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Saints

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but psychosis is," Father Bamberger observed.

Nevertheless, people suffering from mental illness have a stigma attached to them even in church circles, observed Sister Christine Diensberg, OSF. A rehabilitation therapist at Buffalo General Hospital Community Mental Health Center, she is the author of a new prayer booklet, "Meditations on the Cross for Christians Living with Mental Illness."

This stigma makes it harder for the mentally ill — and their spiritual experiences — to gain acceptance.

"They tend to be isolated because of the stigma that goes with the illness," she remarked.

But the mental difficulties saints and other individuals face might even help them on the road to sanctity, according to Father Raymond Studzinski, OSB, who teaches psychology and religion at The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C.

"Some people with various mental difficulties had pushed themselves more, and that even makes their sanctity greater," he contended. "The struggle can be the occasion of their transformation by grace. Often our struggle with mental illness is a struggle to get meaning out of our lives."

But while the struggles associated with mental illness may indeed be a path to spiritual growth for some, questions arise.

How do we differentiate between symptoms of mental illness and genuine spiritual experiences?

Moreover, isn't there a danger of equating all spiritual experiences with manifestations of mental illness?

"We are so psychologically oriented today that we might think they had psychological problems," Father Studzinski ac-



knowledge of some saints.

One difficulty is that we tend to judge some acts based on today's standards of behavior, he noted.

"There is always a different emphasis in different periods," he said. In the past, for example, "the physical self was not as respected as it is today."

Thus, he observed, such penitential practices as wearing hair shirts and observing long fasts were much more accepted in the past than they would be today.

Sanctity and sanity should not be judged in the same way, Father Bamberger cautioned.

"Sanctity, of course, has an operation on a level that's deeper than the psychic life," the abbot said.

Still, he acknowledged, "Many people who go deeply into the spiritual life go through a mental crisis that is almost a temporary neuroses." That process, he explained, helps to break down an individual's resistance to spiritual experiences.

In his 1978 book, *The Road Less Travelled*, psychiatrist M. Scott Peck explored some of these parallels between mental illness and spirituality.

Peck speculated that many of the same forces that keep individuals from achiev-

ing mental health are the same forces that interfere with spiritual growth. Such forces include fear and inertia, the unwillingness to change.

Peck described spiritual growth as a journey toward greater knowledge and awareness. That process brings joy, but often makes it more difficult for individuals to act and make decisions.

"The closer one comes to godhood, the more one feels sympathy for God," Peck wrote. "To participate in God's omniscience is also to share His agony."

He added that "to experience one's closeness to God is also to experience the obligation to be God, to be the agent of His power and love. The call to grace is a call to a life of effortful caring, to a life of service whatever the sacrifice seems required."

Kenneth L. Woodward, likewise addressed the issues of sanity and sanctity in his 1990 book, *Making Saints*.

Church officials who weigh the sanctity of individuals suggested for canonization look at patterns in their lives to discern whether manifestations such as hearing voices are signs of mental illness or are mystical in nature, he explained.

As part of his discussion on mental illness and sainthood, Woodward cites an interview with Father John Lozano, a Claretian priest from Chicago who serves as a psychological consultant evaluating saints' causes.

Father Lozano noted that rather than always being a roadblock to sanctity, "severe psychological problems can help a person to focus on Christ."

The Claretian went on to note that "religious ecstasy and psychological trauma are similar. But behind the ecstasy there is an experience of God, whereas behind the trauma there is not."

The proof of the validity of the ecstasy or vision are the results of the experience, he explained. The seer is moved to acts of adoration, and there are often physical

manifestations, such as the stigmata — the appearance on the person's body of the wounds of Christ.

Father Bamberger echoed that view. "I've dealt with people who've had extraordinary experiences — but they are strengthening experiences," he said.

The individual undergoing mystical experiences, he explained, achieves greater inner freedom, and is moved to serve God and others.

On the other hand, he said, "psychotic experiences leave the person weaker, less able to function."

He cited the case of St. Benedict Labre, who at one time was a Trappist.

"He acted so strangely that superiors felt sorry for him," the abbot said. "They thought the life was too much of a strain and told him to leave. He tried many orders, but he couldn't fit. Then he received an inspiration. That was his vocation: to be a misfit. He became a great saint."

Father Hoctor pointed out that many of the saints learned to overcome or compensate for their mental illnesses, and thus can serve as models for people today — whether suffering from mental illness or not.

"I think it's time that we do feature these saints, the struggle they faced as saints, and not just whitewash them," he said.

Sister Diensberg believes that the church also needs to do more to recognize the spirituality of the mentally ill. Indeed, it was while serving on the Diocese of Buffalo's commission on mental illness and finding no prayer resources that she wrote her book.

She chose to write meditations on the Stations of the Cross because she believed individuals with mental illness could identify with the suffering Jesus experienced.

"Through mental illness they participate in the paschal mystery," Sister Diensberg said. "They are more in touch with Jesus' suffering, death and resurrection because it is mirrored in their lives."

Even a saint who is not clearly mentally ill can set an example for individuals so afflicted, Father Hoctor suggested. He noted that St. John of the Cross' *Dark Night of the Soul*, for example, resonates with people suffering from depression.

"St. John of the Cross teaches the value of suffering as a vehicle toward holiness if you use it as such," he said.

Ultimately, as with other obstacles in our lives, successfully dealing with mental illness becomes a matter of faith, Father Studzinski suggested.

"I think what we're dealing with is, mental illness and sanctity bring us to the limits of ourselves and we have to trust in God," he concluded.

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Hope

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ing pays to his daughter's innocence — "I don't think she ever had a bad thought or was unkind" — but that he also learned a great deal about the saints depicted in the painting.

"Now I realize what these people went through," said the parishioner of St. Louis Church, Pittsford.

Sturtevant helped Father Hoctor to convey that message. Father Hoctor discovered him when a staff member at the psychiatric center told him about Sturtevant, who had himself battled depression. The choice seemed appropriate.

"I thought it was particularly fitting to have the painting done by an artist who struggled with the issue," the priest said.

Father Hoctor subsequently contacted Sturtevant in October, 1996 and commissioned the painting. He supplied him with the needed background information about the saints.

Although not strictly a painter of religious subjects, Sturtevant had done many works depicting Jesus.

"Since I was a young man, I've been drawn to Jesus in a personal relation-

ship which has grown over the years," Sturtevant explained.

His own battle with depression helped him to be aware of how people turn to God.

"A lot of people when they are really hurting will look to God, whereas if they are not hurting they might not have looked to God," he said.

Some two years ago, he said he began praying about every work, and noticed their quality and quantity increasing, and has begun to exhibit more and to enjoy more sales.

He will, for example, be at the *Clothesline Festival* Sept. 6-7 at the Memorial Art Gallery in Rochester.

After studying the information about the saints, he said he was particularly struck by the fact that the saints were not perfect. He began to realize that the saints were people, and he began to pray for them.

Now that the painting is hanging in the chapel, he hopes that it will bring a tribute to Joan Hickey, it will help the people at the center.

"I'm kind of hoping that the people who are in there will see themselves in the painting. These people will have what could be interpreted as mental problems to avoid, but they are not in glory," he said.

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