

I am very pleased to be here with you. I would like to address a very important topic in this session. I believe it is particularly relevant for a charismatic family. In this session, I would like to speak about the weaknesses and personal struggles that affect leadership in the Church.

What I am about to say draws on two perspectives. First, I am a psychologist specializing in social psychology, and second, I have been a leader of a charismatic community called Voice in the Wilderness in Krakow for the past 15 years.

I don't know if you also have the impression that in the Church today we often talk about planes that crash, while paying too little attention to those that take off and stay on course. That is why I am glad that Richard spoke to us about healthy leadership. There are many healthy places like that.

At the same time, I think everyone here will agree that the problem of abuse in church leadership exists, and that it is a serious problem. The Bible tells us about three kinds of things that come from the world: the lust of the eyes, the lust of the flesh, and **the pride of life** (vain glory). The lust of the eyes and the lust of the flesh are connected to betrayal, to adultery against God. But the pride of life is not connected to betrayal, but to replacing God. To taking His place. As the Church, we have persistent problems with sexual and financial abuse, but the abuse of power is something that has also existed for centuries; however, with the emergence of the charismatic movement and due to technological advances, there has been a very significant change in this area.

I would like to begin by helping us understand the context of this problem.

In traditional Church structures (Catholic, Orthodox, and later in the historical Protestant Churches), the selection of leaders was top-down: **institutional and hierarchical**. It was based on succession, formation, and approval by superiors. **The office provided authority**. The greatest value of this model was stability rooted in tradition, combined with mechanisms that protected the community from randomness, divisions, and short-lived influences.

What was its greatest strength (stability, control, continuity) also had its weaknesses:

The first was **lifeless formalism**. A leader might be properly appointed, have succession, education, and office, yet lack genuine spiritual vitality. This created tension between structure and the Spirit.

The second was **the abuse of power resulting from impunity**. The system was closed and self-perpetuating, so correction was very difficult. History knows many situations where office protected the leader more than the truth or the good of the community.

The third was **careerism and politics**. Since positions were stable and influential, there was a temptation to treat them as a path to promotion—not a calling. Extreme cases included simony or nepotism.

The fourth was **the slowness of reform**. Even when something was clearly ailing, the system reacted slowly. Often, only a crisis forced changes.

In summary, the main weakness of the institutional model was rigidity (stiffness, inflexibility) and a power structure that is difficult to hold accountable.

This raised a question that drove change: **should authority stem more from office, or from authenticity and recognition by the community?**

An attempt to give a new answer to this question emerged with the beginning of the Pentecostal movement. A model emerged—I will call it **the charismatic model**—in which leaders emerge from the grassroots, based on spiritual gifts, their effectiveness in evangelism, and recognition by the community. It is worth noting that despite the spontaneity of the Pentecostal movement, structures began to form very quickly that introduced certain forms of control and ordination.

It turned out, however, that in the charismatic community, **problems of abuse of power did not disappear but merely shifted**.

In other words: for centuries, the Church operated under a model in which serious abuses of power existed, and over the centuries we developed various remedies to prevent them.

But today there is also another model of leadership, a charismatic model that is still evolving. It has created new opportunities and possibilities, but it has also brought previously unknown tensions. We are only in the process of creating the proper mechanisms to protect the Church from the weaknesses and disturbances that affect leadership in this new model.

I would like you to notice the change that has taken place over the centuries: in the historical churches, the model for selecting leaders was based on institution and succession. It was a time when authority was granted by the office. **In the charismatic model, authority often precedes the office.**

In the early Pentecostal movement, the charism of leadership and the community's recognition became important in the selection of leaders. Later, in the charismatic movement, it was charism and, to some extent, institutional control. Today, we increasingly see that it is often charism combined with a personal brand or a network brand.

The strength of the charismatic model lies in the fact that authority does not stem primarily from the office, succession, or institutional approval, but from the **recognized qualities of the person**: their gift, character or integrity, credibility, spiritual power, ability to move people, discernment, courage, or the fruits of their actions.

In other words: the community says not so much, "He holds the office, so we follow," but rather, "We see in him something that leads us."

But the same thing that is the strength of this model also carries with it weaknesses and problems that affect the Church.

The first of these is **the leader-centred leadership**. The leader becomes crucial for the existence of the community. The community does not function without the leader and the identity of the community is strictly connected to the leader's personality. The community's authority is often based on the leader's personal charisma, communication skills, and influence (the number of believers/community members, the visible fruits of ministry). Today, public trust has shifted from institutions (as was the case in the institutional model) to the individual. Therefore, the need for a leader as a visionary has emerged in the Church. The leader increasingly rarely represents the institution but stands at its centre. This means that it is difficult to separate the community's message from the person, but also that criticism of the leader is sometimes perceived as an attack on the entire community.

The second is **the lack of real accountability mechanisms**. While councils or elders may exist, they are often dependent on the leader and lack real corrective power.

The third is **the dependence of the authority on the visible results**: the number of people, the emotional power of gatherings, and spectacular testimonies.

The fourth is **instability and a lack of continuity**. Because if the leader leaves (morally, due to health, or simply for organizational reasons), the community often experiences a crisis, as it lacks a deeply rooted structure, and everything is very strongly centred around a single person.

The fifth problem, which I will try to elaborate on in a moment, is **spiritual abuse**, which is covered by charismatic personality, charism or spectacular results.

Let me briefly summarize these two models:

- the institutional model struggles with the temptation: **“my office protects me”**,
- the charismatic model faces the temptation: **“my influence / my experience justifies me”**.

Let me add a brief digression here. Over the centuries, as a society, we have learned a certain distinction: top-down authority can be both good and bad—because it is associated with an institution, power, and the potential for its abuse. In contrast, bottom-up authority was associated almost exclusively with positive connotations—with an authentic testimony of life, recognition earned through relationships, and trust built over the years. It was something that “grew” out of truth, rather than being “bestowed.” The problem is that in today’s reality, especially in the age of social media, this mechanism has undergone a profound change. Today, bottom-up authority can largely be manufactured—through image, marketing, narrative, reach, and even in a purely technical way: by buying attention and recognition. And yet our social intuitions have not kept pace with this change. We still tend to treat “grassroots” authority as, by definition, more credible and safe. This means that leaders who possess it are often trusted more quickly and without sufficient reflection. **That is why we need greater mindfulness today—not to question everything, but to learn to distinguish: between authentic authority that grows out of character and responsibility, and that which is merely a well-crafted image.**

Okay, let’s return to these two models: in each of them, we are dealing with serious abuses of power. But there is something, I think, that is the root of the problems in each of these models: **the leader’s relationship to power and the leader’s relationship to their own “self”**. I believe these criteria should be important to us, and should guide our attention when we make decisions about choosing leaders.

While preparing for this lecture, I analysed the weaknesses and problems affecting leadership in the Church. There are many of them. Therefore, I undertook an attempt to classify them, which reveals an escalation of weaknesses and problems that, if not corrected, can eventually lead to a destructive impact on the entire church system.

I decided to classify these weaknesses and issues in the following progressive manner:

1. The leader’s internal issues
2. Leadership style
3. Community culture
4. Systemic behaviours
5. Organizational structure

6. Church system

Ad. 1. Let's first consider these internal, personal issues of the leader. These things can exist without having a destructive impact on the entire church system. **All leaders experience them.** I would include such things as:

- Emotional immaturity
- Unhealed wounds
- Need for recognition / control
- Misconceptions, including, for example, the belief that a spiritual gift is proof of a mature character
- Difficulty accepting constructive criticism
- Pride / sense of superiority
- Lack of a habit of learning
- Treating one's own beliefs as absolute

Ad. 2. When personal issues begin to affect other people, **internal problems start to manifest externally.** Among these are:

- An authoritarian decision-making style
- Lack of consultation
- Restricting feedback
- Favouring loyal individuals
- Avoiding responsibility
- Reacting defensively to questions
- Overusing spiritual language
- Micromanagement or failure to delegate

In other words, people begin to sense a problem, but it is relatively easy to correct if the church system is healthy.

Ad. 3. When the problem ceases to be an isolated issue and begins to be considered normal, we are dealing with the next level— **the culture of the community** — which includes such things as:

- A culture of silence
- Fear of asking questions
- Lack of honest feedback
- Dependence on the leader
- Decline in trust
- Superficial relationships
- Spiritual pressure ("you have to be more...")
- Lack of authenticity

Note that at this level, we are not saying that the leader has a problem. **Here, we see that people are beginning to adapt to the existing problem.** The possibility of correction still exists, but it becomes more difficult. This is the moment when **the problem can still be described as a cultural mistake, leadership immaturity, a lack of emotional competence, or spiritual blindness.** This does not necessarily mean intentional abuse yet. But it is already dangerous, because the culture begins to teach people to accept a distorted reality as something normal.

Ad. 4. When this kind of culture begins to solidify into specific practices, we can speak of **systemic behaviours**:

- Cover-ups (hiding problems)
- Recasting failures (reframing failures)
- Abuse of power
- Lack of real correction
- Silencing critical voices
- Decisions without transparency
- Spiritual manipulation
- Failure to protect the vulnerable

We find ourselves at a point where **the system begins to actively protect the problem**. At this level, we increasingly speak not of mistakes, but of **abuses**. Not because every individual has bad intentions, but because the system begins to produce harm and block the truth.

Ad. 5. If no intervention takes place, **the pathology may become institutionalized**. At that point, patterns such as the following may begin to emerge:

- Centralization of power
- Lack of accountability
- Closed decision-making circles
- One-person hub
- Lack of succession
- CEO model instead of community
- Lack of transparency (finances, decisions)

At this level, the problem is already embedded in the structure, and **the possibility of rectifying the situation becomes nearly impossible**. Even when individual people want to change something, organizational mechanisms hinder or prevent correction.

Ad. 6. When these problems permeate the church system, we are no longer talking about a local problem, but a systemic pattern. At this stage, the following may occur:

- The sacralization of leaders
- The replication of pathologies in new places
- Resistance to external correction
- Divisions and schisms
- Loss of trust in the Church
- Mass exodus of people
- The burnout of entire communities
- Financial and moral crises

The system then operates to sustain itself—even at the expense of truth and people.

The final aspect I want to discuss is behavioural patterns. Each of us has certain patterns upon which we base our decisions and which shape our actions. **Each of us possesses these patterns to some degree**. If these patterns are not correct, they are not merely problems but act as engines —they begin to drive the entire system in a specific direction.

In other words: each of us possesses patterns to some degree, but if they are too intense, they become disorders that escalate problems at every level of the before mentioned scale: from within the leader all the way to the system.

The most important incorrect patterns (**disorders**) include:

1. narcissistic (need for recognition, fragile identity)
2. paranoid (distrust, suspicion)
3. borderline (instability in relationships and emotions)
4. excessive dependence (difficulty making decisions without approval)
5. obsessive-compulsive (excessive control, perfectionism)
6. avoidant (fear of difficult conversations, judgment, using spirituality as an escape)
7. histrionic (need for attention, dramatization)

Given the times we live in, where it is estimated that 1 in 15 people in the U.S. struggles with **narcissistic personality disorder**, let me briefly elaborate on this particular disorder at the end. I believe that charismatic communities are particularly prone to confusing anointed individuals with those suffering from narcissistic personality disorder.

A person with narcissistic personality disorder, first of all, has **an inflated sense of self-worth**, often evident in the exaggeration of their achievements and abilities. Second, they are **deeply preoccupied or obsessed with fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, and love**. Third, they believe **they are exceptional and can only be understood by others who are exceptional**. Fourth, they demand **excessive admiration**. Fifth, they **expect favors**, feel highly entitled, and expect you to fulfill their demands. They do not tolerate dissent and do not accept criticism. They demand submission. Sixth, they **use other people interpersonally as tools to achieve their goals**, so they feed off the people they consume. Seventh, they **lack empathy**. They cannot understand, identify with, or empathize with the feelings of others. Here's the example:

Someone punches you and breaks your jaw, but keeps talking about how much his hand hurts. That's a narcissist.

Eighth, they **envy others** or believe that others envy them because they are so much better than others. Ninth, they are **arrogant and proud**.

To meet the diagnostic criteria, **you must have at least five of these nine traits**. In the case of personality disorders, we're talking about patterns that are consistent across various contexts. We must be careful when we see someone showing signs of narcissism not to immediately diagnose them.

But as leaders, **we do need discernment**.

As Chuck de Groat, an American therapist, author, lecturer, and pastor specializing in narcissism in church leadership, wrote: *As I learned—not just from the research but from the living experiences of women and men impacted by narcissism—I became convinced that narcissism was not only a growing reality but a misdiagnosed one, especially in churches. Indeed, within churches a narcissist might even be described as charismatic, gifted, confident, smart, strategic, agile, and compelling. He was selected to plant the church, to lead the ministry, to teach the class. (...) I saw also that it wasn't easy to confront systemic narcissism in churches that are seen as successful, special, blessed, Spirit led, and anointed. Whole church systems and programs evolve within the waters of narcissism, and when it's the water you swim in, it's hard to see and even harder to confront.*

At the core of narcissism there is often a fragile self that must be constantly protected. This is why correction, criticism, limits, or loss of admiration can provoke strong reactions: defensiveness, anger, contempt, withdrawal, or manipulation.

The gift may be real. The fruit may be visible. The influence may be significant. **But if the leader's character is not open to correction, if he or she cannot tolerate accountability, and if people are used mainly as instruments for the leader's vision, then the community becomes vulnerable.**

I would also add that I see a clear connection between **the dynamics of narcissism at the micro level and certain manifestations of the New Apostolic Reformation at the macro level.** This seems to be an important area that requires serious theological, psychological, and pastoral discernment.

Let me briefly summarize the whole thing. We have two models of leadership selection: institutional and charismatic. Each has its strengths and weaknesses. Mistakes in leadership are normal. If not corrected in time, they can affect the culture of the community, and subsequently the entire structure and system of the Church. What fuels their escalation are our patterns of thinking. If they are incorrect, they become disorders. In a particular way, the Church's problem today is narcissistic personality disorder. We need to carefully observe potential leaders and their **relationship to power** and **their relationship to their own "self."** The health of our Church depends largely on them.