

# Impact of abuse crisis is yet to come

One of the wisest and most experienced commentators throughout the sexual-abuse crisis has been Father Donald Cozzens. His book, *The Changing Face of the Priesthood* (Liturgical Press, 2000), has been widely read and discussed. A sequel, *Sacred Silence: Denial and the Crisis in the Church* (also Liturgical Press), is about to appear.

In an article in *Commonweal* magazine (9/13/02), Father Cozzens, referring to the crisis, writes "I fear the worst is yet to come."

He points to the eventual trial of Father Paul Shanley, a Boston priest, who "is likely to put up a strenuous defense, which will bring to light matters church officials would prefer remain in darkness. Should his case go to trial, Boston's current situation may erupt with a force yet to be imagined."

Another reason why the current crisis may be prolonged is the growing tension between bishops and priests in the aftermath of the Dallas meeting at which the bishops adopted their zero-tolerance policy. The policy calls for the laicization of any priest who has even one instance of sexual abuse of a minor on his record, no matter how far back the incident occurred and regardless of his subsequent, abuse-free record of service in the priesthood.

That policy is being challenged by canon lawyers, priest associations, some bishops and leaders of religious congregations of men



Father Richard McBrien

## Essays in Theology

and women. Canon lawyers raise questions about the lack of due process. Others ask about our traditional Christian belief in forgiveness and redemption.

The strain in the bishop-priest relationship, Father Cozzens says, is "undermining the morale of an already overworked and beleaguered priest corps." Many feel it is now every priest for himself.

Father Cozzens warns against underestimating the laity's dissatisfaction toward their bishops. Lay anger, he writes, has "galvanized previously disparate cohorts of Catholics into a force to be reckoned with. Only the naive believe that the actions taken in Dallas have restored the bishops' credibility."

How the bishops respond to newly formed lay groups like *Voice of the Faithful* will be critical, he says. "It appears that many bishops have yet to learn how to deal nondefensively with the grass roots initiatives of one of the best-educated, articulate and committed body of believers among the people of God. One has only to cite, by way of ex-

ample, the recent actions of the bishops of Rockville Center, New York, and Bridgeport, Connecticut, in denying VOTF access to church property for its meetings.

The scandal, Father Cozzens believes, is much larger in scope than we now imagine. If that should prove to be the case, the perception that "mandated celibacy for diocesan clergy just isn't working" will become more widespread and publicly expressed.

Father Cozzens expresses the hope that the courage demonstrated by many priests in Boston, in establishing and joining an independent Boston Priests Forum, will be emulated elsewhere.

But he also observes with much regret that, with the death of Cardinal Joseph Bernardin of Chicago in 1996, a leadership vacuum has developed in the U.S. hierarchy. At no time has that vacuum been more painfully evident than in the teeth of the current crisis.

Father Cozzens says John Paul II's successor will have to address this major crisis in ministry, "of which the sexual-abuse scandal is but one factor."

Because the integrity of the priesthood is at stake, so, too, is the spiritual vitality of the church's sacramental life. Nothing is more important than that.

Father McBrien is a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame.

## Bible quotes can support many ideas

To the editor:

It's always dismaying when people quote the Bible against other people. The same Old Testament that is sometimes quoted against gays, in support of slavery, etc., includes other fascinating decrees.

Consider these gems, from Deuteronomy: "When a virgin is pledged in marriage to a man and another man ... lies with her, you shall bring both of them out to the gate of that town and stone them to death" (22:23-24). Read around in Deuteronomy and discover other Bible-sanctioned stoning occasions. "When brothers live together and one of them dies without leaving a son ... (the widow's) husband's brother shall have intercourse with her" (25:5)!

There's plenty more of the same kind of weirdness between the same black covers. Hopefully, no living Christian will suggest that we ought to be out stoning virgins.

"Ah, but that's the Old Testament," you may say. "The New changes everything." One problem with this is that God is supposed to be the single unchanging, eternal constant in the universe, and yet the OT and the NT present such disturbingly dissimilar Gods that whole Christian sects have been founded on the differences. But the NT has its share of strangeness, too. Here is Mark 16:16-18: "And these signs shall attend those who believe: in

my name they shall ... take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them ... " What sane believer has attempted these feats? Actually, there's a corps of loonies down in Georgia who do indeed dance with cobras and drink arsenic and occasionally die from one or the other! Your New Testament and mine explicitly prescribes these bizarre and extremely dangerous demonstrations of belief. Check it out.

If we adhere too faithfully to the Bible, we'll all wind up as either the stoners or the stoned. Or maybe poisoned.

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## Wants stats on diocese

To the editor:

I am not interested in the year 2025. I would like to know what the diocese and the parishes are going to do in 2005 or in 2010 when a large percentage of sisters currently serving the parishes and diocesan offices will be approaching retirement. Given their experience and knowledge, these women will be next to impossible to replace.

Your front page story (Sept. 5: "Tougher issues await in new round of planning") told us nothing about the number of working deacons or the number of deacons in training, lay men and women who are degree or certification candidates now enrolled at St. Bernard's School of Theology and Ministry.

I would like to know how many SBSTM students are in the "pipeline" for certification or degrees as pastoral administrators or pastoral assistants?

I think many of us who love the Church and the diocese would like to see the *Courier* publish annual statistics about the numbers of baptisms, confirmations, funerals, RCIA candidates, etc.

We are fortunate in most parishes in receiving a fair-

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