

Famed Psychiatrist Declares

De-Emphasis of Sin Hurts Society

By J.D. NICOLA
Catholic Press Features

New York — Dr. Karl Menninger, one of the world's most prominent and respected psychiatrists, has declared that one of the major causes of modern man's mental and social problems is society's virtual abandonment of the notion of sin.

In a newly-published book titled *Whatever Became of Sin?* (Hawthorn Books Inc.), Dr. Menninger, founder of the world-famed Menninger Clinic in Topeka, Kan., not only argues for a strong revival of the concept of sin but also traces how, he believes, the idea of sin — indeed, the very word, "sin" — is being erased from man's consciousness.

Sin, Dr. Menninger notes, "was a word once in everyone's mind, but now rarely, if ever, heard. Does that mean that no sin is involved in all our troubles — sin with an 'I' in the middle? Is no one any longer guilty of anything?"

The psychiatrist comments that either everyone now has a "reason" for performing acts that were once regarded as obvious sins — ranging from cheating on income tax to killing civilians in a war — or sin is called by anything but "sin."

"It is surely nothing new that men want to get away from acknowledging their sins or even thinking about them," Dr. Menninger writes, "Is this not the religious history of mankind? Perhaps we are only more glib nowadays and equipped with more euphemisms.

"We can speak of error and transgression and infraction and mistakes without the naive exposure that goes with serious use of that old-fashioned pietistic word 'sin.'"

He puts part of the blame for the disappearance of sin on his own psychiatric profession, which does not use the word "because of its strong reproachful quality, its vague or nonspecific quality, and its corollaries and implications of guilt, reparation, and atonement."

"I have pursued the possible usefulness of reviving the use of the word 'sin' — not for the word's sake, but for the reintroduction of the concepts of guilt and moral responsibility," he writes.

Many offenses once termed sins "were translatable into psychological terms and 'explained' by psychological theories. To call them sins had no usefulness. . . . Thus it was that 'sin,' except for the rituals of the confessional and the prayer

chamber, increasingly disappeared from public view — or hearing.

"Believers continued their beliefs not only in a Creator but in His displeasure at their moral failures. They confessed their sins in their own company — but they did not refer to them in daily life intercourse. Sin was no longer a topic of conversation, debate, argument, accusation and public remorse — as it has long been. It was no longer a euphemism for masturbation, adultery, drunkenness, smoking, or 'gambling.' It became a word of mild disapproval, less and less frequently applied — or a jocular word."

Reaching the core of his argument, Dr. Menninger flatly states:

"I believe there is 'sin' which is expressed in ways which cannot be subsumed under verbal artifacts such as 'crime,' 'disease,' 'delinquency,' 'deviancy.' There is immorality; there is unethical behavior; there is wrongdoing."

One of Dr. Menninger's more interesting observations, particularly since psychiatry has often been accused by moralists of making people feel not responsible for anti-social acts, is this one:

"The law and the Church were so sure of themselves, and so fixed on the position that all behavior is conscious and voluntary (unless accidental), that when scientists began to assert themselves about involuntary and unconsciously motivated behavior, some of them simply carried their thesis too far. Their absolutism is just as offensive and misleading as that of their opponents.

"Even if we concede that some — perhaps most — behavior is essentially involuntary, automatic, or reactive, we know that no behavior — or very little of it — is entirely involuntary

"To admit the notion of any 'voluntary' control is to acknowledge that such intangibles as idealism and conscience and 'will' do play a determining role. My intention here is to resist total translation of all 'sins' and 'crimes' into the category of symptoms. Some criminal behavior may be the result of an expression of sickness, but not all criminals are sick. Indeed, few of them are, in my experience."

Dr. Menninger explained that one way in which sin began to disappear from modern man's consciousness was that a great many practices once regarded as "sinful" were made the concern of the state and became "crimes."

"There ought to be a law," says someone, and before long, the law has been enacted and another old 'sin' has become a new 'crime.' This is where many sins have gone," Dr. Menninger states, including in his list of sin-into-crimes murder, robbing, mugging, cheating and operating a business on Sunday.

Another reason for a lessening of awareness of sin, he states, is that society once put too heavy a penalty on one-time sins. He cites in particular the harsh threats leveled against masturbation (at one time a person could be hanged for it).

"People began to disapprove of the harshness of the penalties assessed against 'sins' by parents, priests and courts. The stocks, the tongue-slitting, the cheek-branding, were too cruel. Imprisonment was substituted in the case of 'criminals.' Children were sent to the gallows for peccadilloes; crimes in England punished by deportation to Australia were often minor offenses indeed, as we would judge today. Life was sterner in the olden days, and penalties for displeasing power — parental, civil, economic, or Divine — were stark. And this association of sin and penalty was ingrained. The vanishing of sin has really been a disappearance of harsh reprisal, a softening not of moral fiber but of human compassion.

"Thus sin, or designating something sinful, began to disappear because it was too expensive in terms of the current standards of comfort. Instead of reducing the penalty, people merely negated the sin. Sabbath violation is a clear example."

Early in his book, Dr. Menninger notes that "as a nation, we officially ceased 'sinning' some twenty years ago," for that is the last time that a President of the United States (Eisenhower, in 1953, proclaiming a national day of prayer) made a specific reference to "sin."

"Who feels responsible for the world's suffering?" Dr. Menninger asks later in his book in commenting for the need for individual moral responsibility. "Illness only partially conquered, crime miserably controlled, individual and collective deprivations abundant. A sense of personal moral responsibility is faint and apparently growing fainter. Depression, discouragement, (despair), and likewise megalomania and power-flaunting are widespread. We each do our part in a total process of wasting, spending, polluting, defiling, stealing, hoarding, exhausting and destroying. We pause occasionally to gaze about in alarm and apprehensiveness; we acknowledge a general pall of depression. But no collective mea culpa escapes our lips."

In perhaps the most powerful graphs in his book, Dr. Menninger sees an awareness of sin as a necessary requisite for good mental health:

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'Art of Visiting' Course Offered

People who would like to take a mission of calling on the sick and housebound are invited to take training in the "art of visitation."

The Lutheran Inner Mission Society of the Rochester area will offer two courses, the first of which will meet on four consecutive Tuesday mornings, beginning Nov. 13, at First Baptist Church, 175 Allens Creek Rd. A second course will be offered on the Mondays of February, at Central Presbyterian, 50 N. Plymouth. All classes meet from 9:30 until 11:30 a.m.

AREA SCHOOL BAND

Six Aquinas students will be in the area "all-state" band that will perform in Albion Nov. 16 and 17. They are Michael Milonni, James Rozzi, Andrew Huber, Brian Stotz, James DeJager, and Anthony Liepert.

Some of the topics in the "Project Compassion" curriculum are The Art of Listening, Ways Volunteers Can Help, and This is My Friend.

Registration for the courses should be made by Nov. 1 and Feb. 1 with Mrs. Paul Utz Sr. at 586-4491, or Mrs. Paul Utz Jr. at 381-4116. There is a fee of \$2.

AMENDMENTS

Amendments on the November ballot that relate to the judicial process will be outlined this noontime at a meeting in First Presbyterian Church, 101 S. Plymouth. A representative of the League of Women Voters will be the speaker at this final pre-election program of the Forum on Justice. The forum is a project of the Judicial Process Commission of the Genesee Ecumenical Ministries. People are invited to bring their lunch to the meeting, which runs from 12:15 until 1:30 p.m.


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