

THOSE WE'VE LOST

Donald Cozzens, Priest Who Pressed Church From Within, Dies at 82

He challenged the Roman Catholic Church on the culture of secrecy and denial that protected predator priests, and said celibacy should be optional.



By Katharine Q. Seelye

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The Rev. Donald Cozzens, a Roman Catholic priest who challenged the church on its culture of secrecy and its denial that it protected priests who molested children, died on Dec. 9 in Mayfield Heights, Ohio. He was 82.

His sister, Maryellen Dombek, said the cause was complications of pneumonia brought on by Covid-19. He had been vaccinated, she said, and was healthy, still playing racquetball and riding his bike, when he succumbed to the virus in a hospital in a matter of days.

Father Cozzens, a diocesan priest, seminary rector and counselor to priests and seminarians, was best-known both in and outside the church for his candid writing.

In his most influential book, “The Changing Face of the Priesthood” (2000), he was among the first to explore the root causes of clerical sexual abuse and how the church had covered up the crimes of predatory priests.

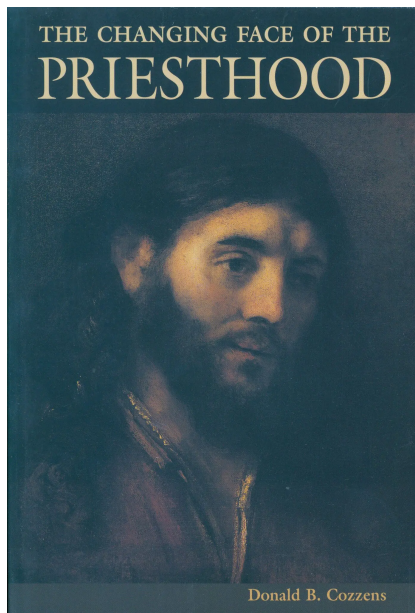
Separately in the book, he highlighted a taboo subject that everyone knew about but that no one discussed — that an increasingly disproportionate number of priests were gay. “The need gay priests have for friendship with other gay men has created a gay subculture in most of the larger U.S. diocese,” he wrote.

He did not argue against the ordination of gay men; indeed, he said many gay priests were exceptionally empathetic and effective. But he said that their large numbers essentially established the priesthood as a “gay profession,” which he said could have a destabilizing effect on straight priests and discourage them from ministry.

The book, which was translated into six languages, was controversial less for its content than for the fact that the author was a figure of some authority; at the time, Father Cozzens was president-rector of Saint Mary Seminary and Graduate School of Theology in Cleveland.

“Some said I was hurting the priesthood and was being disloyal to my brother priests,” he said in a 2018 interview with Cleveland.com. “But there were many people — a cardinal, bishops, priests and laity — who told me I was writing about issues that needed to be addressed.”

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Despite his challenges to the church's teachings, Father Cozzens was not a rogue priest but rather a loyalist who remained in good standing. He said his writings sprang from his love for the church and a desire to make it healthier.

"I write to convince the reader of nothing," he wrote in the introduction to "Faith That Dares to Speak" (2004). Convincing is the job of politicians and debaters, he said; speech that rises from faith should serve as an invitation to ponder and consider.

Father Cozzens's acceptance of gay priests was at odds with the official church. Under Pope Benedict XVI, the Vatican restated Catholic teaching that being gay was "objectively disordered" and that gay men should not be admitted to the priesthood. Pope Francis has signaled a more tolerant attitude, but has not changed policies.

Two years after "The Changing Face of the Priesthood" was published, the church was engulfed in the clergy abuse scandal, in which it was found to have protected hundreds of priests who had sexually molested children in their care. The scandal started in Boston and spread nationwide.

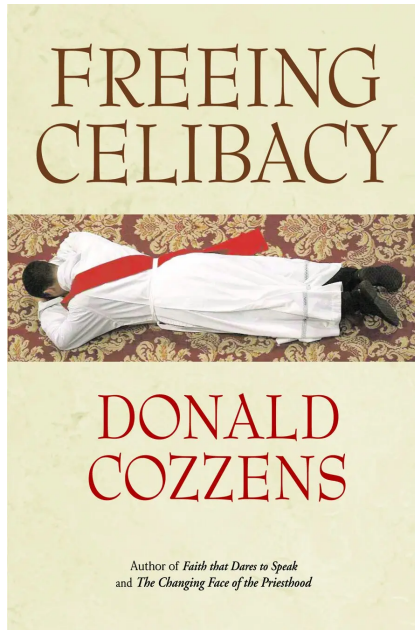
"That framed the rest of his work and writing on the priesthood, because it was such a dramatic manifestation of all the problems he was seeing," Edward P. Hahnenberg, a professor of systematic theology at John Carroll University in Cleveland and a close friend of Father Cozzens', said in a phone interview.

"As some more conservative church figures wanted to blame gay priests for the abuse scandal," he added, "he made it clear that the issue was more about unhealthy patterns of authority and power."

Father Cozzens examined those patterns in his next two books — "Sacred Silence: Denial and the Crisis in the Church" (2002) and "Faith That Dares to Speak." He described the corrosive effects of denial and silence and called for honest discussion about how its leadership structure, which he called feudal and a cult of secrecy, could be reformed to make it more accountable.

Father Cozzens grappled with other issues facing the church as well, including the lack of women in leadership and the potentially harmful effects of mandatory celibacy, which he examined in "Freeing Celibacy" (2006).

He himself had been faithful to his vow of celibacy, he said, but he thought it should be optional. He saw no rational or religious basis for the mandate; until the 12th century, priests and bishops had been free to marry. He believed that the celibacy requirement was largely responsible for the sharp drop in the number of priests in recent decades. He was uncertain if the mandate had played a role in the sexual abuse scandal, saying it may have been a factor in some cases. But either way, he said, he believed that insisting on celibacy could eventually spell the end of the priesthood.



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Donald Bernard Cozzens was born on May 17, 1939, in Cleveland, the oldest of four children of Bernard and Florence (Gaye) Cozzens. His mother was a legal secretary and later a bookkeeper. His father was a salesman for a gas company and also did office work for a local cemetery.

Donald knew early on that he wanted to be a priest. “In first grade, he would play priest,” his sister, who was not yet born at the time but who had heard the family stories, said in an interview. “He would use vanilla wafers and pretend he was giving communion and make our other brothers listen to him.”

After high school he entered the seminary at Borromeo College, now Borromeo Seminary, in Wickliffe, which serves the Diocese of Cleveland. He graduated in 1961, then earned his master’s of divinity at Saint Mary Seminary in 1965, when he was ordained. He received a master’s degree in religious education at the University of Notre Dame in 1973 and a doctorate in counseling psychology at Kent State University in 1976.

Father Cozzens served in parish ministry for nine years and held numerous teaching posts and official appointments within the diocese. He served as rector, president and professor of pastoral theology at Saint Mary’s from 1996 to 2001.

After writing “The Changing Face of the Priesthood,” he found it difficult to hold a leadership role at the seminary. He stepped down as president-rector and joined the faculty of John Carroll, where he became writer in residence and a professor in the religious studies department until his retirement in 2016. He remained an active priest until his death.

In addition to his six nonfiction books, Father Cozzens wrote three mystery novels that involved many of the matters he examined in his nonfiction.

“In many ways,” Dr. Hahnenberg said, “he was raising issues at a local level that Pope Francis has tried to raise at a universal level: ‘How is the Catholic Church going to be engaged with the world in a constructive way in the 21st century? How will the church minister to its people? What voice will lay people have in decisions in the church?’ To the end, Don was still seeking answers.”