Messing with the Mass: The problem of priestly narcissism today

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Since Vatican II the Mass has fallen victim to various kinds of irregularities. This issue has been much discussed from various perspectives, but in this article we will examine a previously neglected aspect of the situation — namely, the psychological reasons why priests have introduced these changes. We will not deal with theological explanations for why the Mass has been subject to liturgical experimentation, nor will we discuss liturgical rationales for such innovations. Instead, we will focus on the psychology of the priest and those assisting at the liturgy — that is, on the psychological motives as distinct from theological and liturgical reasoning.

We propose that the primary motivation behind many of these changes derives from underlying narcissistic motives — that is, extreme self love — found in many people in contemporary culture. This is especially the case with the relatively small changes introduced in an idiosyncratic way into the Mass. We first summarize and describe the nature of this narcissism, then apply it to the situation found among priests.

American Narcissism

Beginning in the 1970's, a number of major social critics noted and criticized this country's increasingly narcissistic — that is, self-preoccupied — character. Tom Wolfe's article "The Me Decade" opened this critique, and many others followed it. Perhaps the most extensive treatment was Christopher Lasch's *The Culture of Narcissism*. The first book-length critique of American's narcissism was written by one of the present authors (PCV), *Psychology as Religion: The Cult of Self-Worship* (1977, 1994). Vitz explicitly addressed the basic anti-Christian (though not the anti-Catholic) significance of contemporary cultural narcissism. Robert Bellah and colleagues' *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* in 1985 continued such critiques. We briefly summarize here key points made by these authors to allow their insights to be applied to the psychology of many American priests.

Lasch emphasized the decline of the "sense of historical time." (p. 1) Narcissism as a mental framework is easier for individuals and societies when they are no longer connected to the past. It is the past that provides a framework for judging contemporary behavior as good or bad, as appropriate or inappropriate, as traditional or novel. The historical past, with its heroes and its lessons, is a person's link to family and cultural traditions; it provides norms of behavior and moral strictures. Lasch makes it clear that as the past has faded from American consciousness, the capacity for narcissistic self-indulgence has grown substantially.

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Lasch also noted how American society has begun to lose its confidence in the future — something truer still of Europe. This rejection of the future began to become widespread in the 1960's with the fear of overpopulation. Many began to argue for "zero population growth", and considered that the future of the world would be better with far fewer human beings. There was also a loss of hope for the future of humanity and traditional social organizations. This same phenomenon is readily discernible with respect to Western culture generally including the American nation. Modern critiques of Western society as exploitive, imperialistic, and even culturally inferior became widespread in the intellectual communities of the United States and Europe. From our colleges, universities and seminaries this general attitude spread out to become commonplace among America's professional or "governing" class. A related critique of religion itself arose at the same time — and in the same places. Science, technology and secular life were generally assumed to be desirable and inevitable, and religion — part of the embarrassing Western culture anyway — was doomed to disappear. Christianity in any recognizable form was judged as having no future. The evaporation of hope for the future on all these fronts, along with the decline of belief in the relevance of tradition, meant that the "now" was what mattered. Having cut loose from the past and having little confidence in the future, we have allowed the present moment to dominate our consciousness.

Examples of the preoccupation with the present — "now" — at the expense of the lessons of the past and concern for the future abound. Consumer society, with its obsession with consumption, and its encouragement to incur debt with a disregard for future consequences, is perhaps the most obvious example. The glorification of transient sexual gratification and sensory pleasures is another commonplace example of this peculiarly contemporary focus on the present. The entertainment industry feeds — and feeds on — preoccupation with the present moment. This mindset promotes narcissism, because persons firmly wedded to their tradition and mindful of their future have inherent restraints on personal self-indulgence and gratification. Such persons instead draw gratification from continuing an admired past and projecting it in a positive way toward a hopeful future. In short, the "now" and narcissism go hand in hand.

Vitz, in his treatment, identifies the self-psychology of Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow and other psychologists as a central causal factor, especially in these

psychologists' preoccupation with self-actualization and self-fulfillment. He also notes how this psychological narcissism morphed into the New Age emphasis on spiritual narcissism: "When I pray, I pray to myself." The self, for many, has become the absolute center of values and preoccupation. Such an attitude is a form of idolatry, obviously related to the traditional vices of pride and vanity, and well summed up in the truly ancient temptation — "You shall be as gods." Of course, most of today's self-oriented American narcissists do not go quite so far, but there is a strong temptation for individuals today to agree with the Burger King erstwhile motto — "Have it your way."

The narcissism discussed by Lasch was refocused in Bellah *et al*'s well-known *Habits of the Heart*. This book primarily identified American individualism and the autonomous self as the cultural culprit underlying America's social fragmentation, loneliness and personal alienation. Although American individualism is not quite the same thing as narcissism — in some ways it is more moderate — Bellah *et al* conclude, "in the end, its [individualism's] results are much the same" as narcissism or egoism. Bellah agrees with Lasch that with American individualism, "people come to 'forget their ancestors,' but also their descendents, as well as isolating themselves from their contemporaries."

Narcissism of a General Psychological Type

The preceding summary has interpreted narcissism primarily within a cultural or social framework. However, a psychological definition of narcissism is also relevant. Genuine clinical narcissism, such as narcissistic personality disorder (NPD), is a relatively uncommon major disorder and is not of concern here. Instead, our focus is on the more moderate narcissistic traits found in many individuals today. Five characteristics are relevant, all part of narcissistic personality disorder as described in the DSM-IV-R description of NPD. (Words from the DSM are in Italics.)

An *excessive need for admiration and praise* and with this comes an equally *excessive need to avoid criticism*. Often *this* is *associated with obvious attention seeking behavior.* These narcissistic traits are frequently found in those who introduce and participate in liturgical innovations.

1. *Requires excessive admiration*; with this comes extreme *sensitivity to criticism.* Such criticism *often leads to social withdrawal or an appearance of humility*. Often this is associated with obvious attention seeking behavior. These narcissistic traits are frequently found in those who introduce and participate in liturgical innovations.
2. A *sense of entitlement, of unreasonable expectations of favorable treatment and of automatic compliance of others with one's suggestions and expectations* is another narcissistic trait. An attitude of the "rules don't apply to me" comes with this sense of entitlement — for example the rubrics of the

Mass don't really require me to follow them.

3. *A belief that they are superior, special or unique and expect others to recognize this; that they should only associate with other people who are special or of high status.* For priests this may show by extreme needs to associate with high ranking clergy or with liturgical experts.
4. Another narcissistic characteristic is showing *arrogant, haughty behaviors and attitudes*. At times priests show this in their liturgical style, emphases or innovation or when criticized for such innovations. Such attitudes often underlie the very assumption that one has the right to change the liturgy.
5. A *lack of empathy,* that is, *an unwillingness to recognize or identify with the feeling and needs of others.* This is sometimes shown by contempt or anger toward those who are offended by changes in the liturgy — often changes that have no real canonical support.

All of the above don't need to be present in a given individual for the general narcissistic personality of the person to be clear, but any of these traits to an extreme or any two or more as obvious, would be enough to identify a "narcissistic type."

Catholic Expressions of Clerical Narcissism

Lasch, Vitz and Bellah never touch on the Catholic Church in the works cited above, but their points apply to the situation of the Church in the United States over the last several decades. Setting aside the important underlying theological issues, we can see deeply rooted psychological motives behind the American priests who "individualize" the Masses they celebrate, placing their "personal stamp" on the liturgy. These priests play fast and loose with the rubrics of the mass, transform the "very brief" introduction after the greeting of the people, as authorized by the General Instruction of the Roman Missal, into another homily. Some even individualize the prayer of consecration, and in numerous other ways seek to make the Divine Liturgy conform to their own tastes and views.

Much of this change was long attributed to the "Spirit of Vatican II", but in fact, our point is that the secular and narcissistic spirit of the times lies beneath these liturgical irregularities. This secular spirit, as described by Lasch, was explicitly self-indulgent and self-aggrandizing. The rationale of those who "personalize" the liturgy is clearly one that rejects the Church's history and tradition — just as society in general has rejected its past. This is easily seen in the frequent neglect and sometimes even explicit disparagement of the Church's liturgical tradition by those who should be most closely wedded to the Church — priests.

These abuses also reflect a real disconnect with the Christian future. The future is a central focus of the liturgy as properly understood. The liturgy reflects the longing for God that we hope to realize at our deaths, but perhaps even more importantly the Mass presages the Last Judgment to be visited upon all mankind. At its heart, the Divine Liturgy is an expression of hopefulness for the future, and is an earthly

manifestation of our ultimate goal — Heaven. The Mass should take us out of the present — should have a transcendent timelessness — and should also give us an awareness of the long traditions of the Church which precede us. Unfortunately, the congregation in many of today's liturgies leaves the Mass with little awareness of the liturgy's meaning for both the Church's past and their eternal future. The Mass was just a transitory emotional experience, and easily forgotten.

The common contemporary focus on being "relevant" is a straightforward articulation of making the Mass focus on the "now" with a serious neglect of where the Mass came from and where it is leading us. To be relevant is to be involved in the present, commonly at the expense of the past as well as the future. In fact, most of the innovators would argue that a "relevant" liturgy is one that speaks to the people "now", rather than serving as a fixed reference point in a confused and changing world. The "now" is also an expression of narcissistic preoccupations. Indeed, it is difficult to disentangle the connection between narcissism and "relevant" liturgy: focusing on the "now" breeds narcissism, and narcissism creates a preoccupation with "relevance" and the "now." We turn now to some specific examples of our thesis.

In 1990 Thomas Day, in *Why Catholic Can't Sing*, gave some clear examples of the narcissistic phenomenon in the Catholic liturgy — a phenomenon that he calls "Ego Renewal."

"It is Holy Thursday and we are at the solemn evening mass in a mid-western parish. The moment comes for the celebrant of the Mass, the pastor, to wash the feet of twelve parishioners, just as Christ washed the feet of the apostles at the last Supper. During this deeply moving ceremony, the choir sings motets and alternates with the congregation, which sings hymns. Finally, this part of the liturgy comes to a close with the washing of the last foot. The music ends; you can almost sense that the congregation wants to weep for joy. Then, Father Hank (this is what the pastor wishes to be called) walks over to a microphone, smiles, and says, "Boy, that was great! Let's give these twelve parishioners a hand."

A stunned and somewhat reluctant congregation applauds weakly. Father Hank continues….

One by one, Father Hank goes down the row of twelve parishioners; each one gets a little testimonial and applause. With that job out of the way, Father Hank, visibly pleased with himself, resumes the liturgy, while the congregation, visibly annoyed, contemplates various methods of strangulation."

This is a narcissistic example of "personalizing" the liturgy, and Day points out that "Father Hank's" antics, far from being selfless, are fundamentally intended to draw attention to himself. Any psychologist would be aware of Father Hank's underlying insecurity and consequent need for personal affirmation, and we can see this same psychology on a lesser scale when the celebrant leaves the sanctuary to shake hands with the laity during the sign of peace or nods and glad-hands his way through the congregation during the recessional as though he were a local politician running for office. Day displays acute awareness of the narcissism underlying many liturgical problems, and as noted aptly refers to it as "Ego Renewal." A similar, real-life

example of this personalizing of the liturgy in a way that detracts from its spiritual significance occurred at a large Mass, attended by the junior author, in which the main celebrant introduced each of over twenty other concelebrants at the start of the mass, inviting applause for each as they were introduced.

With rare exceptions the introduction of applause within the Mass is a display of the ego needs of the priest or priests who are modeling the mass on show business and on public demonstrations of emotional support at the expense of Christ and an attitude of reverence.

Changing the rubrics sometimes panders to the narcissism both of the congregation and the priest, such as when the celebrant states to the congregation, "the Lord *is* with you" instead of blessing them, "the Lord *be* with you."

Lest the reader think that the cited examples belong to the 1980's and 90's, here is a fall 2006 example from a good sized diocese noted in the January 2007 *First Things.* A Halloween Mass in a parish that we will leave nameless "featured musicians decked out as devils and people in demon costumes distributing the Eucharist. I stopped watching the widely available video of the Mass at the point when the pastor introduced the Lord's Prayer with the words, "As goblins and ghouls…," and so I missed the part where, reportedly, he arrayed himself as the purple dinosaur Barney to conclude the ceremony." The obvious narcissistic points are that this Mass was videoed for distribution, and that the pastor appeared in the costume of a well-liked media dinosaur. (What does a dinosaur costume say about his attitude toward the priesthood and the Church?) There is also, of course, a more sinister theme in this "performance" — one that suggests an association between narcissism and heresy.

It is important for priests to keep in mind that most Catholics go to Mass to encounter Jesus Christ, and not to come into contact with the particular psychology of the celebrant. Furthermore, they go for something that is not present in the popular culture — a sense of the sacred (and a recognition of the need for humility).

Most changes and additions to the Mass are not as lengthy or obvious to the man in the pew as the above examples. Nevertheless, they can be just as disturbing, and equally unsound theologically. On one occasion the junior author noticed that the words of consecration had been altered by the priest during a daily Mass in a major cathedral. After Mass he approached the priest and politely asked about the changes, and was told that they were "just a little thing that I always do." Another example occurred when this same priest so modified the words of the Mass that the congregation lost its place and didn't realize its cue to say the appropriate responses. Still another example, involved a priest who memorized the gospel each week and then recited it from memory rather than reading it. This novelty drew considerable attention to the priest, of course, and many lost the gospel message by concentrating on the performance. Likewise, a priest was reported to us who mimed the homily, again drawing undue attention to him and his performance. Imitating Christ's self-forgetfulness and humble heart are the antidotes for these tendencies.

The laity is recruited to narcissism as well today. The mass is presented as a celebration of the assembled faithful themselves rather than a celebration of Christ's presence in the Eucharist. This is part of the motivation behind applause elicited from the laity. Perhaps the most obvious example of narcissism in the laity assisting at the mass occurs in the realm of "music ministry." Day focuses particularly on this aspect in *Why Catholics Can't Sing*; one notable aspect of this phenomenon is the moving of the choir from the choir loft and onto the sanctuary, where they are better able to "perform" to the congregation and to be seen an applauded. Indeed, there is a growing sense that the music at mass is more a performance than anything else.

One of the unanticipated results of priests customizing the liturgy — changing it on their own authority to suit their particular predilections — is that the laity sometimes follows suit. Following the American consumer mentality of "having it your way," is potentially available to the lay faithful, not just to priests. If every priest is pope, why not every layman a pope as well? When the priest says, "The Lord is with you", what is to stop the man in the pew from saying: "I know, amen." After all, the laity has their own narcissistic needs that could easily show themselves in disruptive ways during Mass. Some of the laity's narcissism already shows up in the way they often insist on controlling the mass and prayers at weddings and funerals. These services are increasingly custom-made by lay insistence.

It is important for priests to keep in mind that most Catholics go to Mass to encounter Jesus Christ, and not to come into contact with the particular psychology of the celebrant. They go for something that is *not* present in the popular culture — a sense of the sacred and a recognition of the need for humility. We do not want to come away from the Mass being affirmed in where we are, we want to be drawn toward where we long to be — closer to Christ and to Heaven.

Given the tendency toward "ego renewal", self-esteem and self-aggrandizement, priests and seminarians should be made aware of the danger of inserting one's personality into the liturgy. This tendency toward narcissism needs to be addressed especially in the context of the Mass celebrated *versus populum* — facing the people. Regardless of one's view with regard to the respective merits of the mass being celebrated *ad orientem* or *versus populum*, there can be little question that the temptation to grandstand is much greater when the celebrant is facing the congregation. Cardinal Arinze, the Prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Sacraments, recently commented on this issue, saying, "If the priest is not very disciplined, he will soon become a performer. He may not realize it, but he will be projecting himself rather than projecting Christ. Indeed, it is very demanding, the altar facing the people."

Since the narcissistic or vain needs of many priests lie behind their peculiar and idiosyncratic changes in the liturgy, it is time for these unprepossessing and non-theological factors to be more widely recognized in Catholic seminaries and in the Catholic community at large. We will let Cardinal Arinze have the last word on this issue when he says the liturgy "is not the property of one individual, therefore an individual does not tinker with it."