

endurance and stability we possess ourselves. No one obviously is obliged to go beyond that level of charity where through too close proximity with morbid emotions he is in grave danger of serious uncharity in himself.

Within such limits there is every reason to give our neurotic neighbours what kindness we can. In a way they bear the mental Passion of Christ; and it is not impossible by the light of 'faith to love in them the Christ of Gethsemani.

### III

DR CHARLES BURNS

YOUR correspondent, G.H., has raised a very pertinent question when he asks what should be the attitude of a Christian layman towards neurotic individuals, who seem, in our day, to multiply in our midst.

His letter raises two main issues. One: is it helpful and right for a neurotic to be listened to sympathetically, even by persons with no professional knowledge? Two: is it advisable for such a listener to run the risk of contamination, distress of mind, and waste of time, by giving charitably of his sympathy; is it even his Christian duty so to do?

To answer the first, one must have some notion as to the nature of neurosis. Is a neurotic person essentially selfish, as G.H. suggests? A neurotic may be said to be egocentric or egoistic (which is not the same thing) because, being rebuffed and thwarted in his relationships with others, and frustrated in his life activities, he is driven back on himself; he is at the same time desperately trying to find his way out of the impasse into which he has been driven by his anxiety, his inferiority, and feelings of tension, lassitude, and ill-health.

Fr Keenan, O.F.M., in his book *Neuroses and the Sacraments* gives good definitions of neurosis from a layman's point of view: 'The distinctive mark of the neurotic is that he tries to adjust himself in the wrong way'; and again: 'The neurotic does not adjust himself to reality properly. He is out of tune rather than out of touch with reality.' The reasons for this failure of adjustment lie in the emotional sphere of the mind, are both past and

present, conscious and unconscious. They cause the reason to be clouded and the will rendered almost impotent (this applies in some measure to all of us!). They also befog the spiritual or religious sphere (here it is important to understand the relation between the natural and supernatural spheres of the soul).

To have an understanding and sympathetic listener is a craving with most types of neurotics. (The chap who is just liverish is more likely to be gloomy and peevish.) It is of value to neurotics to be listened to, provided that the listener is able to bear the burden, by virtue of his balance and sanity of outlook, as well as sympathy. Anything like contempt, or excessive heartiness, or sentimentality, is worse than useless. Yet a certain amount of humour, even bantering, may be useful, provided that there is already a good relationship between them.

Now, a psychotherapist is as it were a professional listener, and he is protected by his knowledge (i.e. he knows where he stands), by the time-limits which he sets, and by his detachment (which is not indifference). The same applies in a sense to the confessor. But the poor layman on whom the neurotic pours his troubles has no such safeguards.

So we come to the second part of the question, and we can say that if the layman feels beyond his depth, or that his own nerves are unduly strained, e.g. that he is sleeping badly, then he must be firm and not do it. When it comes to this point he must counsel his neurotic friend to seek professional help (provided he gets the right kind, without falling into the hands of electric shock merchants).

The trouble is that in our day, it would seem that the tide of neurosis has mounted so high that it has overtaken the supply of people who are able to cope with it. Too many doctors, priests, and even psychiatrists, have less knowledge of what constitutes neurosis than many well-read laymen.

G.H. is right in thinking that neurosis is our modern type of plague, that it must be brought into the open, and that we can all help to combat it in one way or another. It is perhaps for the theologian to define how far heroic charity is demanded of us, and in what spheres, but he would agree, I think, that in this matter prudence is also to be invoked: it is not our charitable intent which is to be limited, but we have to know our limitations, perfect our understanding, and act with prudence.