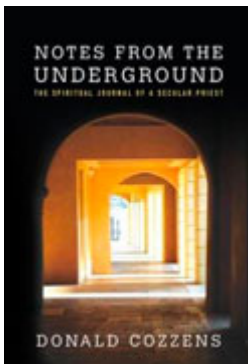


## A search for a spark of hope? in the underground

Robert McClory | May. 1, 2013



NOTES FROM THE UNDERGROUND: THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY OF A SECULAR

PRIEST

By Donald Cozzens

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Fr. Donald Cozzens' new book has come out either a year too late or perhaps a year too soon. In *Notes From the Underground*, he expresses his very personal exasperation as he surveys the bleak landscape of a church that is coming apart at the seams. And he sees himself as 'likely to live out my years in the underground, holding fast to the hope of a renewed and reformed church envisioned by Pope John XXIII.'

Yet even as the first edition was coming off the press, the bleak landscape was bursting into surprising new life with the election of Pope Francis. Millions of dejected Catholics are expressing delight in the style of this new pope and hope he will indeed lead the church in the direction envisioned by John XXIII. It's more than likely that Cozzens himself was among the first to emerge from the underground, along with many of his associates who, he says, embrace 'the spirit of Pope John, Teilhard de Chardin, Yves Congar, Thomas Merton and Dorothy Day' whose first desire is to be simply adult -- a church not of children or adolescents hesitant to think and reflect on the lessons of human experience 'but rather a pilgrim people who believe the Holy Spirit is loose in the world and whose rumors of wisdom might be found in any of God's people.'

But despite this season of euphoria, we have no guarantees the new spring will last, and sections of the book may well serve as a cautionary note or at least a sobering reminder of what Francis has to overcome. Cozzens writes with passion about 'Vatican policies and directives that [have] ignored the lived experiences of ordinary men and women' with a Vatican that [has] insisted gay and lesbian Catholics were 'disordered' and had no right to fall in love 'and with hierarchs that [have] shrugged off the voices -- muted voices though they were -- of discouraged priests.' It is the hierarchy obsessed with 'pelvic issues,' he writes, that has created 'the current atmosphere of suspicion and accusation.'

It will be some time before the full church has a sense of whether this is a false spring or the real one.

More importantly, a substantial part of the book provides Cozzens' advice on living with integrity in uncertain times. He discusses in some detail the distinction between faith and belief. 'What if faith and belief had 'their

own religious territory and boundaries?? he asks. ?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.?

Faith?s essential core is trust, Cozzens says, ?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.? Faith in his view is ?a cry of the heart, a brave act of trust, a conviction that we are beloved, that we are saved.?

Cozzens is in doctrinally deep water here, but he assures us he is not alone. He cites theologians Jesuit Fr. Karl Rahner and Dominican Fr. Albert Nolan. In fact, *Notes From the Underground* is full of citations, alive with relevant comments.

His other powerful theme is the importance of intimacy and transcendence. He returns again and again to theologian Walter Brueggemann?s definition of table fellowship as ?serious conversation leading to blessed communion.? Those words have become a kind of mantra for Cozzens (and for this book as well).

Intimacy is like trust, he says, because it requires we stand before another without our usual defenses ? vulnerable and fully open. ?In this graced space we not only find the freedom to reveal our deepest fears and anxieties, but rather what is more personal, our deepest ideals and dreams, the noblest thoughts of our souls. For many it?s sheer foolishness. But if it is sheer foolishness, then love itself is sheer foolishness. To the contrary, I insist that married or single, young or old, we humans need a few people in our lives, perhaps only one, with whom we are or might become soul mates.?

Cozzens doesn?t get specific about how he has managed intimacy in his own life, other than to speak briefly about a dozen or so like-minded friends with whom he gathers every Saturday for coffee and conversation. His hesitancy regarding intimacy is understandable. But I wish this splendid writer had chosen to share more of his personal experiences when he touches on subjects like prayer, power and authority. To be sure, there are anecdotes scattered in these pages, including Cozzens? recollection of an embarrassing incident on the day of his first Mass. But for long sections, he reverts to the role of the well-informed teacher.

At the end of this book, Cozzens saw himself walking the streets of the underground ?with my collar turned up and my cap pulled low ? the secret police stand in the shadows ? my eyes searching for a crack in the darkness, a flicker of light, a spark of hope. Whenever I can, I seek out friends and trail guides for coffee and serious conversation leading to blessed communion.?

There has been more than a flicker of light and a spark of hope since he wrote those words. The reader is left to wonder: Is it time for Cozzens and his companions to throw their caps in the air and settle down for upbeat conversation and jubilant communion?

[Robert McClory writes regularly for *NCR* -- and has for many years.]

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