EDITORIAL COMMENT

ONE-EYED JACKS AND DEUCES WILD

There are passages to recall a crow-caucus, the Mad Tea Party, and an all-night poker game in that fascinating document, *Action for Mental Health.*

The Quarterly is indebted to John H. Cumming, M.D., director of the New York State Department of Mental Hygiene’s Mental Health Research Unit, for enlightening comment on the book’s proposals to employ clergymen as mental health counselors. *Action for Mental Health* represents the conclusions and recommendations for Congressional action, as finally agreed upon by the Joint Commission on Mental Illness and Mental Health; Dr. Cumming notes that it contains “three different indications for the competency of the clergyman in dealing with those who have emotional problems. First, although untrained for mental health work, he is the most successful of the community mental health workers; second, that he can with relative ease be trained to be competent and third, that he must have intensive clinical training in order to be competent.”** Or: The clergyman is already the best community counselor; he needs a little training to be a counselor; he needs a lot of intensive training to be a counselor.

To get down to cases, how long would it take to teach a clergyman to recognize blocking as a sign of serious illness? (And then how long should the clergyman take to send a patient to a doctor?) Perhaps one should refer to the clergy themselves. The Rev. W. W. Meissner, S.J., reports in this issue on the results of introducing 26 young Roman Catholic priests to a nine-day period of ward visitation and study at St. Elizabeths Hospital, Washington.† At the risk of interpreting what the reader can better consult for himself, it may be said that Father Meissner found that the visitors—initially somewhat favorably disposed toward psychiatry as shown by psychological testing—were inclined generally by

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**Cumming, John H.: Chairman’s remarks at American Psychiatric Association’s Thirteenth Mental Hospital Institute, Panel on Secondary Prevention, Omaha, October 1961. Quoted from personal communication to editor.

their experiences to still more favorable attitudes, but that the change was not enough to be significant. The young priests were in more general agreement, after their experiences, that parishioners should be referred to psychiatrists when mentally disturbed; but Father Meissner nowhere indicates that they felt themselves competent to diagnose, much less to treat, mental illness. On the contrary, they finished their visit with a somewhat increased feeling that more teaching of the findings of psychiatry was needed in the seminary.

There is no doubt that not entirely dissimilar findings could be reported of clergymen in other dominations. The Joint Commission could have found voluminous discussion of this point in publications addressed particularly to the clergy, ranging from journals to books — none from a responsible source advocating, so far as this Quarterly is aware, that theologians undertake serious psychiatric treatment.

To this journal, the Joint Commission’s recommendations on counseling suggest dealer’s choice by a desperate poker loser, seven-card stud with one-eyed jacks and deuces wild (or scoutmasters, schoolteachers and county farm agents rated as aces and kings—or professional advisers in a medical specialty). The commission’s summary of recommendations for who should counsel “in the absence of fully trained psychiatrists, clinical psychologists, psychiatric social workers and psychiatric nurses” (the aces and face cards?) includes “a host of persons untrained or partially trained in mental health principles and practices,” who are “already trying to help and treat the mentally ill in the absence of professional resources,” and who “with a moderate amount of training ... can be fully equipped ... as mental health counselors.” The Joint Commission then names some of these lesser cards in the pack: “clergymen, family physicians, teachers, probation officers, public health nurses, sheriffs, judges, public welfare workers, scoutmasters, county farm agents [the deuces?] and others ...” If there are extra cards here—bartenders, barbers, beauticians!—so much the better. According to dealer’s rules, just call them counselors, and—with a little training and access to expert advice themselves “as needed”—they will pull in the pots like professionals.

At this point it seems appropriate to ask, “Who called that county agent a counselor?” Inasmuch as the Joint Commission