

# The Equilibrium of the Social Worker<sup>1</sup>

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The absence of equilibrium implies the presence of tensions; there are tensions in the life of everyone, but nowhere more so than in the life of those who are trying to live up to an ideal. Experience has proved this to be true. But it is the more true of the Christian, continually responding to the urge of grace or failing to do so. Even the great Apostle of the Gentiles was forced to admit that 'praiseworthy intentions are always ready to hand, but I cannot find my way to the performance of them. It is not the good my will prefers, but the evil my will disapproves, that I find myself doing.'<sup>2</sup> Yet such tensions can be an asset, provided we are clear about our goals. We cannot hope to eliminate tensions—trying to suppress or ignore them can only lead to worse effects—because they are due to our human nature wounded by the sin of our first parents. But we can hope to arrive at a state of harmony, a *balance* of tensions which will sustain us and even carry us forward.

Again it is even more true of the social worker whose function is, by definition, 'to assess the disturbance of equilibrium in a given handicapped person, in his family, his social relationships, so as to give appropriate help.'<sup>3</sup> In order to do his job properly, the social worker has to place himself in a situation that is lacking equilibrium, and through empathy to share—at least to some extent—the client's problems. The social worker is not to be considered as a person safe and dry who throws a lifebelt to somebody struggling in the water. He has himself to jump in the water and to encourage the person in difficulties to make the necessary strokes to remain afloat, and perhaps eventually to make for the shore. A case is not a person but a person in a given situation, characterised by disequilibrium. This the social worker must accept as a necessary preliminary to giving 'the appropriate help'.

<sup>1</sup>A paper read at the Tenth International Congress of the International Catholic Union of Social Service, Nijmegen, August 1963.

<sup>2</sup>Rom 7, 18f.

<sup>3</sup>Report of the Working Party on Social Workers in the Local Authority Health and Welfare Services, H.M.S.O. (London, 1959), para. 615.

The manipulation of social relationships is the main tool of the social worker. 'Casework is a personal service provided by qualified workers for individuals who require skilled assistance in resolving some material, emotional or character problem. It is a disciplined activity which requires a full appreciation of the needs of the client, in his family and community setting. The caseworker seeks to perform this service on the basis of mutual trust, and in such ways as will strengthen the client's own capacities to deal with his problems, and to achieve a better adjustment with his environment.'<sup>4</sup> Not everybody is endowed with the ability to take up an easy relationship with another, even if their vocation is to be a social worker. Yet this ability to relate, the subtle mysterious interaction between two individuals, is to the social worker what iron is to the smith, stone to the sculptor, wood to the carver—the very stuff of his work.

By definition, the social worker is dealing with those who are out of harmony either with themselves, with their family or with society. Hence he is faced with a double problem: to establish his own interior equilibrium, and to establish an equilibrium with his client. More often than not the social worker too is concerned not merely with the client, but also directly or indirectly with the readjustment, and therefore with the members of, the client's family. It is the interaction of both which has contributed to, if not caused, the client's problems in the first place.

A number of factors enter into the question of interior balance. First, there is the question of emotional stability, without which tensions can become unbearable. Then, there must be a sense of adequacy, that is a conviction of professional competence to cope with this situation here and now, not in a dogmatic but in a problematic way. Here of course experience is essential. But underlying this there must be knowledge of goals and of norms which are satisfying both to professional skills and to one's philosophy of life, whether religious or humanist. Finally there must be a balanced enthusiasm, based on real love of one's neighbour.

The neighbour is the client, and it is with him that the social worker must engage in a dialogue, not a monologue. For this latter would inevitably mean unbalance. The goal is to be achieved by the social worker offering himself as confidant and counsellor, not as guide and director. Each relationship is unique, because each individual human being is a unique creation of God. Hence the social worker's caseload

<sup>4</sup>Provisional definition in the glossary of the International Conference of Social Work. Cf. definition of Catholic social casework by Betty Hannigan and Henry R. Evans in *The Catholic Charities Review*, Feb. 1963, p. 7.

involves his having to seek and find a particular balanced relationship with each client who figures on it—and often with members of the families of clients as well.

In reality of course, these two, interior and exterior equilibrium, cannot be separated. Each reacts on the other, for the social worker is one indivisible personality. Hence the vital importance of a self-awareness on the part of the social worker, and the necessity for increased insights into his own conscious and unconscious motives, i.e., a knowledge of self that goes beyond an examination of conscious attitudes. This should be augmented by working through the social worker's own relationships with parents and with other figures of authority, as well as siblings. At the same time he should be clear about his motivation for choosing this career. Has it been chosen as a means of self-perfection, thus using the client as a means to an end? Is it perhaps an unconscious attempt to solve the worker's own buried problems, neglecting the beam in his own eye . . . ? Is there perhaps a hidden sense of insecurity which is being helped by being able to say 'at least I haven't my client's problems'? Or again may it be a revolt against the existing order which is being fought through the vehicle of the client? All of these possibilities must be considered—none of them may be neglected—if the social worker is to approach his task with a certain security and maturity that are essential prerequisites.

We need to consider in more detail the areas of disequilibrium in the life of the social worker, and this by an analysis of the imbalance that can arise in the psyche of the social worker himself, then in his personal relationships with others, and finally in his spiritual life which should underpin and suffuse these other areas.

#### 1. *Sources of tension*

Some conflict may arise from a lack of maturity and will show itself in various ways: a sense of insecurity possibly leading to an inability to make decisions and stand by them; an excessive need for praise or commendation, without which the worker may become discouraged, as equally may be the case through lack of success; a need to dominate; a tendency to be ultra sensitive and to take offence where none is intended or present (what I would like to call the dudgeon-prone type). Naturally all these weaknesses can be found in mature people as well—they are part of the inevitable tension that arises from continually dealing with people. The important point is that with mature people they happen only sporadically while with the immature they are a constant feature.

But there are unconscious elements too that must be taken into account. If one accepts that personal relationships always contain an element of antagonism, however slight, then there will often be present 'a sediment of feeling of aversion and hostility'. Partly because of its hidden nature and partly because the social worker experiences discomfort from it, there will be a tendency to repress these instead of allowing them to become conscious and then work them through. In its turn this will then lead to compulsions, anxieties, unexplained outbursts of anger, as well as to possible psychosomatic symptoms. At the same time, the social worker may experience relative helplessness in some situations giving rise to feelings of guilt.

Inadequate professional training or preparation may be the cause of disequilibrium, and insufficient supervision of casework will show itself by lack of method. This is doubly unnerving when the individual is conscious of it, and for one reason or another (through pride or lack of opportunity) it may be impossible to remedy this defect. For those who are working in other than Catholic agencies a conflict can arise between the Catholic idea of responsibility and determinist theories of behaviour, and the Catholic's knowledge may not be profound enough to resolve the conflict. There may be an instinctive knowledge that an argument is wrong, but an inability to provide a rational basis to refute it. Furthermore, it is very rarely indeed that one comes across a social worker who is not carrying an excessive caseload. The result is overwork which prevents one from keeping up intellectually with academic developments in any critical kind of way, and also produces a mental tiredness which in turn disturbs intellectual judgement. This is the more disconcerting because the very theories on which casework is based are themselves in a state of disequilibrium. It first developed on a sociological basis which in its turn was—at least in some countries—displaced by an over-emphasis on psychological factors. Historically speaking there was no gradual merging and integration of the two approaches and we have not yet reached a satisfactory balance between the two.

There are many forms of personal relationship that influence the equilibrium of the social worker, quite apart from the central relationship with the client. The type of client, or of situation, that constantly confronts the social worker means that he is exposed to a parade of human misery and must find a middle way between the cynicism of inhumanity and the luxury of emotional involvement. He must develop a carapace of non-involvement which does not stifle the outgoing attitude of empathy. A wrong way of seeking equilibrium would be to

rest in a state of detached objectivity while handing out a cut-and-dried solution to the client's problem 'in the light of logic and common sense'. There are so many different problems to handle, in fact as many problems as there are clients, for no two are alike as no two human beings are alike. We sometimes dream of some simple formula, a magic method of procedure, that would apply to every case and produce results? In fact, there is such a device which while it does not produce an immediate solution is at least always profitable. It can be expressed simply as the ability to listen. In many instances if we are ever to get to know the dynamics behind various types of emotional and moral disorders, we must learn to listen. And yet there is often a great disparity between the cultural and intellectual level of social worker and client. Tension can arise through trying to have an outgoing interest in the uncouth, the unlettered, the unattractive, the unfriendly. The only way that balance can be retained is by a kenotic act, such as our Lord himself performed when he emptied himself, taking on himself the form of the servant. Moreover, those with whom we have to deal are nearly always in a state of inferiority, of frustration and of resentment, and the first essential is to create an atmosphere of 'permissiveness'. Without this there can be no true dialogue or personal relationship.

Clients may come and clients may go, but one's colleagues in the same department or agency remain, for good or for ill, as a source of harmony and help, or as a source of disturbance and friction. We must not underestimate the possibility of the emotional problems arising from temperamental differences, accentuated if they are not between equals but between superiors and subordinates. Laymen and laywomen in the Church are increasingly ill at ease at being denied full responsibility for their actions in the temporal order. In fully developed societies there is something anachronistic in having priests as directors of agencies of social work. Intervention in the temporal order is no part of the direct mission of the Church as such—she, in the person of her ordained representatives, intervenes only in circumstances of emergency, that is until such time as there are competent laymen and satisfactory institutions to carry on the work. The clergy, through clinging to these positions out of a mistaken sense of duty, can cause frustration to the laity who work with them, and contribute to their lack of equilibrium. (The position may be different, of course, where the priest director is also himself a professionally trained and qualified social worker.) The social worker involved may suffer through this—but how much more so the clients. There can be intellectual problems too, through lack of

understanding and appreciation by colleagues and supervisors of the use and purpose of casework. I say 'casework', but I could just as easily say new methods, new techniques, new insights which are not welcomed by the more conservative type of mentality. Another source of tension in this same area may be a badly organised department which can show itself in lack of discussion, lack of supervision, too many unimportant duties (including paper work which should be done by secretaries) and delayed referrals.

But the profession is wider than one's own immediate colleagues. Social work is a profession, and many people who are in it have a quite natural desire to advance themselves, not necessarily because they are ambitious in a narrow selfish manner, but because they feel themselves capable of carrying further responsibilities, of providing greater service. Hence the danger of feeling frustrated at the success of others, which in itself is bad enough. But there is a further disturbing thought—which may be true or false—that being a Catholic puts one at a competitive disadvantage. This then has repercussions on the inevitable lack of agreement that the Catholic is bound to have regarding some basic principles with other non-Catholic members of the profession.

One final factor in this area is the position of the social worker in society as a whole. In some countries the status of social work is not high in the community, and the 'average social worker' is a 'marginal person' who often feels himself to be underpaid and insecure. Although social workers are now trained members of a profession, there are many people who still believe that anybody can do this kind of job provided they have good will and human understanding. A basic element in the equilibrium of the social worker must be acceptance by, and standing in, the community. The tangible signs of this are remuneration comparable with other professions and adequate facilities and assistance in the form of office accommodation and help.

Life in community, with the strength that comes from belonging to the group, is necessary to all of us, and not least to the social worker. The social worker is better equipped, because more human, if he emerges from and returns to a background of family or friends. The emphasis here is on the enrichment of human personality. The social worker is not merely a technician with acquired skills but a human person who performs his work in and through his relationships with other human persons. Hence he must be truly human, with the humanity which is enriched by 'laughter and the love of friends'. The unmarried woman social worker with no family ties, especially if living

and working away from the geographical area where she grew up, is in danger of missing this. Her acquaintance may be limited to fellow members of her own or cognate professions, or perhaps through a misguided sense of detachment (itself a rationalisation of a timid nature) she may lead a solitary kind of existence. Let me stress that a social worker is a *social* worker, and should perhaps be more gregarious than others in less exacting professions.

But what of those who, because of their state of life, already live in community? I refer to religious, usually women, who are engaged in social work. Their problems are sometimes at the other end of the scale. It would be wrong to omit mention of them, especially as in our day so many religious are already involved or in process of becoming involved in serving Christ in the casualties of society. There is an inherent difficulty—and therefore possible cause of disequilibrium—for the religious. In her professional work she will have one form of relationship with whoever is in authority over her—with her case supervisor, for example, she will enter into free discussion and arrive at a decision which is the agreed conclusion of this dialogue. Does she have this same relationship with her religious superior? One would like to think so, but experience of narrow views of obedience and of still narrower views of authority leads one to fear that some religious who are engaged in social work must find it difficult if not impossible to integrate their professional and religious life, with a resulting tension that cannot make any contribution to equilibrium. Difficulties are especially to be expected in those congregations which are just beginning to turn to social work. The trained sister social worker may have to suffer a great deal from the lack of understanding of other members of the community who hold to the mistaken belief that love of God and of one's neighbour is sufficient without any professional training.

Apart from this last reference to religious communities, all that I have said up to now would be valid for any social worker with any kind of religious belief or with none. The differentiating factor for the Christian is surely that his faith—lived out in his life—should be the integrating factor, a positive help in achieving balance and harmony rather than a source of further disturbance. Perhaps we have not thought sufficiently about this at the existential level, being content to enunciate principles.

The spiritual life of the social worker should, ideally speaking, underpin the areas of tension, helping to resolve them. But in fact the action and effect may flow in the other direction so that the tension and con-

sequent disequilibrium may be transferred to religious belief and practice. Without strongly based faith it could happen that the depressing nature of some forms of social work would have the effect of undermining the worker's trust in God's mercy and justice. It can happen too that the social worker will get so enmeshed in the mechanics of the profession that religion, and especially religious practice, has less and less relation to the work of everyday life, and becomes no more than an appendage, a species of habit or automatism.

## 2. *The redemption of the social order*

To arrive at a harmonious balance of tensions the first essential for the Catholic social worker is to have clear ideas about the philosophical and theological principles that underlie social welfare in general and social work in particular. This involves an understanding of man in society, seen in the Christian context of the universal redemption of mankind. Stability is aided by having fixed and sure points of reference, co-ordinates that can bring back a vacillating judgement to fundamentals and which can also be points of departure for new appraisals of problems.

The chief danger in our technical age is to think that techniques can be applied with equal success to man as well as to machines. To guard against this we need to have a profound respect for the dignity of human personality. 'Any human society', said Pope John, 'if it is to be well-ordered and productive, must lay down as a foundation this principle, namely that every human being is a person, that is, his nature is endowed with intelligence and free-will. By virtue of this he has rights and duties of his own, flowing directly and simultaneously from his very nature, which are therefore universal, inviolable and inalienable.'<sup>5</sup> This dignity can be stated very simply: it means that every human being, no matter how degraded, how helpless, how apparently useless he may seem, is destined directly and without intermediary to know, love and serve God both in this world and in the next. He has 'an absolute value of his own and is willed for his own sake; he is the most perfect of creatures and the one for whom all others are willed; he is the principal part of the universe . . . He is a free creature, capable of participating in the divine government of the universe, and so is a cause willed for itself. He is immortal as an individual, and not simply in virtue of participating in a species; his spiritual acts have therefore an eternal value, and it is under their strictly personal aspect that God wills

<sup>5</sup>John XXIII, *Pacem in terris*.



their performance here below. He carries the image of God substantial, unique, ineradicable, but perfectible, and the whole universe exists to help him to perfect it. He is willed "according to his proper individuality" (St Thomas Aquinas' *Contra Gentes*, III, 113) and he is therefore never to be considered as a means . . . he is an end.<sup>6</sup> Of the many rights that man has qua human person there is one which Pope John singled out (in the encyclical *Pacem in Terris*) for special emphasis and which is of great importance to the social worker. 'The dignity of the human person,' he wrote, 'also requires that every man enjoy the right to act freely and responsibly. For this reason man should . . . act chiefly on his own responsibility and initiative. This is to be done in such a way that each one acts on his own decision, of set purpose and from a consciousness of his obligation, without being moved by force or pressure brought to bear on him externally.'<sup>7</sup> But this by no means exhausts the value of each individual human person, for besides being the image of God, he is an image transfigured in Christ. 'Just as natural creation endows man with a being which is a certain likeness of the divine goodness, so his filial adoption endows him with a being which is a likeness to the natural sonship of the Word in God.'<sup>8</sup> As St Paul expresses it, it is in Christ that we are eternally loved, chosen, predestined, called and become creatures of grace. Each single individual is called to be a partaker of the divine nature, and does so at least potentially. He may derive his existence from his descent from Adam, but he exists *for* Christ, and by faith and baptism he will be divinised at the very source of his personality.

Yet, man must live in society and find the satisfaction of his rights and the fulfilment of his duties in association with others like himself. The State exists to assure that there shall be such a balance of rights and duties among imperfect men that they can live their lives in the various communities to which they belong, family, economic, cultural, religious, to the fulfilment of their nature. The primary reason for its existence is to promote the order of justice, and in this age the form of justice which most concerns mankind is social justice. Hence the State's increasing intervention in an effort to redress the general disregard for human solidarity and the violation of justice. 'With the growing complexity of social life, especially in an industrial society, the range of the

<sup>6</sup>Mouroux, J. *The Meaning of Man*, pp. 128-9.

<sup>7</sup>John XXIII, *Pacem in terris*. Cf. *A Handbook of Christian Social Ethics*, Vol. I, by E. Welty, O.P. (tr. and ed. J. Fitzsimons, pp. 45-6.)

<sup>8</sup>Mouroux, J., *op. cit.*, p. 134.

State's intervention becomes even wider. The welfare state is a faithful commentary on the essential insecurity of the world we know . . . As the papal teaching of the past sixty years has repeatedly emphasized, there is an inherent weakness in a society dominated by commercial gain: too often the weakest have gone to the wall, and the common good has demanded the guaranteeing to all of the essential means of a social security that accords with man's proper dignity.<sup>9</sup>

But, for the theologian, charity and not justice is the supreme norm of social life and of all other aspects of human existence. For while justice bids me look on my neighbour, or the community to which I belong, as those who have a claim on me, charity makes me look on them as equals, as united to me in God and in Christ. The good news that Christ brought to mankind was the sublime knowledge that the divine life was to be communicated to men, that we were to have fellowship in the Godhead of Him who deigned to share our manhood. And this concerns, obviously, the constitutive resources of man, those which condition his being and progress, and thus those social structures of man in which alone he can acquire his perfection. The law of nature becomes the law of grace. But the effect of charity is 'not to produce a good citizen, or even a reasonable fellow, but to make men move at ease in the extravagances of divine friendship. Christianity offers more than a superior sort of civic philosophy . . . The Gospel Law is no written system, nor a model constitution for the State, but a spirit shed in our hearts; a life, not of submission to the group nor of assent to a plan of life, both of which are demanded as predispositions, but of freedom in the enjoyment of divine truth and friendship.'<sup>10</sup>

In our life in society we are to show our charity, and this is where the difficulties and the problems begin. To talk of loving all men is vague and general because it is asking us, demanding from us, that we be concerned about the welfare of people we do not know, people we have never even seen. Can it be all that important? It is the most important of all virtues in the hierarchy of charity. We must love the good of all men, of humanity, more than the good of a group, still more than that of an individual. How in practice are we to work for the good of all men? First, by freeing ourselves from the idea that charity is limited to person to person relationships, confined to direct action by one person on the soul or body of another. In fact, the principal duty of charity urges us to forms of action which reach others only

<sup>9</sup>Evans, Illtud, O.P., *One and Many*, pp. 72-3.

<sup>10</sup>Gilby, Thomas, O.P., *Between Community and Society*, pp. 321-2.

indirectly. Unfortunately, this was not sufficiently recognized in the last century, and while Christians were appalled by the casualties of society, they concentrated for the most part on person to person charity when what was most needed was to change society itself. In fact a medieval approach to charity which was suited to the social conditions of a bygone age (and indeed produced a flowering of good works the like of which the world had never seen before) was carried over into a totally different, more complex, age in which the characteristic is social organization. Social charity is now the order of the day.

In 1934 Pope Pius XI wrote to the *Semaine sociale de France*: 'Social charity by the acts proper to charity as such unites men to God and to one another in him. Then it conditions, it determines, it commands the acts of social justice itself, so increasing the regulatory power of the latter almost to infinity.' The object of social charity is the well-being of all members organized and living together in community; love of the common good as a goal worth striving for precedes social justice which considers the common good as something which is owed as a basis of right. The greatest duty of charity for every one of us is to be an element in human society useful to the common good—and more than that an element which contributes to the redemption of society.

The Christian is called on to purify and redeem the world: misery and injustice must be fought so that the human community may become gradually more habitable by the sons of God, and may at last reach its consummation in a community divinized. There is universal disorder because the effect of original sin in man is also in the works of man, in art and technics in the widest sense. All need to be redeemed, to be brought back to order—and this is to be done in and through Christ—for in Him the world is reconciled to the Father, and all things are made new. It was God's loving design, says St Paul, to give history its fulfilment by bringing together all things in Him, all that is in heaven, all that is in earth, summed up in Him. This means the establishment of the harmony of all things in Christ, as the principle of unity, the centre and living link of the universe. He alone can be the principle of unity and harmony because while through His incarnation he is of the world, at the same time He is above and beyond it. It must tend to Him as its end, for it was created for Him. So redemption is cosmic in its effects: the fulfilment of the redemption at the end of time did not mean for St Paul the transfer of the elect to a heavenly sphere, nor the replacement of this world with a new world, nor even the re-establishment of the world in the state it was in before the Fall, but a trans-

figuration of the world, the effect of which would be to adapt it to the spiritual character which the beings called to inhabit it will then bear.

What do we mean by the redemption of human society? As all societies depend on Christ for their very being, so they should submit to Him in their action and their influence. Societies should provide the environment in which men can find the various goods that will enrich them and help them towards perfection. This implies a double task: first, to help those who are the casualties of society, and second, to work towards the amelioration of those conditions that have caused the casualties. The former are summed up in the traditional list of the corporal and spiritual works of mercy, and indeed most of these are now the professional preoccupation of the social worker, through the social services. These social services must be baptized, and will be if those who work in them are convinced that in meeting another's need they are meeting Christ. The latter part of the task means becoming actively involved in the reform of the structure of society. Let me combine the two parts of this double task by an extension of the parable of the Good Samaritan. In the modern world the real Good Samaritan, after binding up the wounds of the man who has been attacked and making sure that he is comfortable and on the road to recovery, should organize a posse (which being interpreted means an action group) and take off into the mountains to find the hide-out of the robbers who started it all. He should capture them and bring them back to Jerusalem, and there he should hand them over to the civil power so that they can be withdrawn from circulation for correction. And so at least one form of attack on innocent travellers will be eliminated. (In parenthesis I might say that the Good Samaritan in the modern world may very well find that the robbers, when unmasked, will turn out to be his employers. This should not deter him from doing his duty.) Thus what begins as a work of charity is completed by the work of seeing that justice is done. The social worker, by his very profession, is in a privileged position to work for the redemption of society. Surely the realisation of this can be a very important stabilising factor in helping the social worker to that maturity of outlook which is so important for equilibrium.

*(to be continued)*