

March 24, 2007 - Priest urges Catholics to stand up for change

By KELLEY BOUCHARD, Staff Writer, Portland (ME) Press Herald

Roman Catholics should push for a stronger role in the church and seek greater accountability from the clergy, a noted theologian told an audience of 80 people in Portland Friday evening.

The Rev. Donald Cozzens, a Catholic priest, professor and author, said the denial and secrecy that pervaded the church's reaction to the priest sexual abuse scandal exposed its feudal structure, in which priests are viewed as lords of the manor and church members are expected to be docile serfs.

Cozzens said the church must abandon its feudal roots to survive and grow beyond the priest scandal and other challenges facing parishes around the world.

"These are not easy times for the church and these are not easy times for people who love the church," Cozzens said. "This is the laity's moment and we need good leadership."

Cozzens spoke at St. Pius X Church hall at the invitation of Maine Catholics Together, a fledgling organization of several groups, including Pax Christi and Voice of the Faithful, that are seeking church reform. It was Cozzens' first visit to Maine, which has 193,228 Catholics, according to the Roman Catholic Diocese of Portland.

"He presents an honest, reasonable appraisal of the church with a laity that has a secondary role. He encourages us to move away from the mindset of pray, pay and obey," said John Wirtz, a member of Maine Catholics Today who lives in Scarborough and attends St. Patrick's Church in Portland.

Cozzens is writer-in-residence and professor of religious studies at John Carroll University, a Jesuit school in Cleveland, Ohio. He has written several books on issues facing today's church and its shrinking priesthood, including "The Changing Face of the Priesthood: A Reflection on the Priest's Crisis of Soul" and "Sacred Silence: Denial and the Crisis in the Church."

In his latest book, "Freeing Celibacy," Cozzens, who is celibate, proposes making celibacy optional rather than mandatory. He said such a change in church doctrine would recognize that the call to celibacy is a gift and not one that can be demanded from God or expected of every man who wants to be a priest.

"I think we would have a lot more men in the priesthood if celibacy were optional," he said. "I think we would have a healthier and stronger priesthood."

Cozzens said today's younger Catholics aren't interested in institutions, so they're more likely to demonstrate their faith by volunteering at a soup kitchen than attending Mass. Since the 1960s, he said, the number of Catholics who attend Mass every week has dropped from 70 percent to less than 30 percent.

He said many Catholics suffer from a crisis of belief rather than a crisis of faith. They no longer have confidence in official directives or decisions of the institution, but they hold true to Christ's teachings.

He said lay members should have the courage to examine the church to forge a deeper faith and a stronger relationship with God. The church's structure, he said, should further its mission and reflect the fact that all Catholics are disciples of Christ, whether they are ordained or not.

Cozzens' talk drew different reactions from the audience.

"There's a lot of truth in what he said, but my experience with the church has been very positive," said Lori Arsenault, a Gorham resident who is a member of the Sacred Heart and St. Dominic Parish in Portland.

Brian Trask is a Chelsea resident who is Catholic and no longer attends church.

"I'm interested in the subject and interested in the role of celibacy in the church," Trask said. "I think the institution of the church is collapsing."