

Acceptance Speech: Reverend Donald Cozzens

Voice of the Faithful

Priest of Integrity Award

Long Island, New York

October 31, 2009

I am honored to receive this award from brothers and sisters in the faith—from women and men I've known and admired for many years now. I especially admire the commitment of the National Working Group for Priest Support

As you know, Pope Benedict has declared 2009 to be the "Year of the Priest." Well, I think the Pope should declare 2010 the "Year of the Laity."

Your voice, the voice of the faithful laity, has spoken with urgency and strength and clarity to church leaders and to the church as a whole at a time when the voice of priests and bishops is hardly heard at all—except to minimize, contextualize, and rationalize the abuse scandals and their cover-up that have led to the worst crisis ever faced by the U.S. Catholic Church.

You have spoken from your hearts—with hope and courage for a renewed and vital and humble church. And you have done so in the face of uncalled for mistrust, misunderstanding, and trenchant hostility from numerous church bureaucrats and authorities.

You have rightfully recognized, in perfect harmony with the Second Vatican Council's teachings on the responsibilities and rights of the laity, that you have an obligation to speak out—in the name of justice and compassion—for reforms promised by the bishops and popes of Vatican II who sat in ecumenical council, the highest authority in the church.

With Pope John XXIII, you have insisted on *Aggiornamento*, the updating, so clearly, undeniably needed by our church—for its own sake, for the sake of the children, for the sake of the church's mission to bring the hope and freedom of the gospel to a battered and bloodied world.

I'm sure you must wonder if anyone is listening to your voice...wonder if anyone understands the depth of faith and fidelity and passion with which you speak.

I'm afraid most Catholics in the U.S. haven't heard of you. Of course, most Catholics don't know the name of their own bishop. While most priests have heard of the Voice of the Faithful, many of us remain either indifferent or wary of your voice. While bishops certainly have heard of Voice of the Faithful, many accuse you of having an "agenda", some Machiavellian scheme to refashion the church in such a way as to render it indistinguishable from the churches of the Protestant Reformation.

As the years go by and your energy ebbs, you might indeed wonder: *Is anyone listening?* I believe Jesus of Nazareth asked himself the same question. But he

went on preaching, teaching, and healing. Jesus' voice was indeed *THE* voice of the Spirit. But I say, without hesitation, that *your* voice is of the Spirit.

Dear friends, don't give up, "though your hearts may be weary." Don't give up, though no one in purple robes seems to be listening. Don't give up, though you might be judged unfaithful rather than faithful.

You can't give up because the church, in spite of deafness in many quarters, needs your voice, your commitment, and your witness.

You can't give up because the women of the church and the world need you to stand shoulder to shoulder with them. We need women leaders in our chanceries and Catholic Centers. We need to hear the gospel preached in the voice of women as well as men.

You can't give up because the men in holy orders are growing old and tired. The lifting of mandatory celibacy is the key to a healthy, revitalized priesthood and church.

You can't give up because the world's economic order is twisted and unjust and you are positioned to forge a more just and humane order.

You can't give up because the church has barely set out on its grudging journey down the road of accountability and transparency.

You can't give up because there remain victims of clergy abuse who need your support and compassion.

You can't give up because children continue to be abused not only in rectories and schools, but also in their homes and neighborhoods.

Don't give up. We priests, whether we realize it or not, need your witness of adult maturity and courage and integrity. You are the voice of hope to countless priests you may never hear from.

There is yet another reason why you can't give up. The church is in the midst of a major, powerful, wrenching period of conversion and renewal—the likes of which we haven't seen in centuries.

We are too close to this conversion to see it in perspective, but we sense its muted thunder and urgent significance, its transforming power and spirit of hope.

By the workings of the Holy Spirit, you are "players" in this conversion and renewal. Your voice, your faith, your commitment to the gospel matter greatly.

So carry on, carry on.

As you meet here in significant numbers, remember what Thomas Merton wrote to Jim Forest, a discouraged young activist exhausted from his work for racial justice. Whether or not he saw any positive results from his work for racial equality, Merton wrote, he must carry on. Merton understood that seeing results in the young activist's lifetime could not be the ultimate goal. Jim Forest's faith, his vision, his integrity required him to persevere, even if his efforts seemed, at the time, fruitless.

So we keep on carrying on. Parishioners and priests speak the truth in love. And as we speak, we ask for the grace to listen as well. For it is necessary for us to listen—prayerfully, humbly, and with open hearts. Otherwise our voice will be heard as strident, whether we mean it to be or not.

Merton would be pleased, I think, to see the new movement surfacing, slowly to be sure, for “contemplative leadership” in government, business, education, the military, the church—and throughout the various dimensions of society.

The “contemplative leadership” movement, spear-headed by the Merton Institute for Contemplative Living, understands that spirit-grounded leadership begins with a vital spiritual life—a life of prayerful listening for wisdom, the whispers of grace, that forge respect and mutuality that in turn lead to authentic renewal and right reform.

Voice of the Faithful needs to be a part of this movement. Our voice needs to arise from a bedrock of trust that the Spirit is with us. Our voice will be heard if it is an authentically contemplative voice.

I see a link between the emerging contemplative leadership movement and the insight of the seventeenth century French philosopher, Blaise Pascal. Pascal wrote that all the evil in the world can be traced to our inability to sit still in a room.

Our voice—the voice of the faithful—is different after we sit still in a room. It has a different quality to it. It has the ring of humility and authenticity and patience. Our voice will also have a ring of quiet confidence and joy.

In his memoir, *The Journal of a Soul*, Pope John XXIII spoke of his complete confidence in the maxim: *Absolute Trust in God in the present and complete tranquility in regard to what is going to happen in the future.*

While Pope John had complete confidence in the maxim, my own confidence isn't quite complete. Perhaps I haven't learned to sit still enough.

Might we consider sitting still for the first five minutes of every Voice of the Faithful meeting—before every meeting with a bishop or pastor, before meeting with the media or drafting our press releases?

You who love the church and you who have dared to speak your truth in love should sleep well—no matter how small the steps of renewal and conversion might be in your lifetime. You have taken the gospel seriously. You have taken the Second Vatican Council seriously. You have tried to act responsibly and faithfully. Now that, it seems to me, is integrity.

If only we priests were more united, we would do well to honor Voice of the Faithful with our “Laity of Integrity Award.” It would be well deserved.

Thank you for honoring me with this award. You have my love and respect.

Rev. Donald Cozzens
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