Another Face of the Priesthood

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That there is a crisis in the Catholic priesthood is by now something that "everybody knows." But new discussions of old questions are sparked from time to time, often by the publication of a book. Such is the case with The Changing Face of the Priesthood: A Reflection on the Priest's Crisis of Soul (Liturgical Press) by Father Donald Cozzens, Rector of St. Mary Seminary and Graduate School in Cleveland, Ohio. According to Fr. Cozzens, the changing face of the priesthood is very grim indeed, and his argument has sparked a great deal of discussion.

Fr. Cozzens frankly acknowledges that his book is impressionistic. His reflection, he writes in the preface, "is grounded in and shaped by my own experience as a priest, especially by more than a half dozen years of service as vicar for clergy in the Diocese of Cleveland and more recently as rector of our graduate seminary.... The experiences and reflections of many priests, I am quite sure, will lead them to see a different picture than the one I outline in the pages ahead." Precisely.

My own experience of thirteen years in seminary work in Detroit and now as Rector of the Pontifical College Josephinum in Columbus, Ohio, suggests a very different picture. Put differently, I recognize many of the problems discussed by Fr. Cozzens, but I believe that, at least in some cases, he frames the problem in a way that is, no doubt inadvertently, profoundly misleading.

For instance, Fr. Cozzens addresses the "identity" of the priest in terms of what he describes as a shift following the Second Vatican Council from a "cultic" model to a model of the "servant leader." This shift was precipitated by the Council's emphasis on the fuller realization of the priesthood of the laity. There should be, says Fr. Cozzens, a "dyadic" relationship between the priesthood of the faithful and that of the ordained. His greatest concern is that the "dyad" malfunctions when the ordained ministry of "servant leader" fails to be fully engaged with the ministry of the people.

Of course that can happen, and when it does, it is a real problem. Another problem, however, is the collapse of the dyad when the difference that ordination makes is obscured or forgotten. It is precisely the cultic nature of ordained priesthood that prevents such a collapse. Priestly identity is most fundamentally derived from the sacramental grace of ordination at the hands of the bishop. For many people, the word "cultic" has negative connotations that load the discussion. We are speaking about sacramentality, and sacramentality is what, most importantly, defines the priesthood. Priestly identity may be existentially experienced in different ways, but surely we can agree that the most important factor in the priest's sense of who he is is his relationship with Jesus Christ, whom he makes sacramentally present. Apart from this sustaining sacramental reality, the ordained priesthood simply makes no sense.

At seminary conferences and elsewhere, one regularly hears the lament that younger priests and seminarians...

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The very face of the priesthood was evolving even as he arrived at his first parish assignment. A generation later, the face of the priesthood continues to reveal new contours, fascinating features, and sadly, some tragic blemishes. In The Changing Face of the Priesthood, Cozzens takes a long, honest look at the present state of the priesthood. Father Cozzens offers a serious approach to understanding the priesthood in the modern day." Priests and People"Although written by an American diocesan priest, it is of universal interest. . . . " Intercom"The Changing Face of the Priesthood is a fresh look on a problem that will not go away without vigorous conversation at all levels of Church life. When Luther referred to the priesthood of all believers, he was maintaining that the plowboy and the milkmaid could do priestly work. In fact, their plowing and milking was priestly work. So there was no hierarchy where the priesthood was a "vocation" and milking the cow was not. Both were tasks that God called his followers to do, each according to their gifts. Clearly, the idea of the "priesthood of all believers" is vital for the health and effectiveness of the Church. Perhaps one reason for its neglect is that the "priesthood of all believers" is seen as a negative, controversial subject. It implies the rejection of the Roman Catholic idea of priesthood. This implication is certainly present in the concept that Luther put forth