

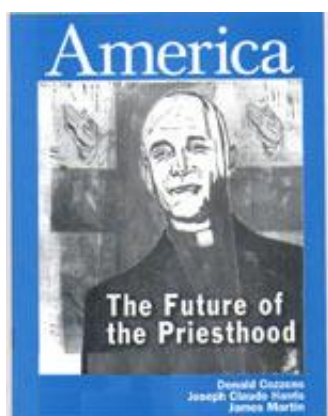
America

THE NATIONAL CATHOLIC REVIEW

DONATE
SUBSCRIBE

Facing the Crisis in the Priesthood

[November 4, 2000 Issue](#) | [Donald Cozzens](#)



A generation has elapsed since the close of the Second Vatican Council, and the church has underscored the council's extraordinary ecclesial and historical significance by beatifying, this Sept. 3, Pope John XXIII. At the same time, however, the beatification of Pope Pius IX highlighted the tide of profound ambivalence engulfing not only many of today's priests but large numbers of laity and religious. The ambivalence and resulting psychic tension so characteristic of the postconciliar church were captured, as if in a black-and-white photograph, by the beatification of these two remarkably different pontiffs—the ultramontane Pio Nono and the visionary prophet of renewal, John XXIII.

The ambivalence of the last decades of the 20th century and the first unsteady days of our new era have created their own crisis in the church, destabilizing the equilibrium of large numbers of priests and bishops. Priests in particular have wrestled with their new and emerging identities as servant-leaders, with the suspicion that their very integrity was at stake and with the dawning awareness that their celibate lifestyles were fraught with dangers they dare not admit, let alone confront. While the crisis is multifaceted, it is undeniably a crisis of nerve. It comes down to this: Do our bishops and priests, our lay and religious leaders, have the will and

courage to address this crisis candidly and confidently inspired, not by the fear and suspicion that characterized the greater part of Pius IX's papacy, but by the openness and trust that marked the papacy of John XXIII? The answer to the question will define the issues and shape the structures of the church in the 21st century.

This essay acknowledges those forces and factors that are both pushing and pulling at the soul of today's priests and bishops. Under a kind of psychic siege, the pressures they endure, often with quiet dignity, have shaken their confidence as pastors and bearers of the word. The focus here, however, is on the first fundamental steps necessary if we are to face with responsible action the crisis facing today's priesthood. I fear the present crisis from the declining number of candidates, the aging of priests, the sexual orientation issue, to the staggering and numbing discovery that a significant number of clergy have sexually abused adolescent boys will be honestly faced only with considerable moral courage. The present generation of priests and bishops will surely have their mettle tested. The testing will initially occur, I believe, in the following areas.

Courage to Speak

Perhaps it is the judgment of their peers that keeps large numbers of priests from speaking about their experiences and insights. They may do so in private with a priest friend or in small gatherings of priests they know well, but they are consistently reluctant to speak honestly about their lives and their concerns relating to pastoral issues and to the church itself in any but the most protected situations. During an address to the Association of Chicago Priests in 1968, Msgr. John Tracy Ellis observed: What I find particularly disappointing and even depressing...is that while numerous priests are quite articulate in private about the unhappiness they feel with their present lot, they will not take the steps to improve it when offered an opportunity through approved channels such as committees of their diocesan senates. The reluctance to speak out that so disturbed Monsignor Ellis in 1968 is evident in many if not most of the priests of 2000.



The risk inherent in speaking from one's experience and reflection in all but the most safe and trustworthy environments might well lie in the threat it poses to the surface tranquility maintained by guarded, cautious speech, the kind of speech that is common to gatherings of priests. Unpopular opinions, smoldering resentments and repressed anxieties numbed by the escapes of modern life may rise to disturb, even fracture, the fragile equanimity and light-hearted banter that mark typical gatherings of clergy. Over time, this apparently minor lack of courage easily erodes the self-respect and the very moral ground upon which the priest stands. Returning to their rectories after participating with something less than candor at various gatherings with their brother priests, they often find themselves mysteriously diminished. For priests, it is now clear, are emotionally sustained by their experience of belonging to the corporate body of their brothers, whether they particularly like their brother priests or not. Anything that may push them to the margins of their fraternal community, such as the criticism or suspicion of their peers, leaves them both unsettled and alienated.

Aware of this dark side to their clerical culture, they need to risk speaking honestly and bravely about the crisis facing the priesthood. A greater risk would be to keep a discreet silence and thereby undermine their own integrity.

Courage to Listen

Speaking from one's center with candor and courage assumes that the speaker has learned the art of respectful listening, the kind of listening that is genuinely open to the wisdom of the community and its leaders. This kind of listening leads to discernment, which in turn leads to a different quality of speech. The courage necessary for this type of listening is equal to the courage priests must draw upon when speaking honestly of their own pastoral and personal experiences, of their own joys and sorrows.

Priests and bishops, however, by their training and pastoral experience, have learned to listen for the question or problem an individual brings to them in order to respond clearly and

pastorally in the case of a question and with wisdom and prudence in the case of a pastoral problem. This kind of listening clearly has its place, since priests and especially bishops are *the* teachers in the church. But it is a hierarchical form of listening that proves inappropriate and even harmful if exercised when discernment is the issue rather than a pastoral question or problem.

Please support our journalism. Subscribe now!

If dialogue is to be achieved and it is desperately needed in this period of crisis, priests and bishops need to listen as members of a community of faith. This is a different kind of listening than many church leaders are accustomed to. It requires a certain attitude of heart, a readiness to suspend one's ecclesial role in the community, to bracket one's convictions and assumptions, and to listen so that one may be both informed and transformed. In other words, it requires that one surrender to the possibility of conversion to a deeper understanding, to a new vision of what might be.

Where postconciliar ambivalence has given way to a new sense of mystery and potential, to a new spirit of evangelization and mission, church leaders, as members of the faithful, have learned to listen from their hearts to their brothers and sisters in faith. Such communal listening, of course, requires considerable courage and humility. Numerous priests and bishops have already mastered this form of listening. The question remains whether they constitute the critical mass necessary to sustain the dialogue and address the present crisis.

Courage to Affirm

One of the priest's first services to the world, said Cardinal Emmanuel Suhard, is to tell the truth. When priests and bishops, laity and religious speak honestly and listen humbly, a truth will surface that, at first blush, seems to do anything but set one free. It will be the kind of truth that spontaneously evokes denial and rebuttal. For it often suggests a new horizon, a new understanding of church and ministry, that lies outside the borders of one's imagination. The new horizon may well challenge the ecclesial and clerical structures that provide considerable comfort to priests and prelates, especially when these men are faced with the kind of crisis currently challenging the priesthood. And the new horizon, of course, suggests change enough to give credence to the Latin proverb, *Veritas odium parit*, Truth begets hatred.

If priests and bishops are to speak to the realities that make up their world with confidence and courage, if they are to listen with an attitude of respect and even reverence, they will encounter considerable odium. This added burden at a time of increased pastoral demands can shake the resolve of the strongest of men. Faced with criticism from without and within their church,

these priests need and deserve affirmation and encouragement. While they are not the only participants in the dialogue, priests are essential participants, with a great deal personally at stake.

The vast majority of today's priests are middle-aged and older. They have weathered, with varying degrees of success, the ambivalence and tensions of the decades following the council. Their perseverance and commitment in many instances has been heroic. In an essay remarkable for its understanding and compassion, Eugene Kennedy sees these faithful priests as brothers of the Prodigal Son, deserving in their own right of feast and celebration (Saving Fr. Ryan: Understanding the Good Priest, *National Catholic Reporter*, 3/31). Kennedy is one of the relatively few to acknowledge the difficult and brave adjustments these priests have had to make in the last decades of the 20th century simply to preserve their psychic and spiritual well-being. They will need continued affirmation from their brother priests, from their bishops and from their parishioners if they are to speak honestly and listen humbly.

The present crisis gripping the priesthood is complex and serious. It will lead to a renewed and strengthened ministerial priesthood to the extent that the veils of denial and minimization are rent. That will come to pass only if Spirit-filled dialogue is encouraged and joined on diocesan and national levels of the church.

There is reason, I propose, for only guarded optimism. Cardinal Joseph Bernardin's rebuff by a number of U.S. cardinals following his Common Ground initiative revealed the fear and suspicion that still shape and govern the perceptions and judgments of many contemporary church leaders when faced with opportunities for dialogue. What is critically needed in these perilous times is the wisdom and courage of church leaders like Bernardin and John XXIII. Both men perhaps embodied what Eskimo storytellers refer to as an *isumataq*, a person who can create an atmosphere by his or her own spirit of truth and reverence that allows wisdom to show herself. The *isumataqs*, it is said, not only create a climate that fosters truth, they point to the wisdom that is to be found in the people themselves.

It is time for new *isumataqs* to step forward. And it is time for the rest of us to speak simply from our hearts and to listen for the wisdom promised to the people of God.

The Rev. Donald Cozzens is president-rector of Saint Mary Seminary and Graduate School of Theology in Cleveland, Ohio. He is the author of *The Changing Face of the Priesthood: A Reflection on the Priest's Crisis of Soul*

[log in](#)

or

[register](#)

to post comments

COMMENTS

William Barlak | 1/22/2007 - 11:02am

Thank you for the reasoned and well-balanced issue on the crisis in the priesthood (11/4).

I was called to a vocation as a husband 15 years ago, and to a vocation as a father five years later. Since becoming active in my local parish, I have perceived a vocation to the priesthood (not to the permanent diaconate). In my case, these callings are not mutually exclusive. I am certain I have been called to the vocations of marriage, fatherhood and priesthood.

Could it be possible that the worsening crisis in the priesthood you so plainly present is a quiet whisper from the Holy Spirit to the church to accept optional celibacy? Perhaps we should listen to the Spirit with the same openness, courage and humility that Father Donald Cozzens prescribes.

[log in](#) or [register](#) to post comments

Bruce Snowden | 1/22/2007 - 12:50pm

The Rev. Donald Cozzens's excellent article (11/4) points out that "forces and factors" are both "pushing and pulling" at today's priests. True. But it seems to me that the various stresses confronting today's priests may correctly be condensed into one single urgency—Christ's call to fidelity, universal to the whole church and, from the beginning, part of the Christian vocation, indeed the very marrow transfusing the words of Christ, "When the Son of Man comes again, will he find faith on the earth?"

[log in](#) or [register](#) to post comments

Benedict J. Groeschel, C.F.R. | 1/22/2007 - 12:18pm

The Rev. Donald Cozzens's article (11/4) contains the same lopsided and misleading impression given by his book *The Changing Face of the Priesthood*. Many priests and seminarians are appalled by his analysis of the present crisis and his complete failure to give any moral evaluation of sexual misconduct except pedophilia. His use of passé psychological theories is embarrassing, but I am most dismayed by his demonizing of the opposition. Those of us who disagree with his so-called liberal stance are characterized as fearful, suspicious and unwilling to dialogue. The truth is that many younger priests and seminarians have been coerced into silent acquiescence of an agenda deceptively called liberal. Yes, indeed, we do need dialogue, but it is not going to start by identifying your opposition with ultramontane 19th-century causes and making oneself a representative of Pope John XXIII. There are literally thousands of young priests and seminarians who survive seminaries and religious communities where they are coerced into accepting behavior with which they profoundly disagree. Many others have given up studying for the priesthood because of this disedifying spectacle. In many seminaries in the past 20 years, students put up with the ignoring of the Catholic tradition and the disparagement of Pope John Paul II.

The problems outlined by James Martin, S.J., who correctly points out the ambiguity of the word "gay," would not be so widespread if some clergy had been guided by a simple scriptural teaching; "Blessed are they who walk according to the Law of the Lord." I have been working full time with priests as a spiritual director and psychologist for 30 years, and it is my profound conviction that this crisis has been caused by substituting secular values and shaky psychological theories for the teaching of the Gospel and the traditions of the Catholic Church.

[log in](#) or [register](#) to post comments

William Barlak | 1/22/2007 - 11:02am

Thank you for the reasoned and well-balanced issue on the crisis in the priesthood (11/4).

I was called to a vocation as a husband 15 years ago, and to a vocation as a father five years later. Since becoming active in my local parish, I have perceived a vocation to the priesthood (not to the permanent diaconate). In my case, these callings are not mutually exclusive. I am certain I have been called to the vocations of marriage, fatherhood and priesthood.

Could it be possible that the worsening crisis in the priesthood you so plainly present is a quiet whisper from the Holy Spirit to the church to accept optional celibacy? Perhaps we should listen to the Spirit with the same openness, courage and humility that Father Donald Cozzens prescribes.

[log in](#) or [register](#) to post comments

Bruce Snowden | 1/22/2007 - 12:50pm

The Rev. Donald Cozzens's excellent article (11/4) points out that "forces and factors" are both "pushing and pulling" at today's priests. True. But it seems to me that the various stresses confronting today's priests may correctly be condensed into one single urgency—Christ's call to fidelity, universal to the whole church and, from the beginning, part of the Christian vocation, indeed the very marrow transfusing the words of Christ, "When the Son of Man comes again, will he find faith on the earth?"

[log in](#) or [register](#) to post comments

Benedict J. Groeschel, C.F.R. | 1/22/2007 - 12:18pm

The Rev. Donald Cozzens's article (11/4) contains the same lopsided and misleading impression given by his book *The Changing Face of the Priesthood*. Many priests and seminarians are appalled by his analysis of the present crisis and his complete failure to give any moral evaluation of sexual misconduct except pedophilia. His use of passé psychological theories is embarrassing, but I am most dismayed by his demonizing of the opposition. Those of us who disagree with his so-called liberal stance are characterized as fearful, suspicious and unwilling to dialogue. The truth is that many younger priests and seminarians have been coerced into silent acquiescence of an agenda deceptively called liberal. Yes, indeed, we do need dialogue, but it is not going to start by identifying your opposition with ultramontane 19th-century causes and making oneself a representative of Pope John XXIII. There are literally thousands of young priests and seminarians who survive seminaries and religious communities where they are coerced into accepting behavior with which they profoundly disagree. Many others have given up studying for the priesthood because of this disedifying spectacle. In many seminaries in the past 20 years, students put up with the ignoring of the Catholic tradition and the disparagement of Pope John Paul II.

The problems outlined by James Martin, S.J., who correctly points out the ambiguity of the word "gay," would not be so widespread if some clergy had been guided by a simple scriptural teaching; "Blessed are they who walk according to the Law of the Lord." I have been working full time with priests as a spiritual director and psychologist for 30 years, and it is my profound conviction that this crisis has been caused by substituting secular values and shaky psychological theories for the teaching of the Gospel and the traditions of the Catholic Church.

[log in](#) or [register](#) to post comments

RECENTLY BY DONALD COZZENS

[A Happy Lot](#) (September 24, 2012)



Copyright © 2016 America Press Inc.
All Rights Reserved.

[Donate](#) [Subscribe](#) [About](#)

[MAGAZINE](#) [NEWS](#) [FAITH](#) [OPINION](#) [CULTURE](#) [BLOGS](#) [MEDIA](#)
[RESOURCES](#)

[LOGIN](#) / [REGISTER](#)
