

Belief, faith and Roger Ebert

Robert McClory | Apr. 25, 2013 NCR Today

In his newly published book, *Notes From the Underground: The Spiritual Journal of a Secular Priest* [1], Fr. Donald Cozzens commiserates with Catholics who simply cannot swallow the whole package of official church beliefs, doctrines, rules and regulations the hierarchy proposes as mandatory for all: dissent is not an option. But Cozzens, whose previous books have been highly regarded, wonders if there might be some room for sincere truth-seekers unable to suppress their doubts and objections without compromising their integrity.

"What if faith and belief had ... their own religious territory and boundaries?" he writes. "What if they were distinct enough that a Christian who doubted or struggled to accept certain doctrines might still be a person of faith? Could it be that a Christian who embraced all the official teachings of the church might, in the end, be faithless?"

If there is such a thing as righteous anger, he adds, "there must be such a thing as righteous doubt." Cozzens says faith's essential core is a "conviction without proof that the mystery we call God is good, that creation is holy, and that we are called to live in right relationship with one another."

I thought of Cozzens' distinction two weeks ago when Roger Ebert, the celebrated movie reviewer and beloved man for all seasons, was laid to rest. By no means was Ebert your traditional believer. In his memoir, *Life Itself* [2], he made clear he stepped away from the authority of the church not long after attending a Catholic parish school. He insisted he was not a member of any church, mosque, temple or assembly.

"At some point the reality of God was no longer in my mind," he wrote. "I believed in the basic church teachings because I thought they were correct, not because God wanted me to. In my mind, in the way I interpret them, I still live by them today. Not by the rules and regulations, but by the principles. ... Popes come and go, and John XXIII has been the only one I felt affection for. Their dictums strike me as lacking in the ability to surprise. They have been leading a holding action for a millennium ... I am not a believer, not an atheist, not an agnostic. I am more content with questions than answers."

Roger Ebert loved people, and people loved him. Even as the illness that hounded for some seven years was closing in for a fatal blow, he wrote reviews, articles and books and tweeted to his thousands of friends about films, politics, education, art and culture. He remained amazingly perceptive and articulate to the last day of his life.

And then to the surprise of many, a funeral Mass was held for him at Chicago's Holy Name Cathedral before an overflow crowd, including Mayor Rahm Emanuel, Illinois Gov. Pat Quinn, Sen. Dick Durbin and a host of his fans from every walk of life. No bishops were visible, but Fr. Michael Pflieger of St. Sabina Church gave the final blessing, suggesting that as Ebert rose up to heaven, the balconies were packed with the saints, all with their thumbs up in Ebert's signature sign of approval.

Afterward, I neither saw nor heard any indication of displeasure that this man should be accorded high honor in Chicago's cathedral with cameras flashing and TV coverage from the major stations. So it seems that though

Ebert did not regard himself as a believer in any traditional way, somebody in authority regarded him as man of "faith," or maybe a variation of faith as understood by Fr. Cozzens. And are we seeing a precedent here, perhaps in response to the open style of Pope Francis?

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[1] http://www.amazon.com/Notes-Underground-Spiritual-Journal-Secular/dp/1626980063/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1366895242&sr=8-1&keywords=Notes+From+the+Underground%3A+the+Spiritual+Journal+of+a+Secular+Priest

[2] http://www.amazon.com/Life-Itself-Memoir-Roger-Ebert/dp/0446584967/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1366895308&sr=1-1&keywords=life+itself