

SEEK OUT THE HARMONIES BETWEEN FAITH AND REASON

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The following is a transcript of a lecture by Dominican Father Romanus Cessario, delivered May 25, 2010, at the commencement exercises of the Institute for the Psychological Sciences, held at the Crypt Chapel in the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception. Father Cessario highlights the work of the Institute for the Psychological Sciences, on whose faculty serve several SCSS members, including its president, Gladys Sweeney. It was originally published by ZENIT, July 12, 2010 (zenit.org), and the CSSR gratefully acknowledges ZENIT's permission to reprint (edited and formatted for the CSSR).

I express my gratitude, Father President, to the Institute for the Psychological Sciences. You award me a degree honoris causa. Of course, Aristotle warns about making much of honors. He considered that “since it seems to depend more on those who honor than on the one honored,” receiving honors would not make a man happy.¹ Thus the Latin adage, *Honor est honoranti, non honorato*. Let me assure you of one thing. Today, I am very happy, Aristotle notwithstanding. In fact, I am happy precisely because of the *honorans*, the Institute for the Psychological Sciences. I am happy because those honoring me labor to make others happy. I am happy because your Alma Mater and now mine locate the psychological sciences within the context of the Highest Happiness: The Happy God who wants us to share his happiness.

The achievement of Dr. Gladys Sweeney merits recognition and acclaim. During the past decade under her leadership, the Institute for the Psychological Sciences has prepared its students and others to discover a happiness that conforms to the divinely established “plan of sheer goodness.”² Our Alma Mater has raised and sought to answer a question others leave unanswered: How do the psychological sciences relate to the divine science, the science of God? She has addressed topics others prefer to ignore: For example, how can the psychological sciences, while observing their specific methods and objectives, truthfully assist distressed persons to enjoy the blessed life that God wills for all men? She has stood firm and encouraged others to stand firm before the elites of the psychological establishment on issues where Catholic truth and prevailing secular values dramatically collide. In short, our dear, dear, Alma Mater has sustained with boldness a project of enormous significance for the Church of Christ.

Her fortitude has paid off. The Institute for the Psychological Sciences, on the one hand, does not attempt to reduce the psychological sciences to a sub-specialty of Catholic theology. Those who animate the Institute do not mistake devotion for therapy. The graduates of 2010 do not leave IPS furnished only with pious answers to real problems. The Institute, on the other hand, does not endorse the absolute autonomy of the psychological sciences. Dr. Sweeney and her established colleagues know that therapeutic practices no matter how successful cannot replace the sacramental mediations that conduce to the Highest Happiness. Those who are graduated from the Institute do not study by the Potomac River and dream of the Charles. They are not secular counselors who go to Mass. Neither the option for reduction or for autonomy would make the Institute for the Psychological Sciences the kind of Catholic institution that Gladys-Maria Sweeney consecrates herself to ensuring that it remains. Instead, she and her colleagues search to identify the harmonies that exist between the postulates of the psychological sciences and the tenets of the Catholic faith.³ To seek out the harmonies between faith and reason remains, as Pope John Paul II has reminded us, a very Catholic thing to do.⁴

What Dr. Sweeney began in 1997 marked a new moment in the dialogue between psychology and Catholic thought. In the United States, nationally publicized controversies between the Church and psychology erupted as recently as the late 1940s. Post-World War II Catholic outlooks on psychology, at least as they existed among Americans, find an apt summary in a brief notice that appeared in the “People” rubric of the 28 July 1947 issue of *Time* magazine. The national news weekly reported an exchange between the then-Monsignor Fulton Sheen and an ousted chief psychiatrist at the now closed St. Vincent’s Hospital in New York City.

[It said,]: “Four months after Monsignor Fulton J. Sheen delivered a sermon on psychoanalysis, the news slipped out that Roman Catholic Dr. Frank J. Curran had resigned in protest as chief psychiatrist of Manhattan’s St. Vincent’s Hospital. Dr. Curran explained that he had vainly sought a clarification from Monsignor Sheen. Cardinal Spellman’s office promptly announced that ‘Dr. Curran’s services are not required in any institution of the Archdiocese of New York. However, he will not be refused admittance as a patient. . . .’ And Monsignor Sheen made a lengthy statement to the press: there had been ‘grave distortion’ of his meaning; he had not attacked psychiatry, ‘a perfectly valid science,’ nor ‘psychoanalysis in general’; he had attacked Freudianism, ‘and this only to the extent that it denies sin, and would supplant confession.’”⁵

Fulton Sheen's clarifications did not suffice to stop other Catholic psychologists from joining the fray. Catholic laity in the United States were emerging, and they had to face the challenge of maintaining their bona fides in the learned professions. The growth of the magazine, *The Commonweal*, characterizes this period of pre-conciliar effervescence.⁶

A onetime Fordham University lay professor came to the defense of psychology in the very pages of *The Commonweal*. The next week, 4 August 1947, the following account appeared in *Time*: "Is Freudian psychiatry a natural enemy of Roman Catholicism? The question was still warm last week, thanks to the set-to between Msgr. Fulton J. Sheen and Psychiatrist Frank J. Curran (*TIME*, July 28). Not likely to quench the flames of controversy was an article in the Catholic weekly *Commonweal* by Catholic Psychologist Dr. Harry McNeill, prewar teacher at Fordham University, now a clinical psychologist in the Veterans Administration. Gist of the article: the Church has much to learn from Freud—and vice versa."⁷

There followed a long series of excerpts from the article by Dr. Harry McNeill that had appeared in the aforementioned Catholic weekly, *The Commonweal*.⁸

Today's graduates of the Institute know that Freud no longer represents the dominant outlook among psychologists. The evolution of the psychological sciences, however, only makes the task of harmonizing them with Catholic doctrine more demanding now than it was in 1947. The Institute for the Psychological Sciences aims to carry on this discussion in many ways, including at the speculative level. In order to account for the de facto practice of many Church authorities to turn to psychologists for help, one must distinguish between the speculative level and the practical level. For counsel and evaluation both can and do proceed without the purveyors possessing the theoretical premises that justify the cooperation between psychological specialists and the Church's mission of sanctification. In other words, a psychologist may help a distressed person achieve virtuous stability without either one fully understanding the interplay of divine and human dynamics at work. It happens more often than not. No wonder. The 1950s and early 60s did not witness great progress toward clarifying the relationship of Catholic thought to psychology.

Within twenty years of Monsignor Sheen's critique of Freud as an enemy of moral order and sacramental practice, the Catholic world and Catholic theology had entered the post-conciliar period. Confusion reigned. Pope Benedict XVI has referred to the "hermeneutics of discontinuity" as a way of reproving those theologians who treated the

Second Vatican Council as a moment of complete rupture with the past.⁹ As a matter of fact, the rapid decline in the practice of sound Catholic theology left open the door for much popularized psychology to find its way into religious institutions.¹⁰ The late 1960s, 70s, and 80s witnessed an unprecedented period of random reorganization of just about everything Catholic. Few worried in those heady days of “renewal” whether Freudian analysis made the practice of confession go away. The theologians themselves were quite successful in their efforts to marginalize the sacraments of healing. To the best of my knowledge, no agreement was reached on how clinical psychology and spiritual counseling work together to assist a Catholic believer achieve psychological and spiritual excellence. Then came 1997, and a petite Chilean woman, who rented a basement conference room in a downtown Bethesda hotel....

If we return to the excerpts that the 1947 *Time* magazine presented its readers from the article by Dr Harry McNeill published in *The Commonweal*, we discover that McNeill knew his Aquinas: “In connection with Freud’s capital concept of repression,” McNeill wrote, “which consists of the violent submergence of undesirable stimuli in the unconscious, they [theologians] might look into its conscious counterpart, a defect of prudence which the classic moralists called *inconsideratio*. . . .”¹¹ That was 1947 during the heyday in the United States of Leonine Thomism. How many psychologists today could pick an obscure vice from the *secunda pars* and identify it as a starting point for sounding the harmonies between faith and psychology?

In his *Summa theologiae* IIa-IIae, q.53, a.4, Aquinas examines “*inconsideratio*” under the heading of imprudence. The English translation by Father Thomas Gilby translates the Latin term as “thoughtlessness.”¹² Aquinas makes the following point: “Consideration signifies an act of the mind attentively looking at the truth of something... [it] concerns judgment above all. Accordingly, the defect of right judgment goes with the vice of thoughtlessness [*inconsiderationis*], inasmuch as a person fails to come to a sound judgment out of scorn or neglect to attend to the evidences on which to base it.”¹³ McNeill took this vice to represent a conscious expression of what psychologists of his day sought to discover in the patient suffering from “repression.”

Dear Graduates, I realize that even a Woody Allen can dismantle the Freudian myths. No need now for Catholics to take up the task. You, however, face challenges more difficult than exposing the comically ironic in Freud. Even serious critiques of Freud, such as those by Professor Paul Vitz, will not equip you adequately to confront the deformations of culture that destroy Catholics before they have had the

chance to learn about the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation.¹⁴ In short, you will encounter difficulties that Harry McNeill could not have imagined in 1947. Would that, in order to establish harmony between Catholic faith and psychological practice, it were as easy as identifying a common ethical insight in Aquinas and Freud, or in Aquinas and other founding figures of modern psychology. It is not. In my mind, then, today's graduation resembles more the completion of a formation program than it does the everyday baccalaureate. You leave, it is true, the institution on the Potomac. You, at the same time, must remain attentive to the ongoing research that, God willing, will continue to flourish at the Institute for the Psychological Sciences.

I refer especially to the Integrative Studies component of the curriculum, originally worked out and taught by Father Benedict Ashley, OP. The public record of completed research appears in publications produced at the Institute. Professor Craig Steven Titus edits both the respected John Henry Cardinal Newman Lecture Series and the IPS Monograph Series. The latter presently includes volumes by two leading Catholic thinkers, Father Fergus Kerr, OP, and Professor Kenneth Schmitz. I would like also to point out the international significance of the IPS Centre for Philosophical Psychology at Blackfriars Hall, Oxford. The work there tests the harmonies between the reason developed by the psychological sciences and the faith proclaimed by the Catholic Church. *Fides et ratio*—the encyclical—demands commitment to this kind of research, whether done in Oxford, Rome, or Virginia.

Allow me a concluding remark that addresses the ongoing challenges that face the Institute for the Psychological Sciences. Given some of the issues that I have addressed and others that I have not, there is no reason to promise Dr. Sweeney a rose garden.¹⁵ To persevere in the high mission that she has set for IPS requires fortitude put at the service of the feminine genius—to borrow another phrase from Pope John Paul II.¹⁶ Even this thought makes me happy. For under the intellectual leadership of Gladys-Maria Sweeney, one can say confidently of the Institute for the Psychological Sciences and its Dean what is engraved on the tomb of another Catholic hero, “Magnus in prosperis, in adversis maior.”¹⁷ Great in good times; in adversity, greater. Thank you.

Notes

1. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk 1, chap. 5, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis, 1985), p. 7.
2. See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1: “God, infinitely perfect and blessed in himself, in a plan of sheer goodness freely created man to make him share in his own blessed life.”
3. For background to this discussion, see Etienne Gilson, *Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1966).
4. Encyclical Letter of Pope John Paul II, *Fides et ratio* (1998), no. 42: “Both the light of reason and the light of faith come from God, [Aquinas] argued; hence there can be no contradiction between them.” To reference this claim, John Paul refers to Aquinas’s *Summa contra Gentiles*, Book 1, chapter 7. In his General Audience of 2 June 2010, Pope Benedict repeated this endorsement of the harmony between reason and Christian faith. “Thomas Aquinas, at St. Albert the Great’s school, carried out a task of fundamental importance in the history of philosophy and theology as well as for history and culture,” Benedict said. “He studied Aristotle and his interpreters in depth” and “commented on a great part of Aristotle’s works, discerning what was valid in it from what was doubtful or refutable, demonstrating its consonance with the facts of Christian revelation, using Aristotelian thought with great breadth and intelligence in presenting the theological writings he composed. In short, Thomas Aquinas demonstrated that a natural harmony exists between reason and the Christian faith.”
5. See <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,887440-2,00.html> (14 April 2010).
6. *The Commonweal* (shortened to *Commonweal* in 1965) is the oldest independent lay Catholic journal of opinion in the United States. Founded in 1924 by Michael Williams (1877–1950) and the Calvert Associates, it reflected a growing sense of self-confidence among American Catholics as they emerged from a largely immigrant status to become highly successful members of the American mainstream. Modeled on *The New Republic* and *The Nation*, the magazine’s goal was to be a weekly review “expressive of the Catholic note” in covering literature, the arts, religion, society, and politics.
7. See <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,855857-1,00.html> (14 April 2010).
8. Harry McNeill, with a Louvain Ph.D., arrived at Fordham Graduate School in 1934. In the fall of 1938, he moved to the Teachers College to teach philosophy.

9. See the essays, especially the “Introduction” by the editors, in *Vatican II: Renewal Within Tradition*, eds. Matthew L. Lamb & Matthew Levering (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).
10. See the interview with Dr. William Coulson, “We overcame their traditions, we overcame their faith,” *The Latin Mass* (Ft. Collins, CO, Special Edition), pp. 12–17.
11. See <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,855857-1,00.html> (14 April 2010).
12. *Summa theologiae*, Blackfriars edition, vol 36, trans. Thomas Gilby, (New York, 1973), p. 131.
13. *Summa theologiae* II-II q. 53, art. 4.
14. Paul C. Vitz, *Sigmund Freud’s Christian Unconscious* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1988). See also, Michael Stock, *Freud: A Thomistic Appraisal* (Washington, DC: The Thomist Press, 1963).
15. The reference is to the 1965 *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden*, an autobiographical novel by Joanne Greenberg, written under the pen name of Hannah Green.
16. Pope John Paul II, *Letter to Women*, no. 10: “It is thus my hope, dear sisters, that you will reflect carefully on what it means to speak of the ‘genius of women,’ not only in order to be able to see in this phrase a specific part of God’s plan which needs to be accepted and appreciated, but also in order to let this genius be more fully expressed in the life of society as a whole, as well as in the life of the Church.”
17. Epitaph on the tomb of the last Stuart King to reign in England, James II, located in the Church of Saint-Germain-en-Laye, outside Paris.

