Learning to Hate the Church?

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In a lecture in 1947, the very influential pediatrician and psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott shocked a lot of people by openly acknowledging that parents and children sometimes hate each other, and that this is not only perfectly normal, but a necessary achievement for healthy development among children. The child needs at some level to know he has the freedom to hate without the relationship's collapsing and without the parent's unleashing a devastating retaliation. But Winnicott shocked his audience even more by saying that the child learns to hate the parent by first being hated by the parent: "He needs hate to hate."

How could parents hate children, especially mothers and their sweet, cute, innocent newborns? Winnicott responded with a long list of reasons why mothers are, some of the time, deeply ambivalent about their babies, even hating them sometimes: for example, "The baby is a danger to her body in pregnancy and at birth," he wrote, and "the baby is an interference with her private life, a challenge to preoccupation," and "the baby hurts her nipples even by suckling, which is at first a chewing activity." Polite society prefers, of course, not to talk about these things, which is why Winnicott's "Hate in the Counter-Transference" remains one of the most shocking (but thrillingly honest!) articles in the last 120 years of psychoanalytic literature.[1]

For Orthodox and perhaps even more Catholic Christians confronting corruption and division in the Church, often to unprecedented degrees, we need room to admit how much we hate the Church today. For Orthodox watching the state of the Catholic Church today, it is, I submit, ecumenically salutary for them to know how much those of us who are Catholic hate the corruption in the Church today for its own sake, but also because it functions as one more *skandalon* inhibiting the prospects of unity with Orthodoxy.[2]

We must take all the time we need to honestly and fully acknowledge that we hate "mother Church" and especially all those within it called "father"—popes and patriarchs and bishops especially, but really all other clergy, too, who are implicated in any way in besmirching the body of Christ. We also need room to acknowledge that we have come to hate the Church and its fathers because they first hated it and us: the sins of hierarchs and clerics alike are—however one wants to describe them—undeniable expressions of their hatred for the children and Church of God.

What do we do with this hatred? The first thing is to acknowledge it without embarrassment or cloaking. To deny it is to run the risk of what another British analyst and contemporary of Winnicott, Melanie Klein, called "splitting."[3] Nei-

[1] D. W. Winnicott, "Hate in the Counter-Transference," in *Through Paediatrics to Psycho-Analysis: Collected Papers* (New York: Basic Books, 1975), 194–203. Orig. published in *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 30 (1949): 69–74.

[2] I draw extensively on Orthodox thought in confronting this Catholic corruption in *Everything Hidden Shall Be Revealed: Ridding the Church of Abuses of Sex and Power* (Brooklyn: Angelico Press, 2019).

[3] See Klein, "Notes on Some Schizoid Mechanisms," *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 27 (1946): 99–110.

Sigmund Freud's couch. Photo: cspower, 2004, CC BY-SA 2.0.

ther a proper psychology nor proper ecclesiology of communion will allow us to split the Church into those we hate and those we do not, for the nature of the crisis is such today that the *entire* episcopate is guilty; all clergy are involved. As Pope John Paul II put it memorably in *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*:

> one can speak of a communion of sin, whereby a soul that lowers itself through sin drags down with itself the church and, in some way, the whole world. In other words, there is no sin, not even the most intimate and secret one, the most strictly individual one, that exclusively concerns the person committing it. With greater or lesser violence, with greater or lesser harm, every sin has repercussions on the entire ecclesial body and the whole human family.[4]

If we cannot split sins and their effects, neither can we split our hatred. In those especially acute moments of pure hatred found in early childhood, the child does not scruple to differentiate those moments when Mom or Dad was acquiescent to my will: the child hates *all* of Mom *completely* for thwarting his will *right now* without prejudice to past, present, or future. That "right now" may last only a moment, or it may perdure for quite some time. For Catholics today, it is clear that it *will* perdure for a very long time indeed, which is why we must begin to acknowledge it today.

And our acknowledgement cannot come in the revoltingly treacly language of piety that Christians sometimes like to use to cloak strong emotion. Ours is *real hatred*, born up by and founded upon burning anger and unfathomable disgust: the pearls of salvation have been cast down by swine who have shit upon them and us. There is nothing to be gained by pretending otherwise. Thus we can and must freely and regularly admit, as many times as necessary: We hate all the fathers of the Church, for there is none who is not caught up in, to borrow a phrase from John Paul II, a "culture of death."[5] That a culture of death exists *within* the Church for sex abuse is undeniably a form of what the contemporary American psychiatrist Leonard Shengold calls "soul murder."[6] The culture of death we are caught in today leaves nobody untouched. "Liberal" and "conservative" bishops, clergy who love Latin and lace and those

[4] John Paul II, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, Apostolic Exhortation, December 2, 1984, http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_02121984_reconciliatio-et-paenitentia.html, §16.

[5] See his 1995 encyclical *Evangelium Vitae.* For analysis of this startling language, see my "The Development of the Doctrine of 'Structural Sin' and a 'Culture of Death' in the Thought of Pope John Paul II," *Eglise et théologie* 30 (1999): 307–25.

[6] Leonard Shengold, *Soul Murder: The Effects of Childhood Abuse and Deprivation* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1991).

who happily celebrate Mass on an overturned surfboard on a beach, are *all* caught up in structures of evil within the *entire* Church. There is no splitting possible any more.

If we cannot split the Church into "good" and "bad," then it is even more important that we not split off and repress our hatred, for it will then in all likelihood become directed against ourselves in an unconsciously pathological way. Too much self-hatred is loathing forcibly redirected inward, because as children we fear the catastrophic loss of our parents if we hate them too openly or too much. So we come to hate ourselves instead. We must not do that here: our hatred must remain directed outward, onto the Church and churchmen, where it belongs, and for as long as it takes.

Thus we must not hurry past our hatred. We must remain here awhile with it. There is, I am willing to wager, more than a little hatred on the part of the apostles in the story of the encounter on the road to Emmaus. Luke tells us that the disciples, not realizing it was Jesus who was inquiring into their conversation, "stood still, looking sad" (Luke 24:17). One of the things we have learned from Freud and others is that sadness is never solitary: it is always comes entangled with its sisters, anger and hatred. This sadness on the part of the disciples is an entirely normal reaction to the trauma they have endured by watching the brutal torture and execution of their friend Jesus. Anyone who has gone through such an experience is invariably going to be angry—at the one who has abandoned us by selfishly (we think) putting himself in such a perilous position in the first place, and very often at God as well for inexplicably and unnecessarily allowing the arrest, torture, and death to happen. And, of course, too often that sadness-hatred-anger is displaced onto others. We yell at the person driving too slowly in front of us, or the dog. Disdain is frequently displaced sorrow.

This phenomenon is clearly at work in the story. The disdain fairly oozes out of the response in verse 18, after Jesus asks them what they are talking about: "Then one of them, named Cleopas, answered him, 'Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?'"

Jesus's response is really striking. He does not retaliate, as any of us would be inclined to do when faced with Cleopas's impudent question. Instead, he says laconically, "What things?" and then quietly waits for them to tell him what he already knows. Jesus forbears, with extraordinary patience, and listens at length. Only then does he manifest his own counter-transferential disdain for their misunderstanding: "O foolish men, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" Jesus then, in turn, gives them an even longer story: "Beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself."

By the end of this exchange, the feverish tension between Jesus and his followers seems to have broken, for we are told that as they neared their destination, "he appeared to be going further, but they constrained him, saying, 'Stay with us, for it is toward evening and the day is now far spent.' So he went in to stay with them." It is really striking that in this story Jesus does not cheat them out of their anger and sadness, but does not hurry to get away from it, either. He also "stands

Christ at Emmaus, anonymous German woodcut, 15th century.

still" with it, to bear it at length. Like a good psychoanalyst who does not race to offer a pill or panacea to the patient's pain, he simply takes it all and absorbs it with longsuffering patience.

But he then does something no therapist can really do: he gives them not just any gift, but the gift of eternal life in himself: taking up bread, he "blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened and they recognized him; and he vanished out of their sight. They said to each other, 'Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the scriptures?'" At a stroke Jesus has taken their hatred and transformed it by retelling them the "unthought known" of salvation history, which culminates in his loving self-offering on the cross even to those who hate him.[7]

In this way Jesus manifests something that Winnicott argued: it is an important sign of a parent's psychic health to be capable of bearing the child's hatred without total collapse or permanent abandonment. It is very important that this story end with Jesus not racing off but agreeing to remain even longer than it seems he planned to. In this way, he shows that he is not engaging in a vengeful flight from the "mourning and melancholia" of his traumatized friends. He shows he can bear it; he can take it, for he is indestructible, and so is his body, the Church.

This, for now, gives us all the freedom we need to hate the Church and churchmen, for the evils committed by the latter cannot ultimately destroy the former. We can and must hate them, and they must bear that hatred, all of us knowing that the Church is indestructible, and the only reason it is so, and the only way we can hate them while none of us is destroyed by that hatred, is because we all live in and from the Eucharist.

It is the Eucharist that offers us what Marcus Pound calls a "liturgical therapeutics."[8] The parent who is hated does not cease to feed the child, nor does the child refuse nourishment because of his hatred. In this way, the Eucharist is the only remedy we have, the only divine therapy we can access wherein to learn, slowly some day in the future, to move past our hatred to that point where once more our hearts might burn within us—but then with the love for the Church and churchmen we cannot now feel. ✠

[7] The quoted phrase comes from Christopher Bollas, *The Shadow of the Object: Psychoanalysis of the Unthought Known* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989).

[8] Marcus Pound, *Theology, Psychoanalysis, and Trauma* (London: SCM Books, 2007), 154.

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