woman-driver jokes, mother-in-law jokes, etc., betray a deep contempt for the feminine.

"Friendship" was another topic which produced fruitful discussion. Are we satisfied with, or critical of, the friendships our children make? Do we try to encourage them to make friendships, or are we too often trying to forbid this or that kind of friend? The more wholesome friendships there are in the group, the better. If the children are learning to make friends, we are doing a good job. If they are not, we need to find out why not.

All through the conference the importance of an attitude of encouraging, understanding, and trusting, was stressed. Pampering and harshness were over and over again pointed out as opposite errors. Through the talks and discussions, and also through the very techniques used in the conference, we gained a new insight into the need we all have for mutual acceptance and forbearance, and for the kind of humility which makes a person able to face failures and mistakes without bitterness or discouragement. Surely all this is "not far from the Kingdom of God." And from it all this Church School has learned much that has strengthened and helped us all in our work with children.