

# The Rule of Saint Freud<sup>1</sup>

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by Louis Allen

The monk pointed his pistol. 'As far as I am concerned, the community no longer exists. The land is mine. I suggest you get out—and quick!' The two hired thugs made it clear the threat was a real one. Reluctantly, the little group of Benedictine postulants, and their superior, packed up their few things and trudged off into the heat and dust of a Mexican afternoon. So ended the first period of one of the most interesting experiments in the monastic life in this century.

The superior was, it turned out, a man of rare courage. Born in Lille in 1912, and educated in Louvain, Dom Grégoire Lemerrier spent seven years at the abbey of Mont-César before accepting the invitation of a Mexican colleague to accompany him and another monk, a Belgian, to found a monastery in Mexico. The project was delayed by the outbreak of war, during which Lemerrier served as a chaplain and was taken prisoner. When he was released he left for the United States, and joined his two companions at their abbey of Monte Cassino in the north of Mexico in 1944. The foundation was a double failure: the Belgian threw up his vocation and got married, and the Mexican apostatized and at the end of 1949 took over the monastery by armed force. Two years later, little daunted by this experience, Dom Grégoire founded another monastery, Santa Maria de la Resurrección, a few miles from Cuernavaca, following the strict Benedictine observance. Thomas Merton, who visited the community—all, except the new prior himself, were Mexican Indians—described it as 'one of the most remarkable and courageous experiments in modern monastic history', and said that Lemerrier's monks were perhaps closer to Saint Benedict than any one else in the Americas.

All was not, however, to continue peacefully. During 1960 Lemerrier found that some of his monks were developing symptoms of neurosis, and he made the mistake of inviting two amateur psychologists to see what was wrong. A false sense of economy and his own ignorance were the cause of this, and he soon bitterly regretted unleashing the amateurs upon his monks, once the illusion of a superficial psychotherapy had disappeared. A new factor in the

<sup>1</sup>This article was originally an extended review of Dom Grégoire Lemerrier's *Dialogues avec le Christ* (Grasset, 1966), and its first form ended with an account of the judicial proceedings in Rome on the Cuernavaca experiment. Since events have overtaken this part of the article, it has been omitted. No doubt as further information becomes available from Mexico and Rome, the juridical and pastoral aspects of the Cuernavaca affair will need to be discussed at greater length.

situation arose with a vision he had on October 4th, 1960, a host of brilliant, multi-coloured flashes of light, of extreme beauty, followed by a screen over which passed a succession of faces, stopping at one beautiful face radiating goodness. Lemerrier began to weep, feeling his own inadequacy before God's love, a curious mixture of defeat, of God controlling him, and of great joy, which lasted several hours. This was quite beyond the ability of the amateur psychologists, to whom Lemerrier telephoned for help, and he was advised to get in touch with the president of the Mexican Association for Psychoanalysis. 'I know your work at the monastery', was the response. 'In addition to your very strong personality, and the help from your religion, you should have a more technical help to enable you to face the problems of your monastery: be psychoanalysed yourself' This was the very opposite of what the president had suggested a few months previously, when Lemerrier had been to ask his advice, but at any rate, on January 17th, 1961, at the age of 48, he began his own psychotherapy under the care of a Freudian analyst, Dr Quevedo, selected because of his interest in religious questions.

Lemerrier describes himself at the time of his vision as 'hard, dry, cerebral, in no way given to dabbling with the miraculous, and extremely sceptical about mystical or pseudo-mystical matters'. On March 8th, 1961, he was found to have cancer of the left eye, and the eye was removed, the analysis revealing that the cancer was about six months old. The decisive experience of October 4th, 1960, was, Lemerrier is quite sure, profoundly connected with the beginning of the cancer. Since then, despite the removal of one eye, his sight is better, and he had discovered a deeper, more inward dimension to his life, as if he had exchanged the physical eye for the eye of self-knowledge provided by psychotherapy: 'The long asceticism of psychoanalysis has led me to a spiritual life which I had been unable to reach after thirty years of monastic life, filling me with a joy and confidence which nothing can destroy.'

Both he and Quevedo were so impressed by the results obtained from his own therapy that group therapy for his monks was proposed and accepted, though Quevedo could not guarantee that the result would be favourable to their staying in the monastery. The upshot has been that therapy has become an essential part of the monastic institution at Santa Maria de la Resurrección during the postulant period, lasting for two or three years, or even longer. Some considerable scandal has been caused by the fact that Dr Frida Zmud, a woman psychologist, has shared Quevedo's work, but Lemerrier is convinced such a confrontation is necessary. The two texts usually used as a basis for monastic life, he says, are 'If you would be perfect . . .' and 'Mary hath chosen the better part'. Yet these texts are addressed not to monks but to all Christians and, although they have given monastic life its ideal of the life of perfection, there is another gospel text which he believes to be as important: 'For there

are eunuchs, who were born so from their mother's womb: and there are eunuchs, who were made so by men: and there are eunuchs, who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven.' The phrase which follows this, 'He that can take, let him take it', is considered by Lemerrier to indicate that a restricted group, such as monks, was intended as the recipient of this saying. The monk is essentially a eunuch, he adds; this is the basic element of monastic life. But since Christ refers to three sorts of eunuchs, Lemerrier emphasises that only the third category, 'who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven', are true monks, even though experience shows that all three kinds seek monastic life and enter monasteries. In our society, he goes on, only religious life offers an honourable 'career' to eunuchs of the first two kinds. Psychotherapy discovers which of the brethren are, at bottom, of this kind.

Where the three types co-exist in a monastery, without being aware of their natures, the atmosphere is highly equivocal, and this has led to the ignoring, in monastic writing, of affective relations between monks, and the objurgations of the Desert Fathers to shun women *and children*. This passing-over in silence has led to the situation only too truly characterized by Voltaire (whom one is not accustomed to see quoted as an authority on the monastic life!) of 'monks who live together without loving one another, and die without missing one another'. An awareness of their condition is therefore required, and the presence of Dr Zmud has been a great help in this direction. 'Many bogus vocations have begun', says Lemerrier, 'under the auspices of fear: fear of life, fear of responsibility, fear of woman.' There is a problem of latent homosexuality in any monastic community, so in his view the presence of a female psychoanalyst has the effect of making his monks jump in at the deep end, and all his postulants in fact *begin* their therapy with Dr Zmud. 'Freud's central vision', he writes, 'which traces the whole of life and the whole of love back to its origin in sex—rediscovering the great biblical intuitions, from Genesis to the Song of Songs, by way of the Prophets—made it a duty for us not to let ourselves be stopped by considerations of prudery, in everything related to sex, particularly since religious feeling for monks takes precisely the form of a rejection of sex in its biological reality. These considerations led us to choose a woman as analyst for the first period of psychoanalysis for the new recruits, putting them from the start face to face with the unknown—woman.' Looking back on four fruitful years, Dom Lemerrier declared, in a memorandum issued to the press during the Vatican Council, that his monastery had become a real school of Christian, human love. What more could be asked?

A good deal more, apparently, if one is to go by the hostility which this experiment has aroused. In an article 'Freud au monastère' (*Réalités*, October, 1966), Tanneguy de Quénétaïn reported that the rumours about Lemerrier which had filled the popular press and

TV were as nothing compared with the hullabaloo which had been raised in ecclesiastical—and psychoanalytical—circles. Cardinal Garibi, Archbishop of Mexico City, called him ‘a demon’, the abbot primate of the Benedictines said he was ‘the shame of the Order of Saint Benedict’, a well-known theologian described him as ‘a maniac who believes in nothing but psychoanalysis’. And the conservative Cardinal Antoniutti and the Congregation of Religious which controls monastic orders is supposed to hold him in deep distrust. The question arises then, not in the form, ‘Is the experiment a success?’ but ‘Will Rome allow it to continue?’

*Dialogues avec le Christ* shows there is some substance in the accusation that Lemerrier is absolutely sold on psychoanalysis; but it also shows there is none whatever in the charge that his faith, or that of his monks, is at stake in any of these proceedings. He delivered himself up to psychotherapy because, he says, ‘I had faith in my faith, and faith in science’. And so far both have justified him. There have been defections, of course, and lost vocations, though the extent of these has been falsified by Lemerrier’s enemies. Of sixty members of the community who underwent psychotherapy between 1961 and 1965, forty left the monastery. When Lemerrier published this figure, the cry went up—‘Psychoanalysis is emptying the monasteries!’ But the truth was not so simple. Of the forty, thirty were postulants who hadn’t made their vows, and the percentage of those who left was in fact only infinitesimally greater than that which obtained between 1950 and 1961, i.e. *before* psychotherapy was introduced. More than half the forty left after less than one year’s analysis because they were afraid ‘to confront their own essential selves’. No doubt, says Lemerrier, their real vocation was to life in the world; and quality has begun to replace quantity, though the candidates have not in fact stopped coming: there were seven postulants last year, and the community is now thirty strong. And there are other benefits, perhaps marginal to monastic life but nonetheless interesting. The therapy has revealed unsuspected artistic gifts in some of the monks, and as the monastery subsists on the sale of various artefacts, the success of this has been considerable, and the ateliers now support sixty outside workers. ‘I believe this work, this apostolate’, he declares, ‘is just as Christian, if not more so, than the teaching of the humanities to which so many Benedictine monasteries are dedicated.’ There has been a great decrease in physical sickness, a growth in self-knowledge and responsibility and in the affective relations between the monks. Therapy opened his own eyes to the depths of evil within himself, he affirms, more than any examination of conscience or spiritual retreat had ever done. And it was with great spiritual joy that he learned to cope with the revelation that his own personality as a cultivated westerner was literally *dominating* the monastery, and that *un père abusif* was concealed behind the spiritual father he thought he had been. He is clearly a tremendously forceful personality, and

the withdrawal from too great an exercise of his own powerful character must have been difficult for him, but he has undertaken it.

This has no flavour of doctrinal deviation: 'I've never claimed', writes Lemerrier, 'that therapy is necessary for the pronouncing of monastic vows. I've simply observed, empirically, that the majority of the monks who were members of our community in 1961 were able to profit greatly from it, and that for some of them, it did in fact prove indispensable.'

There have been objections that Catholic psychoanalysts were not used. Skill in analysis was Lemerrier's only criterion. 'Psychoanalysis in the monastery', writes Lemerrier, 'is brought to bear, in particular, on religious feeling. It seeks out, mercilessly, all its faults and gradually makes us uncover our deceits and lies until only what is authentic remains. It is a real *asceticism* which refers us to what an Orthodox writer, Evdokimov, has written, "The *asceticism* of the desert fathers is an immense psycho-analysis followed by a psycho-synthesis of the universal soul".' There is of course an objection here, too, and Dom Grégoire knows it: that psychoanalysis evaporates and dissolves religion away. 'In proportion as religion is lived as a kind of specialization on the margin of everyday life, as a substitute for human values', is his answer, 'any fresh individual insistence upon human values arouses the fear of a loss of religion, as if the one could not increase without detriment to the other. But, in fact, it is the opposite which occurs: the two wither away together. In this situation, psychoanalysis, far from evaporating or dissolving religion away, tends to transform it by interiorization and to make it mature into a religion which takes on all human values and impregnates them more and more with the divine. We can apply to psychoanalysis what the text submitted to the Vatican Council fathers said about "earthly realities": "Whoever tries with perseverance and humility to penetrate into the secrets of beings and things, is led by the hand of God even if he is unaware of it".'

The reference to the Council fathers is not fortuitous. Dom Grégoire was taken to Vatican II by his own bishop, Mgr Mendez Arceo, who has backed him solidly throughout, and who spoke (September 28th, 1963) on behalf of the Freudian revolution, which Schema XIII, on the Church and the World, had passed over in silence. 'We are considering the transformation of the world in all its aspects', he said, 'the revolution in the scientific, technical and economic spheres, etc. Why is nothing said about the psychoanalytical revolution, which is so closely linked with the conditioning of faith? No doubt psychoanalysis has not yet reached its full maturity, and there are dangers in its use which need to be assessed; but it is a science, and Freud's discovery is that of a genius akin to Copernicus and Darwin. Whether we like it or not, the unconscious lives within us, and conditions all our human activities, cultural, political, economic, religious and pastoral. The dogmatic anti-Christian

attitude of certain analysts has led the Church to take up a position reminiscent of the Galileo business.'

Two years later, the *Figaro's* correspondent at Vatican II, who had visited the monastery, clarified some of the motivation behind the experiment. Certain quite genuine religious vocations, wrote abbé Laurentin, went side by side with psychological deviations or lesions which could disturb the religious life. They were curable, and when cures were effected, the number of spoiled vocations decreased: 'After four years, the results are positive. Those whose vocations were not genuine have returned to the world, not wounded or in despair, but cured and enlightened. The faith of others has been purified and made authentic. The life of the monastery has become more effective, and community life more harmonious. . . . One of the most interesting features of the experiment has been the favourable background provided for the Benedictine Rule. Maintained in its entirety by the prior, the Rule stimulates the support of the community in helping its members to avoid those moral accidents which are a serious problem for Christians when they are invited to enter upon a course of psychoanalysis.'

Isn't it true, though, one might ask, that in relation to the life of the world, a monastic life *is* abnormal, and that a too deep questioning and probing of the reality of their vocation might lead monks to doubt themselves and prevent the establishment of a real balance—even one obtained by compensation? Will systematic psychoanalysis *not* empty the monasteries? According to abbé Laurentin, the facts point the other way. When he visited Santa Maria de la Resurrección in 1965, the monastery had over thirty members. The number may have been higher in 1961, when psychotherapy was first introduced, but there were illusory vocations among them. The departures were on the decrease: fifteen in 1962, sixteen in 1963, five in 1964, two in 1965. Vocations are on the increase. 'Psychoanalysis is far less to be feared by the real monk', concludes Laurentin, 'than the final tests of the dark night of the soul spoken of by St John of the Cross.'

But how about the point of view of orthodox psychoanalysts? For them, religion itself is a neurosis, and religious feeling should collapse when a cure is produced. How can a psychoanalysed monk, they enquired, remain a monk when he is no longer neurotic? Lemerrier has a lesson for them as well as for his more conservative ecclesiastical colleagues. Freud and his contemporaries accepted their unbelief as axiomatic, whereas, if they had been strictly consequential, they would have subjected it to the same analysis as belief. Perversions of religious feeling should not be confused with real belief. 'Atheism has its own neuroses which need to be studied.' Lemerrier plays tricks with neither side. The purpose of psychoanalysis at Santa Maria de la Resurrección is to give future monks that inward assurance which will enable them to accomplish their

mission. It is not a substitute for monastic life, but a servant of it. It takes away none of its rigour, but enables them to accept it. Discipline is assumed rather than imposed.

What *Dialogues avec le Christ* does not give us, and to judge the experiment properly we need such information, is a cross-section of the questions and answers undertaken by Dr Quevedo's and Dr Zmud's therapy. Instead of this, we have Lemercier's brief Sunday talks to his monks, which give the book its title, and which he realizes are really two sides of a report he makes on his own thoughts. Perhaps an example 'on forbidden woman' will serve to show the kind of meditation they are.

"Jesus, you weary me sometimes with your miracles. I've just been reading about your first one: when you were invited to a wedding, you changed the water into wine."

"Just a minute, Grégoire! My hand was forced, remember. Don't think I went to Cana in order to carry out the miracle of changing water into wine. Remember I said my hour hadn't yet come. And as I'm not accustomed to being a hypocrite, if I went to the feast, obviously it was because I wanted to mingle with the happiness of the married couple and drink some good wine with them."

"That's a good point on your side, Jesus. Me too, I was invited to a wedding yesterday. I saw you among the guests, and I didn't in any way want you to change water into wine. After everything they've said about you, the miracle as far as I was concerned was precisely that you accepted the wedding invitation, that you were drinking good wine with the guests and didn't hesitate to get them better wine, even after they'd been having a good time, as the gospel makes clear. Between ourselves, if the guests had already finished off what was there, I imagine some of them must have gone on to the next stage, once your new wine—better than the other—was produced, in fact I bet they got tight. Well, Jesus, that's what I like about it, and not the famous miracle about changing water into wine."

"Why's that, Grégoire?"

"Why? You can ask me why? Don't you know what they preach in your name? We'll skip the wine business. Priests are fond of a drop, say the people who look at us ironically. But marriage! Women! What do they do about that? Listen, Jesus, if you're really keen on performing a miracle, instead of doing it with water, do it with marriage."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't quite know. You've more imagination than I have. But I'm convinced it's urgent. Do you want to put it to the test, do you want a touchstone? Just let it be suggested you might have got married yourself. See what I mean—I'm not talking about past reality, just about a piece of fantasy which doesn't affect reality in



any way. But if you are really a man, if you are not one of those eunuchs 'born so from their mother's womb', or 'who were made so by men', if you are one of those 'who made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven', well then, you could have got married, let's say with a young girl like your mother. Look, the gospel itself, at the end of that chapter, says you know all men, you don't need to be told by anybody, you know what's in men, but look at what that fantasy stimulates in the hearts of Christians. Can't you hear at once the old familiar answer 'These are hard sayings'? That's a touchstone, a test, for that reaction denotes a terribly negative attitude towards marriage on the part of so many Christians. And where does it come from, if not from the teaching of so many priests?

"Now you were at the Council, so you must have heard the story—and it's not fantasy—of what happened in one of the commissions. They were discussing marriage. A respectable cardinal, eighty years old, was defending the current views with great vigour: marriage, the remedy against concupiscence, and all that. A woman who was listening—she was a Mexican—asked to speak. I don't remember exactly what she said, but it was more or less along these lines: 'You're always talking about concupiscence. I've had twelve children. I think I'm being honest when I tell you I have no sense whatever of their having been begotten in concupiscence.' And looking over the venerable assembly, the vast majority of whom were eunuchs, she added, 'I'm sure the same is true of the mothers of all those who are here'. You could have heard a pin drop.

"But if the good cardinal was silent, I doubt whether he was really converted—and I daresay that goes for many others, cardinals and laymen. You can see now, perhaps, Jesus, why I wish you'd perform a miracle about women."

"Grégoire, I'll propose another to you: converting wine into water."

"Oh, no, Jesus, you're not going to make us found one of those perpetual abstinence leagues invented by the Americans or the Irish! And what am I going to celebrate Mass with?"

"Calm down, Grégoire. You seem to blow your top whenever wine or women are involved! Now, listen. Wine will always be wine, and water will always be water. What I want to change is —"

"Oh, yes, Jesus, you want to change the use we make of them. Now you're at it with your moralizing notions. You know, I don't much like your miracles, but sometimes I don't like your moralizing either."

"No, Grégoire, that's not what I'm getting at. What I want to change is not directly the *use* we make of wine, but the *image* we make of it. Think for a moment of what the word 'wine' conjures up. Oh, you'll think of a lot of pleasant things, but also many unpleasant ones too. I don't mean the morning after the night before, but all the business of forbidding, of temptation, of sin, of punishment. On



the other hand, you'll never associate all this business of evil and taboo with the word 'water'. That's what I mean by changing wine into water: let wine become like fresh water to you, like pure water, like virginal spring water. Changing wine into water, is converting the image, the notion you have of it, the awareness you have of it; it's changing your mind. If I ever manage to do *that* miracle—or rather, if you manage to do it yourself—wine will be able to flow all round you with the abundance of a river, but the use you make of it will be as clear, as pure, as virginal water.”

“Changing wine into water, Jesus, changing wine into pure water, into virginal fresh water. Is that, too, the miracle of woman who is intoxicating, who is forbidden, who is temptation, who is sin, who is punishment? The miracle of woman I was asking you for, is to change woman into a virgin. Is it for woman to become a virgin for me?

“You've given me something to think about, Jesus. But listen, how did Joseph think about Mary, your mother?”

“Grégoire, our time is up. We'll come back to that one later. But don't forget. Drink up your wine.”

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