

Injury silences Greeley's voice

by [Judy Valente](#) in the [November 15, 2011](#) issue

Andrew Greeley is one of the best-known priests in America: a respected and influential sociologist, a best-selling novelist and an outspoken commentator on public and church issues for some 50 years.

"When the history of the American Catholic Church is written in America, I don't know if you're going to find a more significant name or one with more impact on the church than Andrew Greeley," said John Cusick, a friend and colleague who has known Greeley for 40 years.

Greeley was one of the first priests to publicly criticize the Catholic Church's position on birth control. He also called for better preaching from the pulpit, a greater outreach to young people and a more active role for laypeople.

"He would write and write and write, and it was a part of his life," Eileen Durkin, his niece, told *Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly*. "It couldn't be separated from him. It wasn't a chore for him. It just flowed out of him."

Although the passion remains, Greeley's public life has come to an end. In November 2008, Greeley stepped out of a taxi in a Chicago suburb after a speaking engagement. His coat caught in the door, and as the taxi pulled away he was thrown to the pavement and suffered a traumatic brain injury.

"He's suffering," Durkin said. "Anyone who has had traumatic brain injury to the extent my uncle has, anyone who is a vibrant, intelligent, brilliant person reduced to 24-hour care, is suffering."

Durkin said seeing her uncle's suffering has not affected her faith, "because I know of his faith. . . . because he shared so much of it and wrote so much about it."

Greeley's steamy, best-selling novels won him both fans and critics. He wasn't afraid to depict the sexual side of priests in his fiction and often included provocative sex scenes.

"He would say all the other things he did as a sociologist, as a novelist, as a commentator were just his way of being a priest," Durkin said.

"He would always stir things up, and people would be yelling and screaming and saying, 'How can he say that? How can he write that?'" Cusick said. "And ten years later people are saying it and they're writing it."

"The whole sexual abuse crisis in the church—he was writing about that and identifying it long before it came out in most of the press in America," said Durkin. As early as 1993, on the *Phil Donahue Show*, Greeley said he didn't believe that the Vatican cared about the sexual abuse crisis.

In 2002, Greeley said one of the church's biggest problems is the status of women. "The church just has not been able to cope with the demands for fairness and equality from women, so they're very, very angry," he said. "For a long time the bishops could console themselves, and I think some still do, that these are just radical feminists. But the radical feminists include their sisters and their nieces and their mothers and all the women in their lives."

Added Cusick: "He could drive the Vatican crazy, and I'm sure the Vatican could drive him crazy. When push came to shove, he said I'm not leaving and you can't throw me out, and that was typical Greeley in his prime."

At a mass celebrating the 50th anniversary of his ordination to the priesthood Greeley said he had wanted to be a priest ever since the second grade. After the accident, his family and friends wondered if he would ever again be able to say the mass.

Last year, with his family around him, Greeley helped celebrate Easter mass at Durkin's home with his friend John Cusick presiding. "The priest is still there," said Durkin. "All those years of being a priest, all those years of blessing—they're still there. . . . We know that he is blessed, and he's blessing us, and it means a lot." —*Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly*