

CHURCH CHAT

BY

TOM SMITH

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WHAT IF...?

What if a Church leader - a pastor, bishop, nun or layperson - has narcissistic personality disorder? How would that look, and what would happen?

Narcissistic personality disorder (NPD) is more than looking in the mirror in the morning and wondering if you're going to have a bad hair day. NPD is a diagnosable, clinical disorder included in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition*, (DSM-IV) the official book of the American Psychiatric Association which all psychiatrists, psychologists, and counselors use to diagnose clients.

Since mental illness is difficult to diagnose for even professional mental health providers, it would be foolish for me to attempt a diagnosis of any Church leader. Publically. But what if five of the nine characteristics of NPD found in the DSM-IV accurately describe a Church leader? I say five out of nine because that is the criteria used in the DSM-IV to diagnosis NPD.

Here are the nine:

1. has a grandiose sense of self-importance (e.g. exaggerates achievements and talents, expects to be recognized as superior without commensurate achievements)
2. is preoccupied with fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty, or ideal love.
3. believes that he or she is "special" and unique and can only be understood by, or should associate with, other special or high-status people (or institutions)
4. requires excessive admiration
5. has a sense of entitlement, i.e., unreasonable expectations of especially favorable treatment or automatic compliance with his or her expectations
6. is interpersonally exploitative, i.e., takes advantage of others to achieve his or her own ends.
7. lacks empathy: is unwilling to recognize or identify with the feelings or needs of others.
8. is often envious of others or believes that others are envious of him or her
9. shows arrogant, haughty behaviors or attitudes

So, back to my first question: what if a Church leader consistently exhibits at least five of these behaviors? What happens? Well, my best guess is: nothing!

Here's why:

- Narcissists, classically, do not admit their disorder and therefore see no need to seek help.
- Since narcissism is a personality disorder and not a chemical imbalance, there is no medication that counteracts the illness.
- The Church is extremely reluctant to admit it was a mistake to ordain a narcissist as a priest or make him a Bishop. They are even more reluctant to remove him even if his narcissism becomes more evident. They would likely fire a layperson or a nun.

- A mental health intervention is also unlikely but if it is attempted, it will have a greater chance of success if it is done by peers or superiors. A narcissist will not likely accept an intervention by someone he perceives as inferior to him.

The same basic question could be asked about Alzheimer's, or other forms of mental illness. When a public figure, like a Church leader, experiences these problems, treatment is more complicated but still possible if the person admits and accepts the diagnosis, and commits to a plan for recovery. In fact, the mental illness can be incorporated into ministry very effectively when the person is open, honest, and manages the illness.

But if the Church leader does not admit and accept the mental illness, the predictable disaster is devastating. The Gospel shrinks to fit the illness. The ministry serves the illness first. Church teaching bows to the needs of the disease. Christian community collapses into neurotic disarray, and worship devolves into perverted rituals for satisfying personal needs.

Schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, chronic depression, or Alzheimer's will manifest itself in symptoms that will obviously impact the ministry of a Church leader. A priest, bishop, or Pope with one of these brain disorders may be relieved from ministry and provided some treatment. (Although who knows what happens if a Pope has one of these illnesses?)

On the other hand, if the issue is NPD, there is no recourse. The narcissism thrives on the protection granted by the institution. If a Bishop, in particular, has NPD, there is no one who will do anything about it.

And it's the People of God who reap the poisoned harvest.