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Father Donald Cozzens: How to Build Better Church

By Mary Jo Dangel

This author and lecturer urges faithful Catholics to speak up in an effort to help heal the Church they love.

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While some people try to ignore the fractured foundation of our Church, Father Donald Cozzens calls attention to the cracks in hopes of inspiring enough people to work together to repair the damage. "I believe the Church is always in need of ongoing renewal and reform," says the Cleveland priest about the structure of the Church.

In his lectures, TV appearances and award-winning books, Father Cozzens confronts controversial topics that many members of the clergy and laity think about but won't address publicly. He believes secrecy and silence caused many of the problems the Church is experiencing today.

Father Cozzens, who describes himself as "a moderate in many ways," has been both praised and criticized for addressing such subjects as homosexuality in the priesthood, the roots of the clergy sex-abuse crisis and the rights of lay Catholics.

When he encourages laypeople to ask questions and challenge Church leaders, his views are rooted in the teachings of the Second Vatican Council. For example, the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* says that "the laity are entitled, and indeed sometimes duty-bound, to express their opinion on matters which concern the good of the Church" (#37).

▲ [Early Vocation](#)

Last July, *St. Anthony Messenger* caught up with the blunt but soft-spoken priest in Indianapolis, where he was a panelist at Voice of the Faithful's national convocation. He answered additional questions in a telephone interview a few months later.

Born in Cleveland, Ohio, Donald Cozzens is the oldest of four children. "I went to Catholic schools all my life," he says. He knew "from the first day of the first grade" that he wanted to be a parish priest.

Shortly after graduating from high school in 1957, he entered Cleveland's St. Mary Seminary and was ordained in 1965. Referring to his childhood dream, he notes, "I've been a full-time parish priest only six years." Other assignments included serving as a teacher, pastoral psychologist and vicar for clergy and religious.

Currently, he is writer in residence at Cleveland's John Carroll University, where he teaches in the religious studies department. In addition, he travels quite a bit to give talks and retreats. Thus, he isn't assigned to a particular parish but helps at various locations when he's in town.

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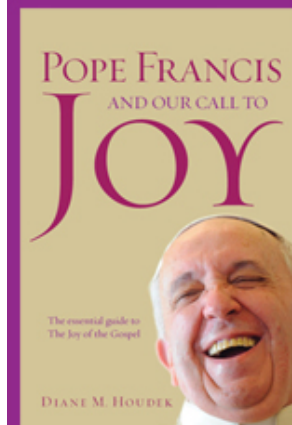
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Although many of his engagements are in the United States and Canada, he is scheduled to give a retreat in May to priests in Meath, Ireland. Although he receives invitations from bishops, groups of priests and organizations, "There are some bishops who do not want me speaking to their priests," he explains. "But there are others who welcome me."

In his free time, Father Cozzens enjoys playing racquetball, reading about history and theology, "leisurely meals with great conversation" and "long walks in the woods."

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▲ **Evolution of Book Series**

Father Cozzens explains the evolution of a series of books he has written, published by Liturgical Press (www.litpress.org). "There is a progression of thought," he says about the topics: priesthood, institutional Church and laity. His next book, tentatively titled *Freeing Celibacy*, will be published later this year.

He was the editor of and a contributor to *The Spirituality of the Diocesan Priest* (1997) while he was president-rector of St. Mary Seminary in Cleveland.

His experience with the book inspired him to write *The Changing Face of the Priesthood: A Reflection on the Priest's Crisis of Soul* (2000). "I was halfway through writing that book when I realized that if I wanted to write an honest book about the priesthood, I had to include two other issues," he explains. Thus, he added a chapter about homosexual orientation in the priesthood and another chapter about the sexual abuse of minors by clergy. Although he incorporated many other issues, research and Church documents, those chapters received the most attention.

"As soon as I made the decision to incorporate those two very neuralgic issues, I knew there would be a price involved," he recalls. "I felt good about the decision, although not naïve at all: I was not surprised with the response."

Although the book was most controversial in the Cleveland area, he says, "I was writing from a far more comprehensive perspective. As vicar for clergy and religious, I had met vicars, chancellors and seminary faculty from coast to coast."

The Changing Face of the Priesthood won a first-place award (professional books category) from the Catholic Press Association, which said, "While the author brings a wealth of clinical data and documented research to his analysis, the pages are animated by an obvious commitment to and love for the ordained ministry....The future of the priesthood, and in some ways the future of the Church's sacramental life, depend on our collective willingness to embrace the truth of studies such as this one and then make the difficult decisions necessary to assure a holy and healthy presbyterate for generations to come."

▲ **Speaking From Experience**

Although few people denied the issues Father Cozzens tackled in *The Changing Face of the Priesthood*, he says that "many people felt they shouldn't be raised, at least in the public forum."

The book was published in 2000, two years before the clergy sex-abuse scandal exploded in Boston. Thus, the “current crisis” Father Cozzens refers to in the chapter titled “Betraying Our Young” is the clergy sex-abuse scandal that erupted in the 1980s.

In this chapter, he recalls “the pall of stunned silence” and “look of shocked disbelief” on the few occasions when he had the task of addressing parishioners at the end of Sunday Eucharist to inform them that one of their priests had been reported for misconduct. “I felt an even keener pain on those occasions when I visited the home of a young man or woman who had fallen victim to the sexual advances of a priest.”

He criticizes diocesan attorneys who “feared that apologies, especially public apologies..., would open the gates of litigation, thereby threatening a diocese’s solvency and financial reserves.”

He makes a recommendation in this chapter: “I’m convinced that responding to the crisis as Church, with pastoral concern for the victims and with keen alertness to the possibility of false or unsubstantiated allegations, is the most responsible and effective way to exercise stewardship over the Church’s resources.”

In the chapter titled “Considering Orientation,” he writes, “Straight and gay seminarians, I believe, have different formational needs as they progress through their seminary years of preparation.”

Father Cozzens clarifies a misconception about the effect this book had on his future. “Some people suspect that my bishop fired me as rector of the seminary and that is not the case,” he says. “I requested permission to take a sabbatical and also to return to college teaching.” This gave him more time to write books and give retreats and talks.

▲ **Loss of Credibility**

He wrote the final chapter of his next book, *Sacred Silence: Denial and the Crisis in the Church*, in the spring of 2002, “with the scandal triggered by the arrest and conviction of Boston priest John Geoghan still mounting.”

Like his previous book, *Sacred Silence* also won a first-place award (pastoral ministry category) from the Catholic Press Association, which said, “Donald Cozzens thoughtfully and courageously explores the underpinnings of the current and continuing crisis of the abuse of power riddling the Catholic Church....His book paves a path to authentic honest dialogue, which is the only way that will lead to personal, social and ecclesial transformation.”

In this book, Father Cozzens observes that “long-simmering tensions are now at the boiling point—and close to overflowing.” He notes that an increasing number of laypeople were demanding accountability from Church leaders, who were suffering a loss of credibility. The friction in Boston led to the birth of Voice of the Faithful.

“We still haven’t learned as a Church that secrecy and denial only tend to exacerbate the harmful effects of inappropriate and scandalous behaviors,” writes Father Cozzens.

He urges communication instead of secrecy and cooperation instead of competition between Church leaders and members of the faithful. Catholics “are ready to assume their rightful responsibility, in partnership with their ordained brothers, to serve the Church they love,” he writes in *Sacred Silence*. “As if in exile, the faithful yearn for words of honesty, hope and direction.”

▲ **Crumbling Feudal System**

In *Faith That Dares to Speak* (2004), Father Cozzens further expands on the rights of laypeople to demand accountability. Lest anyone think he’s trying to throw out the baby with the bathwater, he writes, “I have a healthy, historically grounded respect for the way things are, as well as a vision of the way things might be, *ought* to be, a vision rooted in the gospel and the Second Vatican Council.”

Anyone who gasped reading his previous books is likely to object very strenuously to this one, in which Father Cozzens writes that “we are witnessing in the institutional Church the *unraveling of the last feudal system in the West*” (emphasis his). He challenges educated laypeople to stop acting like obedient serfs and start “speaking the truth in love,” a favorite phrase he borrowed from

Father Cozzens points to Galileo and others who have challenged the Church and writes, "The faithful have both the right and obligation to question structures, practices and disciplines that no longer serve the pastoral needs of the Church nor its mission."

He gains support for his position by quoting the National Review Board report (February 2004), which says, "The exercise of authority without accountability is not servant leadership; it is tyranny." This board was established by the U.S. bishops in 2002 to respond to the clergy sex-abuse crisis.

"The existence of the National Review Board is in itself significant," he explains. "Never before had bishops commissioned lay men and women to study a problem involving bishops and priests and to make a public report of their findings."

Father Cozzens stressed the importance of listening in *Faith That Dares to Speak* and when he was among the prominent Catholics on NBC's *Meet the Press* on Easter Sunday 2002. "I think we're witnessing the unraveling of clerical culture," he explained on the program. "Ultimately, I think it's going to make the priesthood stronger and the Church stronger. But we need to listen to the pastoral experience of priests. We need to listen to the laity in a different way."

In order to respect the experience of priests and laity, he added, "We priests and bishops need to learn how to listen, not only to answer questions and to solve problems, but to be informed and transformed."

Father Cozzens told Tim Russert, moderator of *Meet the Press*, that the sex abuse of minors by clergy was "the tip of the iceberg. I think the problem is a crisis in credibility for our bishops and our leadership. It's a crisis of trust and confidence that Catholics place in their priests."

▲ **Shared Ministry**

As a panelist who spoke about "A Shared Priesthood" at the Voice of the Faithful Convocation last July, Father Cozzens told the assembly, "I think it is sad that the ministry you have offered to our episcopal leadership, to a great extent, has been refused."

Recalling the spirit of Vatican II, he added, "You are ministers to each other. You are ministers to the ordained ministers of the Church. You are ministers to those who have been betrayed and harmed not only by clergy who have abused young people but also by the Church leaders who have failed miserably on the whole to respond in adequate ways to this scandal."

Although participants at this convocation were sympathetic toward survivors of clergy sex abuse, many others say it's time for victims to "get over it; it's time to heal." Father Cozzens told *St. Anthony Messenger* that the Church is missing an important step if it has a healing service before "some kind of sacramental lament and grieving." A wound can't heal if it is still infected, and "grieving is a good way to cauterize or disinfect the wound."

Regarding the Vatican-sponsored visits to U.S. seminaries that began in 2005, Father Cozzens says these visits may be well-intentioned, but "I think they have been prompted by the sexual-abuse scandal." Instead of focusing on gay seminarians and priests, the former seminary rector says the issues should be whether a man applying to the seminary shows signs of a valid vocation and emotional maturity. "Is he capable of leadership, preaching, and intelligent and effective ministry? Is he able to connect with people?" He calls that characteristic "a foundation block for good ministry."

Last April, *Commonweal* published an article he wrote that was also related to the seminary visits. "If we want to improve seminary education, the Church will have to reconsider both the discipline of mandated celibacy for diocesan priests in the Latin rite and a moral teaching that continues to regard all sexual sins as equally serious," wrote Father Cozzens.

"Seminary rectors and teachers know that mandatory celibacy has dramatically shrunk the pool of candidates for the priesthood," he continued. "Concern is widespread that the best and the brightest, the healthiest and the most authentic candidates, are no longer considering the priesthood....Unless the Vatican is willing to reconsider the discipline of mandatory celibacy, it will miss the heart of the matter. Instead of improving seminaries by tackling the real theological and structural flaws, they will only temporarily shore up a flawed system."

He addressed "attempts to rid the priesthood of homosexuals by blocking seminary admission to gay candidates" in an essay published by the *New York Daily News* last October. Not only would this be "difficult to enforce," but there's also a "dimension of hypocrisy," he wrote, since "in many cases the seminary official, religious superior or diocesan bishop who informs a gay candidate for seminary admission that he is not acceptable will be gay himself."

What motivates this soft-spoken priest to be so outspoken? "I'm not writing to be controversial," he says. "If I don't speak the truth as I experience it, I'll be chipping away at my own integrity."

And what is the truth about his experience serving as a priest for 40 years? "I am so amazed and humbled at the privilege of preaching, celebrating the sacraments and working with people," he says, then adds, "I think these are challenging times for the Church but also times of great promise."

▲ **Working Together**

Nearly 600 Catholics from 33 states gathered in Indianapolis last July to discern ways to enhance cooperation and communication in the Church they love at the Voice of the Faithful Convocation.

Most were old enough to remember Latin Mass and the days of "pray, pay and obey." Priests, nuns, survivors of clergy sex abuse, parishioners upset over parish closings and other faithful Catholics prayed fervently and frequently at this three-day gathering. And many emptied their pockets on such items as transportation, hotels, meals and other costs. But blind obedience was not part of their agenda.

The recent election of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger as pope and the resignation of Father Thomas Reese, S.J., as editor of *America* didn't stifle Father Donald Cozzens, Justice Anne Burke and other speakers (www.votf.org/July2005/speeches.html).

Justice Burke, who had been named by the U.S. bishops as a member and, later, interim chairwoman of the National Review Board, received VOTF's first Catherine of Siena Distinguished Lay Person Award. (Her remarks will be in our April issue). In addition, VOTF presented the 2005 Priest of Integrity Award to Msgr. Lawrence Breslin, an elderly priest from the Archdiocese of Cincinnati. He courageously identified a high-ranking priest in the Vatican diplomatic corps as a sexual abuser of a young woman.

▲ **Emphasis on Healing**

VOTF was founded in response to the clergy sex-abuse scandal that exploded in Boston in 2002. Three years later, the organization emphasizes accountability as well as survivor support. For example, one presentation explained that The Linkup has evolved into Healing Alliance (www.healingall.org), which emphasizes recovery resources.

Another presentation focused on restorative justice (www.rjcouncil.org), which can be complementary to litigation or an alternative. Healing and accountability take priority over monetary concerns. Breakout sessions focused on advocacy and cooperation between Church leaders and laypeople. The dedicated Catholics who made this convocation a priority in their lives pledged their renewed commitment to a healthier Church.

Mary Jo Dangel is the assistant managing editor of this publication.

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