

The Changing Face of the Priesthood, by Donald B. Cozzens

reviewed by [Leo D. Lefebure](#) in the [October 25, 2000](#) issue

In his apostolic letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* (1994), Pope John Paul II called upon Roman Catholics to prepare for the new millennium through an examination of conscience, an honest review of how Catholic Christians have betrayed the gospel and have caused harm even when acting in the name of Jesus Christ. While John Paul has publicly expressed regret and prayed for forgiveness for Catholics' past failings in certain areas, he and the staff of the Roman Curia have ruled other topics, notably many issues relating to the ministerial priesthood, out of bounds. Within official circles of the Catholic Church, ecclesial loyalty is often thought to mean a respectful silence regarding married, gay or sexually active priests, and the ordination of women. Others, such as Garry Wills in his best-selling book *Papal Sin: Structures of Deceit*, believe that loyalty demands honesty in examining not only past but also present institutional and personal failings.

Like Wills, Donald B. Cozzens, a priest of the diocese of Cleveland, writes from a deep love of and commitment to the Catholic Church, calling attention to the present crisis in its priesthood in the hope of passing through a purifying dark night to a greater flourishing in the future. During this passage silence itself can become the greatest obstacle to growth. Cozzens knows the challenges, the achievements and the troubles of Roman Catholic seminarians and priests firsthand, both through his earlier work as vicar for priests and his current position as president-rector and professor of pastoral theology at St. Mary Seminary and Graduate School of Theology in Cleveland. Cozzens has known men who have left the ministry, he has talked with clergy sex offenders and their victims, and he has dealt with bishops and ecclesial structures as a trusted insider.

Earlier portrayals of priests, such as Bing Crosby's Father O'Malley in *Going My Way* (1944), expressed a cultural fascination that went well beyond the boundaries of the Catholic Church; today the broader culture's interest frequently focuses on priests or bishops accused of sexual misconduct with minors. Fifty years after Crosby's successful film, clerical abuse of sexuality and power was examined in the film *The Priest*. Estimates of the amount of payment to victims of clergy sexual abuse by the

Catholic Church in recent years begin at around \$500 billion, not including the cost of treatment of the clergy sex offenders themselves.

Cozzens finds that at the core of the crisis of the priesthood is the challenge of maintaining one's integrity, especially in being honest to one's own vision and experience and in establishing responsible close relations with friends of both genders. For a Catholic priest, to say the truth may mean offending officials and losing clerical advancement; to form intimate but chaste relationships with women may cause suspicion. However, refusing the challenge of honesty or intimacy thwarts healthy human development and leads to greater problems. Such failures, multiplied over and over, have weakened the Catholic priesthood immeasurably.

Using Freudian terminology, Cozzens describes an insidious Oedipal triangle of father-bishop, mother-church and son-priest. Mother-church rewards the priest for conforming to a comfortable but potentially smothering situation, while father-bishop threatens him with exclusion from preferment for assertions of independence. The priest is tempted to remain what Carl Jung called a *puer aeternus*, an immature adolescent who can be fascinating and charming, but who needs constant affirmation and attention and shuns the mundane responsibilities of the adult world. Clerical rivalries fester. Celibacy compounds the problem by depriving priests of a relationship that could transform their ties to their own mothers and to the church. One need not accept the Freudian and Jungian assumptions behind this model to see that the challenge of establishing a healthy priestly identity free from rivalry and jealousy, on the one hand, and from dependence and inertia, on the other, is real enough.

Wills makes the provocative claim that by maintaining clerical celibacy, John Paul II will leave the Catholic Church the legacy of a gay clergy. While Cozzens's rhetoric is not as pointed, he also talks about the growing numbers of gay priests and seminarians. While acknowledging the strengths that gay men bring to priestly service, he worries that heterosexual seminarians may feel chronically destabilized, out of place in a community in which gays are a major presence, and may decide to leave. If current trends continue, the Catholic priesthood may become a more and more predominantly gay profession. Church leaders, while aware of this issue, rarely discuss it publicly.

Cozzens hopes that naming this situation's dynamics disarms its danger and opens priests to grace. If anything, he may understate the positive side of the Catholic priesthood. Surveys by Andrew Greeley and CARA reveal a high level of satisfaction

and commitment in a large majority of priests. One recent study of Chicago diocesan priests found that more than 90 percent would choose the priesthood again. An earlier study by Greeley found priests reporting a higher level of happiness than married men of comparable education. Cozzens's courageous and timely work is itself a sign of hope. He calls for priests to have the courage to think and to love, but to be aware that this may be dangerous in the present situation.