

The House of Affirmation

by Rev. Dr. Thomas A. Kane



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A Reprint From . . .



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**Anne Frank wrote in her diary:
"Everyone has inside himself
A piece of good news!
The good news is that you really don't know
how great you can be
how much you can love
what you can accomplish and
what your potential is.
How can you top good news like that."**

This "good news" is at the House of Affirmation, the International Therapeutic Center for Clergy and Religious in Whitinsville, Massachusetts, and is at the service of all priests and religious who are not embarrassed to become a more fulfilled and healthier person. The

House of Affirmation is dedicated to the positive concept that we have "good news" within us that we really do not know as yet. It will all happen when we have become an affirmed person. The non-affirmed personality is expressed in problems of neurosis, emotional and mental discomfort, alcoholism and addiction, erratic homosexuality, compulsive heterosexual behavior, and other symptoms of unhappiness and confusion.

The primary service of the House of Affirmation is to treat, care for, and cure clergy and religious who have non-affirmed identity and therefore feel ineffective or unhappy. The apostolate of the House of Affirmation is of crucial importance, not only to priests and religious whom we serve, but to the entire Church. John Cardinal Wright, Prefect for the Clergy in the Vatican, has said recently: "The need of the House of Affirmation is beyond any doubt considerable and urgent."

The apostolate has already served many priests and religious throughout the world and its full residential program founded in 1973 has already assisted priests from seven continents in its two years of existence.

The House of Affirmation!

It may sound trite, but what the House of Affirmation is all about is a blend of love and science, offering vocational and emotional guidance to priests and religious in the hour of need, "the dark night of the soul and mind."

A Beginning

The House of Affirmation is a direct outgrowth, broadened in scope, of the Consulting Center for Clergy and Religious of the Diocese of Worcester, established as the result of a request by the Senate of Religious to Auxiliary Bishop Timothy J. Harrington, a few years ago.

Bishop Bernard J. Flanagan initiated the proposed center in 1970 under the directorship of Sister Anna Polcino, S.C.M.M., M.D., a practicing psychiatrist. In the early stages, I joined Sister Anna as a priest-psychologist. The project expanded from a local diocesan effort to a nationwide service to clergy and religious, with emotional problems.

The overriding goal of the early out-patient clinic, known as the Consulting Center, was to help priests and religious to become fully human, consistently free persons within the context of their ecclesial calling and society. Sister Anna and myself tried to meet this goal through a three-fold program of service, education and research. Since its opening, the services and programs of the House of Affirmation have included individual consultation, group consultation, group process communication labs, person growth groups, candidate assessment, lectures and workshops.

After two full years of operation as a non-residential Center, it became apparent to Dr. Anna, myself, and significant others, that the out-patient facilities were not sufficient. There was a definite need for an intensive residential treatment program. Thus was the House of Affirmation *Residential Center* conceived. The Residential Center became a reality in October of 1973 when the doors opened to wel-

come its first residents in Whitinsville, Massachusetts. This was the genesis of today's House of Affirmation.

Residential Center

Results were startlingly rapid. Having been incorporated by the State of Massachusetts, and definitely set on securing a site for the work, the Lasell Ecumenical Retreat House, owned by the Episcopal Diocese of Western Massachusetts, was brought into the picture.

Bishop Alexander D. Stewart, the Episcopal bishop, encouraged us by offering the Whitinsville estate, eleven acres, and three main buildings including the mansion built in 1896. The main building was donated by the Episcopal bishop to our work for one dollar. However, so as to assure our privacy and obtain another eleven year old building on the property which was necessary to house priests and religious who came to us, a minimal cost of purchase was set at \$55,000. This amount was supplied by the DeRance Foundation of Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

Now we had a roof over our head! Much work was needed! Where would be the chapel? Try the billiard room! What about the lecture hall? Perhaps the music room! Breakfast room? Perhaps the storage room off the kitchen! Doctors' offices? The master bedroom, the next two principal bedrooms! What about furniture? Check the attic, the former stables, the cellar! Painting, papering, cleaning, sanding, and other work remained!! So, those who came to us in the early days could scrounge, and we did our best with the assistance of many Brothers who were jacks-of-all-trades, and the House of Affirmation took physical shape.

The first resident was Father Bill who had left his teaching community years before, to hide his unhappiness after the glitter and paint of a traveling circus -- "LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, THE G-R-E-A-T-E-S-T S-H-O-W O-N E-A-R-T-H."

Yet amidst his running away, the priesthood remained of value in Father Bill's heart and soul. And his Order, when he applied for reinstatement, told him he needed to be evaluated. Within two months, Father Bill, after receiving treatment at the House of Affirmation, was back where he had really wanted to be, within his religious community, exercising his priesthood, teaching in the classroom, offering youngsters and others the wisdom of the ages as weighed by his personal experiences and the drama of the evolution of the vocation of a man called to God.

Professional Staff

However, the building is not what the House of Affirmation means. The House of Affirmation is people who staff it. So, at this point, I wish to introduce in particular our foundress, Sister Anna Polcino, S.C.M.M., M.D. A former senior psychiatrist with the State of Massachusetts Department of Mental Health, she was the first woman to hold that position. Graduate of Pennsylvania's Woman's Medical College in that State. For nine years she was a missionary surgeon in West Pakistan and Bangladesh. She did her psychiatric residency at Worcester State Hospital and is presently staff member of St. Vincent Hospital and Worcester State Hospital. She is instructor in

psychiatry at the University of Massachusetts Medical School. Given a 1965 award for an Outstanding Missionary, and listed in Who's Who of American Women, she is presently psychiatric director of therapy at the House of Affirmation and president of the diocesan Senate of Religious. Recently in Anaheim, California, she became the first nun ever elected to the board of directors of the National Guild of Catholic Psychiatrists.

We were joined in the early days by other professionals: priest-psychologists, sister-psychologists, lay psychologist, psychiatrists, nurses, all willing to take the risk of dedicating their life to the restoration of priests and religious to happy ministry. A picture of the whole Church emerged from the staff made up of diocesan priests, religious priests and brothers, nuns, and lay married and single persons. According to our accreditations the leadership of the House of Affirmation is academically top-notch and fully experienced.

Program

But what do we actually do?

First, the House of Affirmation is a place for people who wish to reassess their vocational and spiritual life in the light of their emotional problems. The House of Affirmation is not a mental institution, but a center for priests and religious where psycho-spiritual problems may be handled in a therapeutic residential community of men and women while experiencing individual counseling and group therapy.

It is not a nesting place for those unfit for ministry. Residents are accepted only after thorough evaluation. They are made aware that the day they arrive at the House of Affirmation they are being prepared to leave it. Residents are really on an open campus. They may use their cars if they have them and are free to go and come, keeping in mind the internal schedule of the house.

At the House of Affirmation, priests and religious have an opportunity to re-affirm their religious identity and live happy useful lives within the communal structures of their religious communities or diocesan discipline. Cardinal Alfrink of Holland, during a visit to the House of Affirmation commented: "Very often the world of today experiences the religious person as one who is not happy himself and does not make others happy.... This is not the intention of the Lord's message and of our being Christians. The message of the Lord is a message of salvation -- happy tidings -- a message of love and joy."

The laity should not be surprised to find there is a need for a center such as the House of Affirmation. A priest or Religious, in many ways, is no different from someone else from another segment of society. Immaturity and the pressures of the 20th Century exert great forces upon many people before their entrance to seminary or religious life with deprivation results showing up later in life.

Philosophy of the House of Affirmation

The philosophy underlying the House of Affirmation's existence and operation can be succinctly stated as: treatment of the whole person in a wholly therapeutic environment. Priests and religious

who come to us are accepted for who they are as people. While at the same time we offer them what we feel is some of the best in psychiatric and psychological knowledge and therapy and the professional staff shares the Christian value system and encourages the priests and religious in their vocational choice and identity. Priests and religious have chosen a celibate way of life which jars with the usual Freudian model of therapy. An alternative had to evolve to meet the needs of this relatively important and clearly delineated sociological group of celibate religious professionals seeking psychological help.

The House of Affirmation provides a favorable environment for the social re-learning that constitutes therapy. Modern psychology emphasizes the tremendous power of the environment on human development and behavior; our surroundings exert a molding influence on our behavior. In milieu therapy, the expectancies and attitudes of the treatment staff are central to bringing about social rehabilitation. But the psychotheological community concept of the House of Affirmation goes beyond this milieu therapy, with its inherent psycho-analytic orientation and reductionism. There is an existential concern with rediscovering the living person amid the compartmentalization and dehumanization of modern culture. The ontological interest centers on the reality as immediately experienced by the person with the accent on the inter-personal character of the priest and religious' experience. The House of Affirmation therapeutic community supplies the type of accepting or impartial reactions from others that favor social learning. Besides, the therapeutic environment prevents further disorganization in the priest's behavior by reducing his intense anxieties.

Psychotheological Therapeutic Community

The House of Affirmation has developed a unique model in its psychotheological therapeutic community. The expression "psychotheological community" implies a quest for communion with God and with man. It is an accepted fact that personhood can only be realized in community, and this phenomenological aspect of man's human predicament aligns the model with the existential therapeutic movement. It seeks to analyze the structure of the priest and religious' human existence in view of understanding the reality underlying his being-in-crisis. It is concerned with the profound dimensions of the emotional and spiritual temper of contemporary man. The need of a psychotheological community looms large in the current psychological literature.

When people come to the House of Affirmation, each priest and religious in the community remains a unique individual. He may grow and change in the community but he will retain his identity, or grow in awareness of what his true identity as a priest of God is. Unity and charity, openness, receptivity, sharing, giving, and receiving are some of the favorable conditions present at the House of Affirmation between staff and residents that allow the troubled priest or religious to re-assess his whole vocational commitment. Bernard Haring, C.Ss.R., the distinguished moral theologian, has

made the following observation of the House of Affirmation: "I think the House of Affirmation is an excellent opportunity for bringing peace to the heart and the mind of people who are meant to be peacemakers."

The post-Vatican period demands maturity and balance on the part of those chosen to minister to the people of God because much risk is involved. Many priests and religious, since Vatican II, have floundered with the insecurity the slow and painful assimilation of change. Confusion and doubt, and a sense of loss have taxed the coping ability of many priests and religious who, cut off from safe moorings, question their identity and authenticity in what they consider an uncharted land.

Based on St. Thomas Aquinas

The House of Affirmation in its psychotheological approach, based on the rich anthropology of St. Thomas Aquinas, and the best of modern clinical psychiatry and is in complete unity with the Magisterium and tradition of the Roman Catholic Church. For this reason, it continues to exist to be of service to the priests and religious. Humberto Cardinal Medeiros, Archbishop of Boston, has recently stated: "Already the good work of the House of Affirmation is known, not only nationally but internationally. The excellent treatment given to priests and religious has benefited in incalculable ways the mission of Holy Mother Church."

As stated previously, the House of Affirmation is neither a place of confinement nor a haven for rest and recreation; rather, it is a miniature social-religious community planned and controlled for facilitating social learning of its residents. The professional staff members have accepted as the general goal of psychotherapy to help the "unfree," childishly dependent person become a genuine adult capable of responding affirmatively to life, people and society. The focus is on self-understanding and insight-building of an immediate and current nature in view of helping the priest and religious grasp the meaning of his existence in its historical totality. Ultimately, the mentally healthy priest and religious will attain freedom to choose, maturity in outlook and responsible independence.

Appreciation of the Healthy Celibate

The life of the celibate priest or religious can be viewed as an ongoing process of interaction with the religious, social and natural forces that make up the environment. The meaning that life assumes for a celibate depends on the personal response to these forces. The celibate community constitutes a union of persons who participate in a common love-response to the call of Christ. The key to a proper understanding of community life lies in participation which becomes a unifying force while allowing for individual differences. Is not willingness to receive from another one of the dearest gifts one can give to the other? Participation characterizes the relationship of individuals united by love in community. All encounters assume meaning in that context; they become avenues to change.

The difference one's presence makes in the overall community pro-

ness gives meaning to the celibate's life. Being human really means coming to grips, in a creative way, with the concrete situation in which we find ourselves. The here-and-now experience is crucial, for life is today -- not yesterday or tomorrow. The same applies in the therapeutic situation be it individual or group: the ongoing, immediate experience of residents and therapist as they interact becomes the phenomenological emphasis in psychotherapy. The total phenomena experienced at any moment in time describes man's existential situation; the experienced event is what is brought to therapy. Listening to others as persons, looking into their eyes, mind and heart, with deep sympathy, feeling that this person is suffering, is appealing to us as a person -- are they not affirmative responses to Christ's summons: "Love one another as I have loved you." (Jn 13: 34-35)?

The call to Christian life is ideally expressed in the experience of the Eucharist, the community experience *par excellence*. The Eucharist builds up a community of faith and so stands at the very center of the psychotheological community of the House of Affirmation. It reveals the solidarity of all members in Christ. It is the same solidarity that is expressed in the opening words of the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*: "The joys and hopes, the sorrows and worries of men of our time are ours" (Gs. Art 1).

Challenge of Vatican II

The House of Affirmation has thus accepted the challenge of the Fathers of Vatican II who urged, in their *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* to make appropriate use "not only of the theological principles, but also of the findings of the secular sciences, especially of psychology and sociology" (Gs. Art 62) to help the faithful live their faith in a more thorough and mature way.

In its *Decree on the Appropriate Renewal of the Religious Life*, the Council Fathers pursued the same line of thought: "The manner of living, praying, and working should be suitably adapted to the physical and psychological conditions of today's religious...to the needs of the apostolate, the requirements of a given culture, the social and economic circumstances" (PC, Art 3). In the article pertaining to chastity, religious are urged to "take advantage of those natural helps which favor mental and bodily health.... Everyone should remember that chastity has stronger safeguards in a community when true fraternal love thrives among its members" (PC, Art 12). It is believed that celibate religious professionals trained in psychiatry and psychology can bring to bear their own experience in coming to a better understanding of the emotional problems of the religious and priestly life of today. Such is the case in the two satellite offices and in the Residential Treatment Center of the House of Affirmation.

For too long, celibates have been stigmatized when seeking professional help from psychiatrists and psychologists who had little understanding of their religious commitment; the misconceptions often deterred religious and priests from seeking psychiatric-psychological help. The residential treatment center has been set up to minimize the threat and possible alienation attendant on presenting to a pro-

essional type establishment. A homelike atmosphere has been developed which has proved most therapeutic and which prepares the priest and religious to respond to therapy in a very positive manner in contrast to the resistance usually found when working with the laity.

All Must Enter Willingly

An individual priest, sister or brother may be referred to the House of Affirmation for the purpose of coming to a better understanding of his emotional problems and/or to resolve them. However, the priest or religious is always informed that unless he comes of his own free will, therapy will be of little avail to him. No resident is taken in for treatment on the mere recommendation of his religious superiors; the priest or religious must indicate willingness to come for therapy. The principle of confidentiality is crucial to the operation of the House of Affirmation; privacy is maintained at all times. This has produced a sense of security and trust and the number of priests and religious residents has grown geometrically. Since its inception, it has been stressed that the purpose of the House of Affirmation centers is not so much keeping the celibate in the religious or priestly life as helping him become truly human and consistently free; through therapy, the priest and religious can come to his own decision about his future.

In the course of therapy, the priest or religious comes to view his experience in greater perspective and regains a future orientation. Self-growth demands that the priest have something to aim for, a goal which can be brought into reality through committed action. The priest and religious' task will then be to actualize the possibility and make it a reality. As a person begins to respond to his feelings, he sees possibilities in his future and makes attempts to achieve these; by so doing, independence increases in his life-style.

Contrary to the opinions of some, it is our scientific finding, that celibacy is not the prime problem of people who are in vocational crisis or have emotional disturbance. As a matter of fact, many times the vocational crisis itself is a reflection, not of a dissatisfaction so much with the Church or with the priesthood but with underlying emotional immaturity, a lack of affirmation.

Many of the problems that have presented themselves at the House of Affirmation may be classified as deprivation syndromes and what Freud has described as the repressive neurosis. In the first case, lack of love and acceptance (lack of affirmation) has crippled the psychological functioning of the priest and religious; in the latter case, one encounters priests and religious who have made excessive use of the defense mechanism known as intellectualization. These individuals are not aware of their emotions and have even repressed anger in their life as celibates. The repression came about by faulty training which presented the emotion of anger as "unvirtuous," an emotion not to be expressed at any time. Yet, Christ found it appropriate to express his emotions: "The angry Man who picked up a cord to drive the buyers and sellers out of the temple, Who wept in sadness over Jerusalem, Who was bathed in sweat before His arrest was not a stoical, emotionless Man."

Through therapy, individual priests and religious become aware of their emotions, are informed that their emotions are basically good and encouraged to express them in a healthy way within the context of a celibate life. Individual therapy is supported by group therapy where angry feelings may be expressed and accepted as such. The re-educative process is somewhat long and painful but pays off in a more personally satisfying and productive life.

Self-Supporting Apostolate

The work of the House of Affirmation is completely self-supporting. It receives no allotted funds from any diocese or religious community. The House of Affirmation is entirely dependent for its material functioning on donations from interested foundations, concerned members of the laity, and from donations made by some of the residents who come to us.

Since the House of Affirmation is a faith community deeply rooted in the teaching of the Gospel and the tradition of the Roman Catholic Church, it believes that the Lord will provide for the day-to-day material needs. Our own Bishop and member of the Board of Directors, Bernard J. Flanagan, has written: "I am convinced that there is a growing need and demand for the kind of therapy which the House of Affirmation, with a professionally competent staff, is able to offer to priests and religious. I am confident that it is in good hands, and join with all of you in prayer that it will merit the wide support which it deserves."

The Chapel of the Holy Spirit at the House of Affirmation is symbolic of the spiritual principles of its therapeutic and educational programs which are available to priests and religious with emotional and spiritual problems. The Eucharist is the center of the daily life at the House of Affirmation and it is here that we entrust our spiritual, emotional and intellectual needs to the Lord.

Patroness: St. Therese of Lisieux

In a special way St. Therese of Lisieux is very close to the House of Affirmation. Adopted as the patroness of the House of Affirmation, St. Therese's example of affectionate, unselfish love of others serves as a model of the well-spring of new life for the lonely and non-affirmed priests and religious. Therese's doctrine, perfected in the life span of only twenty-four years, has been called by His Holiness Pope Paul VI one of the truly life-giving religious currents of our day. It constitutes an intimate part of the philosophy of the House of Affirmation.

Conclusion

To adequately grasp the spirit and giving of the House of Affirmation requires a visit, to see the hope, the joy of the priests and religious, and the dedicated zeal of staff, from the eminently qualified personnel to the lowliest worker. At the House of Affirmation, priests and religious having been affirmed by the staff and their spiritual and/or emotional problems having been healed or at least worked toward resolution, leave us and become very renewed and refreshed

as they once again serve the Church and society. One priest returned to the parish, or one religious returned to the classroom or other apostolate, has significant influence upon many many people. Thus, we believe the ripple effect of the House of Affirmation is most significant.

One priest recently told me that the feeling he had upon leaving the happy House of Affirmation is reflected in the last two lines of Emma Lazarus' poem "The New Colossus," New York City harbor's Statue of Liberty:

"Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost,
I lift up my lamp beside the golden door."

The House of Affirmation is indeed a lamp to those in the "dark of the soul" and the golden door for them is the door that opens back out to the world of religious re-affirmation and identity-aware service of God and man.

Jesus relies on His clergy and religious. He has made a big investment in them. They "re-present" His Spirit and message; and only a healthy and affirmed personality can do justice to this responsibility. At the House of Affirmation one goes beyond the purely psychological analysis. It is particularly sensitive to the religious dimension of the personality. Many priests and religious leave the House of Affirmation and return to active ministry, refreshed, renewed, and for the first time joyfully realize the words of Christ: "My yoke is easy, and My burden light."

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Prayer

Jesus, inspired by the example of St. Thérèse I place all my trust in your Sacred Heart and surrender myself to Your will. Come into my life, drive away my fears, stop my restless strivings and show me new ways of pleasing You. Teach me to discern the good in others and to love them with an affectionate smile, a gentle touch, a patient ear and an affirming word. St. Thérèse, pray that I will become alive again with awe and appreciation of Truth and the courage to oppose evil. Remind me always that I am created for Happiness, for the joy of living in the presence of God. St. Thérèse, pray that I, and all the friends of House of Affirmation, may have the inner peace that comes from confidence, surrender and affirmation.

