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Ireland, the Vatican and clerical narcissism

Phyllis Zagano | Aug. 3, 2011 Just Catholic

Not long after the Irish government's report on the Cloyne diocese smashed into the public eye, the Irish Prime Minister delivered an eloquent speech before the Irish Parliament in which he decried "the dysfunction, disconnection, elitism ? the narcissism that dominate the culture of the Vatican to this day."

The Vatican's response is delayed. It seems the pertinent Vatican officials are on vacation.

You can't make this up.

Yes, it is summer, and Rome is a company town. But the core of the suffering church in Ireland is not tripping off to the Amalfi coast or back "home" from Catholicism's command and control center.

The people of Ireland are stuck there, wondering how years of malfeasance percolated in John Magee's episcopal residence overlooking Cork Harbor in Cobh, from which the ancestors of so many of their American cousins sailed. Bishop Magee sat there for nearly 23 years. He retired to -- this is true -- Convent Hill in Mitchelstown, Co. Cork. The street is adjacent to the Mitchelstown Golf Club.

It is more than an outrage. We are talking about children here. We are talking about systemic cover-up of the most serious abuses at the highest level within the Irish hierarchy. We are talking about a 421-page document centering on a quarter-century of abuse and cover-up that is both a page-turner and a stomach-turner.

The bishop responsible has been living next to an upscale golf course? And the Vatican is on vacation?

Here's a news flash: the Irish economy is so bad that people are having trouble meeting their mortgage payments, let alone plan a holiday.

Here's another news flash: "the dysfunction, disconnection, elitism ? the narcissism" of the clerical caste is not restricted to the Vatican.

Scratch a man fully involved in clericalism and you'll likely find an undercoating of self-importance beneath a thin black veneer. Criticize him, or anything about the church, and you'll get a dose of his narcissistic rage. But don't mention narcissism -- he'll say you're not competent to use the term.

I am not a psychologist, and I know the American Psychiatric Association may drop the category "narcissistic personality disorder," but to me the Prime Minister's non-clinical use of "narcissism" is correct.

Psychologists say when you assault a narcissist's inflated ego, you'll be belittled, mocked, even laughed at. The narcissist will sneer: Who are you to criticize the "superior" individual? Who are you to criticize the "powerful" one? Who are you to criticize the church?

From country to country we've seen a constant devaluation of the accusers. For the most part, official reactions have been wholly self-referential. Like a true narcissist, the church reacts as the offended party, and questions

the truth of every statement. If you muddle through the weeds of some depositions you'll find a lot of "gaslighting" -- denials, presenting of false information -- all aimed at destroying the accusers' perceptions of reality. Both hypersensitive and incapable of empathy, the narcissist only argues his private truth.

Yes, it is enough to drive you crazy. Aren't professional ministers supposed to be "other directed"? What is "church" about? I keep thinking they're doing things in alphabetical order, and "golf" comes before "Gospel."

The fact is, the Vatican is looking more and more like the dysfunctional, disconnected, elitist and, yes, narcissistic operation the Prime Minister says it is. He has bluntly pointed out the very large elephant beneath the Catholic carpet: it is all about them.

And the church -- the people of God -- are reacting. Healthy people walk away from narcissists. Catholics are leaving the church in droves. It is not a pretty sight.

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