



LUKENOTES

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CASE STUDY

"Father Bill" • Narcissism

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Fr. Bill has been the pastor of a large urban parish for four years. He is a gifted, if not entertaining homilist, and many of the parishioners appreciate his preaching. As in his past assignments, he continues to have difficulties with those who work closely with him: associates, staff and parish council members. He seems to require admiration, even adulation from those who work with him. Because he is difficult to work with and has indicated that he does not need assistance, the diocese has chosen not to assign an assistant at this time. He is pleased with this decision, preferring not to depend on "persons who are often not capable." The parish council does not agree as the parish is large and there are many needs that one priest cannot address by himself.

Currently, Fr. Bill is having difficulty with members of the parish council who are questioning his plans for a new parish center. He wants to build a new center that is twice the size of the current center which is only eight years old. The majority of the Parish Council members believe that some simple renovations and upgrades are sufficient at this time. Fr. Bill insists that they do not have a broad enough vision and are not far-sighted. When the diocese suggested that the Personnel Director, Fr. Franks, assist Fr. Bill and the parish council, he reluctantly agreed, stating "I prefer to deal with the Bishop."

Fr. Franks consulted a psychologist about how to understand the situation and how he might best work with Fr. Bill. As they reviewed Fr. Bill's ministerial history, they realized that Fr. Bill's current behavior is part of a longstanding pervasive pattern of struggling with relationships, especially ministerial relationships. It is also clear that grandiosity, need for admiration and a lack of empathy are characteristic ways that Fr. Bill relates to others.

Recognizing Personality Disorders

With the help of the psychologist, Fr. Franks realized that Fr. Bill has a personality disorder, "an enduring pattern of inner experience and behavior that deviates markedly from the expectations of the individual's culture and that is inflexible and pervasive across a broad range of personal and social situations" (DSM IV). These patterns are stable and of long duration, leading to significant impairment in social or ministerial functioning. There are ten personality disorders and it is clear that Fr. Bill meets the criteria for Narcissism, which

include a grandiose sense of self importance, preoccupations of unlimited success, a belief that he is special and that he should associate with other high status people (e.g., the bishop), a need for excessive admiration, arrogant behavior and an inability to empathize with others.

Understanding Narcissism

Although we often speak of an early wounding (e.g., some kind of abuse or neglect) related to narcissism, it can also be true that narcissism may emerge as a result of selfless love and adoration from a significant figure in a child's life. This clearly seems to be the case for Fr. Bill. His mother doted on him after his father abandoned his mother and himself when he was only three years old. An adoring parent who is consistently deferential and nurturing, may contribute to an arrogant sense of entitlement. Being raised in this type of environment can also interfere with a child's ability to learn that others have needs, perspectives and wants of their own. What is often not understood is that underneath the competence and arrogance is often a person who experiences consistent fear of falling from grace, of not looking good. It is this fear that contributes to an intense and rigid perfectionism and the need to present oneself as having it all together. Thus, these individuals demand that the world "reflect" back an image of idealized perfection.

Coping with Narcissistic Behavior

Pathological narcissism is difficult to deal with as most persons with a personality disorder inflict more pain than they realize. If a person is open to treatment, tempering narcissism may occur. One individual, however, will not be able to change the behavior of a narcissistic person. The best someone can do is adhere to some of the survival techniques recommended by James F. Masterson, MD:

- **Set boundaries:** Decide what demands you can meet and how much approval you are willing to give; set time limits on how long you are willing to listen to self-centered conversations; set realistic deadlines and hold people to them.
- **Support and care for yourself:** Since your time and feelings do not matter to them, remember to take care of yourself; refuse to be blackmailed by anger or blame.
- **Use bargaining chips:** If you have something they want, share it sparingly to keep their worst behavior under control; do not be surprised when old ways return.
- **Avoid anger and arguing:** Conduct confrontations quietly, without losing control; expect to be blamed or to hear that there is something wrong with you; arguing will only make you feel like you are running in circles; do not expect accommodation from the other.
- **Know when to leave:** Dealing with a person who is a malignant narcissist can undermine your own sense of self; examine your relationship with this person, and decide if you wish to maintain it.

What we see with Fr. Bill is an example of unhealthy or pathological narcissism as opposed to a healthy self-love. Healthy self-love is a mature, balanced love of self coupled with a stable sense of self-worth and self-esteem. It implies healthy boundaries and a realistic appraisal of

one's self and one's capabilities. It is only through knowing oneself that a human being can fully appreciate the humanness of others. Because Fr. Bill has little experience of his real self, he is unable to cope with others, share their emotions, put himself in their place or love them. How sad it is that such a gifted person lives, in reality, a lonely, isolated life.

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