BOOK REVIEW

Rector's book on clergy, sex is bestseller -- among priests

By Michael Paulson, Globe Staff, 6/3/2000

The Changing Face of the Priesthood
By Rev. Donald B. Cozzens
Liturgical Press, 168 pp., $14.95

Buy it on Amazon.com (Boston.com receives a small percentage of each sale.)

A slender volume of somber reflections on the priesthood by the rector of a Catholic seminary has become an unexpected hit among priests, raising eyebrows with its unsparing discussion of celibacy, homosexuality, and sexual abuse among the clergy.

In the book, "The Changing Face of the Priesthood," the Rev. Donald B. Cozzens suggests that the priesthood is, or is becoming, a gay profession.

He obliquely criticizes the church hierarchy for its refusal to allow discussion of the issue of celibacy. And he warns that "the scandal of clergy misconduct with minors has cast a long shadow on the credibility and authority of priests and bishops -- a shadow that will last well into" the 21st century.

"There is little doubt in the minds of priests that the church stands at a precarious point at the turn of the millennium," Cozzens writes. "The honesty and courage required of the church, especially of its . . . leaders, is considerable."

The thoughts expressed in the book are remarkable less because of their content than because of their author. Cozzens, who heads Saint Mary Seminary and Graduate School of Theology in Cleveland, is a respected priest who previously authored a well-received book on priestly spirituality.

"Priests are talking about it," said the Rev. Frank J. McNulty of Newark, who represented US priests in a 1986 meeting with the pope. "Some critics are saying, 'Why is he jumping on this stuff?' But I think it's good for priests to read a book that's honest."

Cozzens said he has received letters from about 100 priests since the book's release in February.

"It's not that he's making some great revelation that nobody knows about, but he's saying what some people don't want to have said," said Sandra M. Schneiders of the Jesuit School of Theology in Berkeley, Calif.

Schneiders called the book "the best thing that's been written on the current state of the Catholic priesthood in recent times." That sentiment was echoed by Dean Hoge, a sociologist and specialist on the priesthood at Catholic University of America, who said