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Painful, purifying dark night

By TOM ROBERTS

It may be doing an injustice to skip right to Chapter Seven of this remarkably candid assessment, *The Changing Face of the Priesthood: A Reflection on the Priest's Crisis of Soul*, because in the end it may not be the most important or significant topic treated. But it will be the most talked about.

"Considering Orientation" is the chapter of *The Changing Face of the Priesthood* (Liturgical Press, $14.95) that deals with the increasingly disproportionate number of homosexuals in the Roman Catholic priesthood and the one that leads the author, Fr. Donald B. Cozzens, to ask if the priesthood is on its way to becoming a "gay profession."

It is a devilishly difficult question to ask, first because almost no one in the hierarchical ranks wants anything to do with it, and because one can only approach it through a minefield planted wide with homophobes, right-wing zealots who see homosexual clergy as a particularly noxious manifestation of a liberal agenda, and the church's teaching that the homosexual orientation is "objectively disordered."

Cozzens, a priest of the Cleveland diocese, ably makes his way through the minefield with an understanding of the institutional dynamics as well as the men, gay and straight, who are today's priests and seminarians. It is an issue, like so many, that demands discussion and that will not go away no matter how deeply the church digs itself into denial. It is an issue whose implications for the priesthood "must be faced compassionately but candidly." Cozzens' contribution to such a discussion, should it ever take place, would be substantial.

That contribution will be detailed at some length later. There is good reason, however, to cover the ground leading up to Chapter Seven, for the crisis of soul of the Catholic clerical culture is deeper than one element. The crisis is persistent and threatens the very life of the church as a eucharistic community.

It is Cozzens' love for the priesthood that motivates the book. He speaks warmly of the majority of priests in whom he finds great hope. He is convinced, too, that "that the priesthood is at the edge of a new day following a painful yet purifying dark night."

But that is not to ignore the crisis. And the truth and depth of the crisis is, in part, contained in the numbers.

During the last three decades of the 20th century, Europe and North America have experienced a decline of 80 percent in the number of candidates studying for the priesthood and a 40 percent decline in the number of priests. Less known is the shrinking number of priests under 40. In the Cleveland diocese in 1970 there were 240 priests under age 40; in 1999, there were only 35. And researchers predict that in less than five years, only one in eight priests will be under age 35, with the average age near 60.

"Twenty years ago there was approximately one priest for every 1,000 Catholics; in 2005 the ratio is likely to be one priest to every 2,200 of the faithful."

Even more ominous are the figures he cites from a recent study sponsored by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. Parents were asked to respond to the statement, "You would encourage your child to pursue a career as priest or nun." Only 8 percent strongly agreed; 25 percent agreed; 48 percent disagreed, and 19 percent strongly disagreed. "A staggering 67 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement. … In light of this report, one in five Catholic parents would strongly resist a child pursuing a vocation to the priesthood or religious life."

Still, it is reasonable to ask why anyone should sit through yet one more depressing rundown of the ills of the priesthood. By now the outline of the faltering structure is a familiar sight on the landscape of U.S. Catholicism. But it seems also to draw little concern from those who have the power to keep it from collapsing.

Despite all the gloomy forecasts that have been played out in secular and religious media, Cozzens, in an earlier interview with *The Plain Dealer*, said he believes church leaders have not asked, "What is God's spirit saying to us through these most recent crises, the sexual

misconduct with minors and the large numbers of priests, men of goodness and faith, who have stepped away from their calling?"

This was a book, he said, that he had to write, one that has "been percolating in my soul since my days [teaching] at Ursuline College."

The lack of church attention to the crisis is nothing new. As early as the late 1960s, the bishops had asked a group of priests and academics to put together a study of the priesthood, which had just begun to feel the first tremors of the reforms of the 1962-65 Second Vatican Council. The report was remarkably prescient in its assessment of the future of the priesthood. It was done by a group of priests and lay people unquestionably loyal to the church, and the committee was overseen by a young, not-yet-bishop, Fr. Joseph Bernardin. But few took heed of the findings, and the bishops essentially shelved the report. The strong suspicion was that the bishops simply did not like what they read.

This book, too, is done by a loyalist, someone who has been a priest now for 35 years, who has served his church as dean of clergy for the Cleveland diocese. Cozzens, 60, is now rector of the Cleveland diocese's St. Mary Seminary and serves as chair of its admissions committee.

Many are not going to like what they read, and Cozzens knows it. "The hard look which is at the core of this reflection has inevitably led me to give considerable space to issues that are, quite frankly, both difficult and painful to write about," he says in the introduction.

"Some will be disturbed by what follows, others will be threatened. Perhaps such responses are inevitable when a reflection such as this includes a spiritual and psychosexual analysis of priests today. It may well prove particularly challenging to candidates preparing for the priesthood."

It did not take long for his prediction to come true. Apparently publication of the book and the piece in *The Plain Dealer,* which was distributed by Religion News Service, caused something of a furor among priests and seminarians in Cleveland. So Cozzens refuses now to give any more interviews.

The book speaks for itself.

Cozzens, with a doctorate in psychology, assesses the priesthood in Freudian and Jungian terms. While dismissing Freud's anthropology, his rejection of "any teleology, any transcendent purpose and meaning to life" as woefully flawed, Cozzens applies an "iconic" or

metaphorical reading of the famous Oedipal complex, part of Freud's "remarkable blueprint of the unconscious and ... the subterranean dynamics of the human psyche," to the current priesthood.

As "reconstellated" in Cozzens' schema, the "presbyteral Oedipal complex" reveals the newly ordained priest as son, with the local ordaining bishop as father and the church as mother.

As the hidden psychic drama unfolds, the maternal church, though supportive, "is also demanding and controlling."

> [The priest's] sexuality is restrained, his dress is determined, his residence assigned. This mother wants him for herself. The defining decisions most men make as they claim their personal ground as men are denied. At the same time, the ecclesial mother in partnership with his father-bishop provides identity, status and security. Add to this the rich and meaningful life of pastoral leadership and service and you have the makings of a well-established Oedipal conflict. The strong undercurrents of anxiety and restlessness easily go unnamed and if they remain unnamed, as a matter of course, lead to a simmering envy and rage that for the most part remain just below the boiling point. Add to this mostly hidden psychic drama the inevitable stress of pastoral ministry in a church wrestling with its post-conciliar, renewed understanding of its identity and mission, and you have an environment that will tax the healthiest of priests. Relief is sought often in destructive patterns of behavior to both priest and parishioner.

Just as the boy must eventually make his own way to healthy adulthood while remaining loyal to the family, so the priest, in resolving the Oedipal complex, "must suffer the anxiety and tension of being loyal to the church and faithful to his own vision." Those who do not "stand in the fire leading to true adulthood," writes Cozzens, "follow one of two paths: either becoming sycophant ecclesiastics and pious, effete clerics or the less common but equally destructive path of the maverick," the one who finds fault with everything that comes from the bishop's office.

The psychological framework of Cozzens' analysis is easy to navigate, in part certainly because of the familiarity of the story and of his starting point: the enormous shifts that occurred in the reality and perception of the Catholic clergy following Vatican II.

In pre-conciliar days, the priest was the prestigious focal point of an immigrant church, the undisputed communicator of truths, mystery and

law. Today, his role "remains conflicted and ambiguous." Old images don't work any longer, and new images, "devoid of sentimentalism, continue to surface as the priesthood strives to renew itself in light of the general renewal inspired by the Second Vatican Council."

That renewal, of course, comes up against persistent and sometimes successful attempts to roll back the reforms by those who have ascended to power in the Vatican. They have worked hard to re-establish the distance between ordained clergy and the people and to confine renewal and experimentation to the most restrictive understanding of the law. They insist on strict adherence to rules that most lay people have long become comfortable ignoring.

Out of that prevailing Vatican attitude, writes Cozzens, emerges a deep crisis of authority, compounded by the crimes of priest sex abusers and the church's handling of those crimes. "As church leadership faced the stress and tension of crisis management brought on by a small but significant number of its priests," Cozzens writes, "the church's teaching office saw its power to enlighten and reconcile, to challenge and encourage, diminished by its unwillingness to listen seriously to those outside the inner corridors of the Vatican establishment, including large numbers of bishops belonging to the very college constituted to teach authoritatively in the name of Christ."

He quotes Denis Hurley, the former archbishop of Durban, South Africa: "There is no going back to the old idea that ready-made solutions can be handed down by authority." Authority's new role, said Hurley, "is to set up the conditions in which a solution can be sought by the church, that is, the community. In most cases there will be no final solution, only a continual attempt to adjust to a perpetually evolving situation."

A crisis of authority and of the priest's stature in the community on top of dramatically lower numbers are enormous enough problems. However, that drop off, due largely to what some call the heterosexual exodus from the priesthood that has occurred since the 1960s, created a priesthood in which the percentage of gay men is inordinately higher than the percentage of homosexuals in the general population.

Cozzens' chapter on homosexuality begins with an anecdote. A few years ago, he writes, he was talking with a group of seminary rectors and deans who were gathering for a meeting. The topic of conversation was the growing number of homosexual seminarians. One of the rectors recounted that on his flight to the West Coast conference with another priest, someone in the next seat overheard their conversation about the upcoming meeting and asked if they were priests. When the two said

yes, the other passenger asked without hesitation, “Does that mean you’re gay?”

“Startled at the question, one of the priests inquired what led him to make such an assumption. ‘Nothing in particular,’ he answered, ‘just impressions that took form in recent years.’ ”

So much of the understanding of the church and the current state of the priesthood is carried in our own stories and intuition. More than 15 years ago, I sat with a man who had been head of an order on the East Coast. As almost an aside, I asked about the order’s seminary that we could see from where we were sitting. “Are you still getting the best and brightest?” His demeanor changed. It became clearly pained, and he answered that they were not getting the best or brightest and that many, if not most, of those entering were gay and, he said, he knew they remained sexually active. He didn’t, quite frankly, know what the order was going to do.

Another priest, some years later, someone who had worked with sexually troubled as well as gay priests, predicted in private conversation that the next scandal that would run through the clerical ranks would be priests with AIDS. What was more essential than ever, for both straight and gay priests, those sexually active and those who kept their vows, was that priests and bishops begin talking about sexuality, he said. He also predicted that would not happen because there was no will to delve into such a difficult topic.

Cozzens, an insider, a loyal son of the church, a “priest’s priest” as his friends describe him, has taken the bold step.

“I confess to a certain anxiety as I begin this reflection on homosexuality and the priesthood,” he writes. “Whatever is said about such a sensitive and complex issue is open to misunderstanding and seeming insensitivity. Some will deny the reality that many observers see as changing the face of the priesthood - that the percentage of homosexual priests and seminarians is significantly higher than it is in society at large. Others will see any attention given to the phenomenon as a symptom of the homophobia that is characteristic of individuals with less than open minds. Still others will wonder what difference sexual orientation makes in the celibate lives of priests. Regardless of the risks, the issue, I believe, deserves attention.”

It is estimated that 20,000 priests have left the active ministry, most of them to marry. “Their absence, it can be argued, has dramatically changed the gay/straight ratio,” writes Cozzens. “Furthermore, the need gay priests have for friendship with other gay men, and their shaping of a social life largely comprised of other homosexually oriented men, has

created a gay subculture in most of the larger U.S. dioceses. A similar subculture has occurred in many of our seminaries." He says he knows of one Midwest congregation of men that has a gay caucus when they have large meetings.

What kind of numbers are involved is impossible to pin down. The U.S. bishops are not doing surveys of the issue. Cozzens cites several sources of estimates of homosexual orientation in the Catholic clergy that range from more than 20 percent to nearly 60 percent. In one footnote, Cozzens recounts that he heard "a religious order priest with long experience in both formation and leadership state publicly at a conference on AIDS and the mission of the church that 80 percent of his large East Coast order was gay."

The other information is gleaned from his own experience as a seminary rector and from conversations over the years he has had with other seminary officials from around the country.

Cozzens does not argue against ordaining gay men. He acknowledges that there have in history been significant instances of gay priests, bishops and even popes. He doesn't do much to dispute the assertion by some that the priesthood has always been a vocation primarily for homosexuals. In fact, he describes homosexual priests as men who tend to be "nurturing, intelligent, talented and sensitive - qualities especially suited to ministry. Often they excel as liturgists and homilists. Without question, gay priests minister creatively and effectively at every level of pastoral leadership. The vast majority keep their orientation to themselves."

What, then, is the problem? Is it even appropriate to ask the question?

"Does it matter? Does not the question reveal still another form of homophobia?" he asks. "Is it not another manifestation of discrimination and suspicion? Some would say the issue is best left alone, that we would all be better served not to notice the proverbial elephant in the room."

But ignoring it could have disastrous effects, writes Cozzens. "In spite of the present glut of empirical studies and investigations, human sexuality, so intimately wedded to the life of the soul, still surpasses our full understanding and comprehension. And so, we waver. Nonetheless, it is right that we press on. Pastoral and formational concerns require that we do so."

A gay subculture in seminaries and among ordained priests, argues Cozzens, has a destabilizing effect on heterosexual members of the clergy. The "straight" seminarian or priest in such circumstances is often "gripped by a self-doubt that defies his best efforts to

understand." The resultant "psychic confusion … has significant implications for both their spiritual vitality and emotional balance."

When sexual orientation in the seminary is addressed only indirectly or in individual counseling sessions, Cozzens says, "both the emotional climate of the seminary and the formation program itself suffer."

He cites Fr. Robert Nugent, an advocate in the church of homosexual rights, on the issue of formation in today's seminary:

"A 'one-size-fits-all' approach to celibacy formation without considering the unique differences among the candidates of age, life experiences, socio-cultural backgrounds and sexual orientation is no longer adequate, given the changing ethos of Catholic life and ministry," says Nugent. Differences in background, experience and sexual orientation "cannot be adequately addressed by a highly idealized or overspiritualized celibacy formation program not in touch with the concepts, language and sexual realities of … diverse individuals."

Further, argues Cozzens, an overwhelmingly gay clergy culture will have an effect on how the laity views the priesthood and it will have an effect on incoming vocations. Potential candidates for the priesthood who are heterosexual will be intimidated from joining an institution where the ethos is primarily that of gay culture.

What occurs up to Chapter Seven may be framed in new and innovative ways, but it is a familiar story known by anyone who has not purposely blinded himself to the chill truth. The material in Chapter Seven is something new for an active priest of Cozzens' stature and training to be opening up publicly. He is pressing, one senses almost desperately, for the broader conversation that others have been calling for privately for years.

In fact, he would lash Chapter Seven tightly to what went before:

"The priesthood's crisis of soul, and by extension, the church's crisis of soul, is in part a crisis of orientation. Sooner or later the issue will be faced more forthrightly than it has in the closing days of the 20th century. The longer the delay, the greater the harm to the priesthood and to the church."

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