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Ministering in an Age of Narcissism

Before the death of my father-in-law, he and I watched a grainy video of his 1942 high school graduating class: the entire class of 900 plus, walking out the doors, down a flight of steps, with the camera focused on one position as rows and rows of very thin, almost waif like, seventeen-, eighteen-, and nineteen-year-olds exited the hallowed halls of Allentown High School. It was remarkable for many reasons, the attire, the endless cadre of young people; yet, what struck me most was how thin they were.

“Everyone is so skinny,” I said.

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“Didn’t have any food?” I thought. I proceeded to hear story after story from my father-in-law about the conditions in which he and his friends were raised: little food, scraping for work, communities pulling together to help each other out, and a sense of charity that leaves those from my generation and younger completely clueless about the word sacrifice.

I do not wish to imply that my in-law’s generation was void of entitled, narcissistic individuals anymore than I wish to imply that narcissism is all pervasive in today’s generation. However, narcissism and entitlement, i.e., the expectation that I should receive something better or more without responsibility or effort, have been on the increase (Twenge), and represents a very challenging population of individuals for which to care. Narcissistic persons are difficult to influence, which increases the stress associated with their needs. Ministers have an unarticulated belief that they can and must influence their constituencies. If ministers did not believe that they could influence others, then their entire ministry would falter and they would be crushed by the weight of discouragement.

Narcissistic persons typically fail to demonstrate compassion for others and possess a limited capacity for intimacy due in large part to their deficiency in empathic skills (Back et al.). Empathy is a crucial building block for all relationships and is defined as the capacity of the individual to interpret accurately another’s feelings and internal experience and appropriately express that understanding. These individuals maintain a basic attitude that those around them are

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inferior, as downward social comparison inflates the narcissist’s sense of self (Back et al.). They will choose to associate with others who are weak in character and easily influenced and who will not confront their sense of entitlement, thus securing their fragile ego. They appear rather intractable and eventually are abandoned by others. Ministers will encounter individuals who possess this trait in those they serve, in their coworkers, and in their bosses. What can the minister do to manage and or serve such individuals?

Ministering to the Entitled/ Narcissistic Parishioner

The narcissist will have no insight into his problematic behavior. Thus, ministers would do well to understand the intrapsychic system in which this person operates. The narcissist expects to receive preferential treatment, manipulates those around her, and causes distress in those who interact with her. The narcissist is annoying; and when he does not have his needs met, he will externalize his frustration and become passive-aggressive or aggressive. A minister may initially like this person (Back et al.) but will soon experience the sting of this person’s personality. The minister who engages narcissists in ministry needs (1) to appreciate their lack of self-insight and desire for insight, (2) to practice methods of self-soothing while interacting with them (e.g., breathing, self-coaching), and (3) to draw clear boundaries regarding what the minister will and will not do and to remain firm. The objective for the minister is to maintain an emotional distance without losing charity.

Ministering with the Entitled/ Narcissistic Coworker

In a similar fashion, narcissistic coworkers possess a personality trait that is quite annoying. These coworkers believe the parish functions to support their work and ministry. Demands placed on them by the pastor or boss will be met with passive-aggressive responses: they will show up late for meetings, “forget” to do their part for the group project, display a terse and unresponsive demeanor to those they deem as invading their turf, or they may appear invested and cooperative while the boss is around and resort to their intractable behavior when the boss leaves.

Narcissistic coworkers are not interested in collaboration or building “coworker cohesion.” Social interactions are largely perfunctory unless they deem the reason for the interaction meaningful. Working with them requires the minister to maintain a professional distance without appearing threatened or impatient. Narcissists are quite vigilant about slights and facial expressions and will act dismissively toward others depending on the threat they attribute to the situation. The more threat they experience, the more aggressive, manipulative, and/or hostile their actions. These persons can do good work; they are not villains but the ministers working with them must appreciate their limited capacity and desire to establish working relationships. For a narcissist, all working relationships are viewed through a utility measure, i.e., how useful are you to me?

Ministering with an Entitled/ Narcissistic Boss

Narcissistic bosses expect that all behavior, accomplishment, and achievement be channeled toward and through their sense of competence. This is their “show” and all work at their pleasure. A successful worker is initially perceived as a threat until they prove they know their place. They may speak words of collaboration but power is not shared in this environment: power sharing is an illusion. They judge and “pigeon hole”
their subordinates making their judgments difficult to displace. Any disagreement with them will result in some form of payback. Do not expect or desire a close relationship with them.

Eventually, narcissistic bosses wear out those around them and subordinates leave. At times, the best recourse for ministers is departure. When that is impossible, ministers must ensure that they document interactions with their boss and be very clear about their responsibilities. Yet, that will not secure the minister's employment.

Narcissistic bosses bully or charm and bully. They tend to micromanage. Initially, the minister will experience their charming demeanor as open, intelligent, and caring; and yet will soon learn that the environment is anything but open and caring. Narcissistic bosses create an atmosphere of fear, and all operate to minimize interactions with them. They expect subordinates to anticipate their needs, creating situations for subordinates to fail and lending pseudo-credibility for terminating their employment. These bosses may be happy to have a minister at first. Yet eventually they tire of the minister and will find ways to terminate employment. Subordinates will respond to this boss as they would an authoritarian figure, i.e., don't get in the way, blame others when problems arise, say “yes” while harboring hostile wishes of the boss's destruction.

Caretaking for the Minister

Ministering in an age of narcissism can be rather discouraging and can lead to quick burnout. The minister would do well to keep a few things in mind as she goes about the work of Kingdom-building:

1. Being around such toxic people can affect your brain health. It is important as a minister to take care of your brain. Such things as daily meditation and prayer, learning to play an instrument, exercising, eating well, and minimizing negative thoughts keep the brain functioning optimally. Check out Dr. Daniel Amen’s website, amenclinics.com, for more information on taking care of your brain.

2. Narcissistic individuals are limited in their capacity to build cohesive relationships and typically establish them based on utility. Stop trying to get them to like you. Expect only so much camaraderie, recognize their limitations and maintain a professional distance.

3. Be clear about your responsibilities and ensure that your coworkers understand how you understand those responsibilities. Don’t expect, however, that this will lead to a harmonious work environment. Narcissistic individuals do not have the capacity to create harmonious work environments; they expect you to serve their needs.

4. Find someone other than a coworker with whom to discuss your frustrations. Otherwise, you will create a division among your peers and more problems than you can anticipate.

5. Document interactions with the narcissist that are problematic. Speak to your boss about them only if your boss can listen well and respond appropriately.

There is much more to say on this topic, but these are some ideas to keep in mind when working with narcissistic persons. Hopefully, these few ideas will assist ministers in maintaining their level of charity and pastoral identity.
References
