



ELEPHANTS IN THE LIVING ROOM

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FR. DONALD COZZENS
NEW POPE; NEW HOPE: OUT FROM THE UNDERGROUND
SS. SIMON & JUDE
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Introduction

Bishop Thomas Gumbleton

Good afternoon, and welcome to another presentation by the Elephants. Our speaker today is Fr. Donald Cozzens from John Carroll University in Cleveland. Don spoke to us a few years ago, and is here with us again. First of all, a little bit about his life. He was born in Cleveland, Ohio and attended Catholic schools there. And in fact, when he was in first grade - I read this about him - he said, "I knew from the first day in the first grade that I wanted to be a parish priest." When I read that I kind of laughed, because you heard the joke about God? "You want to make God laugh? Plan your life." Well, Don did; he becomes a parish priest. He was ordained in 1965, and became a parish priest, but only for six years. His long life as a priest has included being a teacher, a pastoral psychologist, a seminary rector, and vicar for clergy in the diocese in Cleveland. So much of his life has been in ministry to priests; and he is very, very familiar with the priesthood, its problems and successes, and so on. He has become kind of an expert on the Catholic priesthood and has published a number of books that started with *The Changing Face of the Priesthood*. Then he wrote *Sacred Silence: Denial and Crises in the Church: Faith that Dares to Speak, Freeing Celibacy*; and then the book that probably has brought us together today, *Notes from the Underground*.

A review of the book by Fr. John McElby, a priest from Philadelphia, described, he says, "Right off the spiritual journey of Fr. Donald Cozzens, priest of the diocese of Cleveland, is a roller coaster ride a cry of the heart; a new personal crises, which began in the 1980s, and worsened with the ongoing revelations of secrecy, incompetence and dishonesty of Church authorities around the pedophilia crises." He quotes Don as saying, "I came to feel, and soon came to think, that I belonged to an underground Church, disoriented, slightly out of place, and much of the time unsure of my identity as a priest." The reviewer, Fr. McElby, says, "Give or take five years, I am the same age and vintage as Fr. Cozzens. A younger set of priests calls us, or at least some of us, Vatican II priests; and so we are brothers of a curious state of misplaced enthusiasm." (Laughter) I must say, that happens here in Detroit too. But now Fr. Cozzens comes back to us to speak with new enthusiasm in which he will share with us about his pope: *New Pope; New Hope: New Notes from the Underground*. I'm happy to welcome Fr. Don. (Much laughter)



(Applause)

New Pope; New Hope: Out from the Underground

Fr. Donald Cozzens

Thank you, Bishop Gumbleton, for those gracious words. I knew two things in the first grade. As Tom indicated, I wanted to be a priest, and I was in love with Joanne Mahoney; (Laughter) and she was in my homeroom for twelve years, first grade through high school. Talk about the agony and the ecstasy. (Laughter) But Joanne is happily married now, and I'm happily ordained. I believe I can put it that way. Thank you for inviting me back. It is a pleasure to be with you good people. I believe this is my third meeting with the Elephants in the Living Room; and you have truly grown in size, and in wisdom, and in grace; so I'm delighted to be with you this afternoon.

And I'd like to begin with a question: Now that the Jesuit from Argentina, Jorge Mario Bergoglio, is Pope Francis, the Bishop of Rome, can we, should we, expect a *Catholic spring*? My remarks this afternoon will take a stab at answering that question. I'm setting the bar rather low, taking a stab, because of the complexity and the countless unknowns that go into any possible response to the likelihood of a *Catholic*

spring. But I will nonetheless take a stab at responding to the question of a possible *Catholic spring* now that Francis is Bishop of Rome and our pope. To say that the Church is in trouble - and here I am speaking primarily of the institutional or hierarchical Church - might be understood as a gross understatement. It's in trouble! It's in big trouble! Some say it is in crises, especially in Europe, where commentators speak of the Church as dying, if not dead, for all practical purposes. And the same commentators and public intellectuals don't hesitate to describe Europe today as post-Christian. Here in the U. S., we feel the tremors of the shaking of the Church's foundations, if the Church hopefully is not dying.

I'm just going to mention some of the factors shaking the foundations of the Church:

- The horrible sexual abuse scandals of the Church embedded by the authorities more concerned about avoiding scandal and protecting the Church's assets than the welfare of young Catholics.
- Then, the staggering financial scandals.
- Arrogant bishops, calling for the investigation of Catholic sisters, while holding themselves above accountability for their own malfeasance.
- The absence of women in positions of Church leadership.
- Dramatic drop in Catholic worship.
- More and more lifelong Catholics are not turning to the Church to marry these days; and they're not turning to the Church to bury their family members.
- And then, our half-full seminaries.

The litany of lament could go on; but, I think, it is good to remember the Church has always been in trouble in some fashion or another, from its beginning 2000 years ago, and in some fashion or another, it always will be in trouble. But we could also point out that the Church has been in trouble, especially since it became the establishment religion of the Roman Empire in the 4th century. At that time Church leaders adapted the structures of Roman governance, and bishops donned the vestments that copied the dress of Roman Senators. Popes established papal courts, and thought and behaved like monarchs, and even emperors. As many of you know, in the 5th century, after taking on the invading Huns Pope, Leo the Great took on the titles of *Pope* and *Supreme Pontiff*. And later on, in the 11th century, Pope Gregory the Great assumed supreme secular power, as well as religious power. The Church has been in big trouble ever since. And yet, the troubles we are facing today aren't the worse troubles the Church has encountered. We need but think of the Crusades, the Inquisition, the staggering corruption of the Renaissance papacies, and other examples of a Church in need of reform and renewal.

As long as I am on this brief historical sidebar, let me mention four popes we don't hear about these days:

- St. Anastasias
- St. Innocent
- St. Hormisdas
- St. Silverius.

I mention these men, because these popes are among the 39 married popes from our past. (Murmurs) Moreover, Anastasias was the father of Innocent; and Hormisdas was the father of Silverius. (Laughter) Can you imagine their wives at the marketplace? (Much laughter) "My husband was a pope. My son is now the pope. Top that if you can." It's interesting - and I know I have a number of brother priests here this afternoon - I never heard about these men in the seminary. (Laughter) I never heard that there were at least 39 married popes. We don't want to mention that today; it might confuse us. (More laughter) But let's go back to the present. Today's troubles are *our* troubles; and we have a responsibility to address them as adult disciples. And so, the leadership of Pope Francis is a bright beacon of hope to many of us caught up by the vision of the Second Vatican Council.

Here's why Pope Francis gives me hope. It's not only his disarming simplicity and humility, his down to earth pastoral instincts, his honesty and his integrity. These characteristics are important; in fact, it's hard to exaggerate their importance. They have caught the attention of a rather cynical media as well as the attention of countless Catholics. If the medium is the message, Francis' humility and simplicity have prompted us to *want* to listen to him. He has captured *our* attention. I'd like to highlight here what I think are a few of the most telling and promising aspects of Francis' vision for reformed and renewed Church:

- First: Pope Francis is willing to turn the light of the Gospel on the Church itself.

Not an easy thing to do. The Lutheran theologian Paul Tillich - some of you have heard of him - pointed out how difficult it is for the Church to turn the light of the Gospel on itself. Here's what Tillich wrote: "If the Church does not subject itself to the judgment, which is pronounced *by* the Church, it becomes idolatrous to itself. Such idolatry is its permanent temptation. A Church which tries to exclude itself from such a judgment loses its right to judge the world, and is rightly judged by the world." Then Tillich added these painful words: "This is the tragedy of the Roman Catholic Church." We take the light of the Gospel, and we judge the world by it; but we seem slow to turn that same light on ourselves, and judge ourselves by it; *and so the world is judging us*. Francis understands that the world is indeed judging the Church; and the world's verdict is cutting to the heart of the Church's integrity. So in his extraordinary *Apostolic Exhortation: The Joy of the Gospel*, Francis writes, "Since I am called to put into practice what I ask others, I too must think about a conversation of the papacy." So we have Francis turning the light of the Gospel on the papacy itself. Unheard of! Can we imagine a day when Church authorities might say about a given teaching, "We were wrong about that." I think Pope Francis can.

- Second: Francis would like us to teach the truths of our religion with greater humility. I believe he is uncomfortable with "absolute dogmatic certainties." Here Pope Francis suggests he is familiar with the South African theologian, Fr. Albert Nolan, a Dominican, who wrote in his book, *Jesus Today*, these striking words: "Upsetting for some people is the undermining of their long held certainties. The challenge they face may not be that of changing one idea for another; but rather, that of replacing certainties with uncertainty. Obsession with absolute certainty is yet another form of slavery. It is a way of finding security without having to put all our trust in God." Pope Francis gets this. While upholding Church teachings, he is putting pastoral compassion and healing mercy ahead of dogmatic teachings. Here Francis is in step with Pope Benedict XVI, who said that Christianity is not a law to be obeyed, but a presence to be embraced, a presence to be seized. That's what Christianity is about. It's a relationship with this presence, this mysterious presence that we call God.
- The third aspect of Francis' Papacy that I'd like to emphasize is his prophetic imagination which breaks into our own sleepy imagination like a splash of cold water hitting us in the face. Francis pays his own hotel charges after being elected. He lives in a hotel rather than in a palace. He cold calls ordinary people. He creates a new form of communicating with his people and non-believers, what we might call the apostolic interview. He kisses the deformed, and washes the feet of young women. He leads by example, and is not slow to correct bishops, who believe they have a right to live like royalty. Francis' prophetic imagination is awakening the imagination of Catholics everywhere. Is it possible we are witnessing the first blooming buds of a *Catholic spring*?

If you would *imagine this!* An internationally televised, Pontifical Mass in St. Peter's Basilica. I imagine that, where half of the altar servers are young women and girls, and prominent among the mitred bishops in the sanctuary are the women major superiors of the religious orders with headquarters in Rome. Among the male deacons ministering at the basilica's high altar, we observe women deacons. The congregation rises for the Gospel Acclamation; and a woman deacon proclaims the Gospel and preaches the homily, naming God's grace and power to lift up the powerless and downtrodden, a homily that speaks of God's humility, even as the assembly worships in the baroque's splendor of Catholicism's mother Church. *Imagine that!* (Applause)

Imagine this! The Vatican press office releases a pontifical letter to the Catholic world in which the pope names four women to the College of Cardinals, (Laughter) representing Asia, Africa, the Americas and Europe. While withholding ordination either as priests or bishops, the Pope has granted the newly named cardinals full voting rights at the next Papal Conclave. *Imagine that!* (Applause)

And *imagine this!* The Vatican press office announces that a leaked report of the secret committee of theologians and canon lawyers convened by the pope to determine the apparent theological problem in Canon 277 needs to be corrected. - Now Canon 277 is something we all know. I'm sure we don't; but let me tell you. (Laughter) Canon 277 requires celibacy for Latin Rite priests, and reads as follows: "Clerics are obliged to observe perfect and perpetual continence for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven; and, therefore, are obliged to observe celibacy, which is a special gift from God, by which sacred ministers can adhere more easily to Christ with an undivided heart, and can more freely dedicate themselves to the

service of God and humankind.” End of the Canon. Now the theologians and canonists were instructed to determine *if it is within the discretionary power of the Church to legislate a gift, a charism from God*. The canon states explicitly that celibacy is a special gift from God. Does the Church have the right to propose that God will bestow the special gift of celibacy on every candidate for the Latin Rite priesthood? In other words, does the Church have the power to mandate celibacy for Latin Rite priests, if celibacy is a gift? - Someone answered no. - Thank you.

My hypothetical committee concluded that the Church does have the right to require celibacy, as it has for Latin Rite priests since the 12th century, but that it is theologically problematic, and possibly arrogant, for the Church to claim that it knows upon whom this gift will be bestowed. The canonists recommend to the pope that if he wished to maintain the discipline of celibacy for the Latin Rite, the phrase "which is a special gift from God" should be deleted from Canon 277. They further recommend that, if the pope was convinced that celibacy is indeed a gift from God, that it should be left to the individual seminarian to prayerfully discern if he has been blessed with this charism. From this perspective clerical celibacy should not be canonically imposed for the simple reason that gifts cannot be imposed by legislation. (Applause) The committee, it was noted, raised a theological question that was clearly outside the charge given it by the pope. Is it not possible that God would grant to an individual a vocation to both the sacrament of Orders and to the sacrament of Marriage? Apparently, God did, and continues to do so in Eastern Rite Catholic Churches. (Laughter) *Imagine that!*

And *imagine this!* The Vatican sponsors an international symposium of the world's most distinguished moral theologians to review the Church's theology of human sexuality. More than half of the symposium's participants are lay, married scholars. Speaker after speaker criticizes the act centered approach to sexual ethics that has held sway in Catholic circles for centuries. The majority of theologians propose that the fundamental criteria for taking the moral measure of sexual behavior should be to determine if it is loving, respectful, mutual and life giving. From this perspective the theologians question the current teaching that every sexual behavior, fantasy, or desire outside of marriage is always objectively, mortally sinful. The participants applaud the Church's teaching office for affirming that, by its very nature, sex makes promises; that casual and recreational sex negates the spiritual and bonding potential of loving sexuality in marriage. The symposium members are unanimous in condemning the violence of sexual abuse, sexual trafficking, and all forms of exploitation of children, women and men. And finally, the symposium participants recommend that the pope establish a special commission to review the teaching that all forms of artificial contraception are always intrinsically evil. *Imagine that!*

Well, let's put our imagination on the shelf for a minute. Here's why I am cautious about Francis inaugurating a *Catholic spring*. There are formidable obstacles holding us back from a *Catholic spring* and pushing us in the direction of the cold and dark days of a metaphorical Catholic winter. I'll mention three of these formidable obstacles:

- First of all the very structure of the Church. The Church's structure, originally modeled after ancient Rome's genius for political control, later modeled to compete with the great national monarchies of the West, has been in place for centuries. So the Church's structure was built after studying the political structure of the Roman Empire. It's been in place for centuries. And, at least from the Middle Ages, the present structural organization of the Church, consisting of dioceses and parishes, is fundamentally a feudal system. I argue, it's the last feudal system in the West. We might think of the pope as the sovereign and bishops as his vassals. Likewise, we can consider diocesan priests as vassals to their liege lord, their bishop. From this perspective, a diocese and a parish can be thought of as benefices, as fiefdoms. In feudal systems the first virtue demanded of a vassal is loyalty to his liege lord. For the vassal bishop his loyalty is first to the pope as Bishop of Rome. For the vassal priest his loyalty is to his diocesan bishop. Now, loyalty to the pope and loyalty to a bishop is fundamentally a good thing. But as bishops and priests our first loyalty should be to the Gospel; it should be to Christ. But we're human beings and as a vassal, a bishop knows that the pope has a great deal of control over his life. And as a diocesan priest, I know that my bishop has a good deal of control over my life: controls where I live, where I work, how I dress; controls my sexuality, a lot of control. And then, as Pope Francis has pointed out, we know there is careerism today in the ranks of the clergy and the episcopacy, human enough. I priest friend of mine, who is a psychologist, said, "You know, clergy have two major human energies to deal with: the energy of sexuality, and the energy of ambition." Now, officially, our ordained ambition is to be the ordained minister God is calling us to be. It's simply to

be a good priest; or in the case of a bishop, to be a good bishop. But ambition is a neutral kind of drive. It doesn't have to be looked at with grave suspicion. But we have to repress our ambition pretty much in the way we are called to repress or suppress our sexuality. Can you imagine a talented young priest who feels he has the ability to be a wonderful chancellor, or seminary professor, or auxiliary bishop, going into seeing his bishop and saying, "Bishop, I'd like to apply to be a bishop. Where are the forms that I fill out?" (Laughter) It doesn't work that way. Well how does it work then? It works in invisible ways; and I am going to leave you to imagine how that might be worked out. (Laughter) And I hope you sense that I'm saying this with a great deal of compassion for my brothers in ordained ministry. Most of us, most of us, simply want to be the ministers God has called us to be. That's true of the majority of us. But there are some of us, maybe in all humility, who say, "I have been blessed with a lot of gifts. I don't need to name them. I think you can see them. How do I get in line for a promotion?" (Laughter) By the way, the idea of transparency and accountability in a feudal system is simply never considered. Feudal systems don't reflect on accountability and transparency. You are to trust the liege lord. And by the way, if we consider the bishop a liege lord, and the priests vassals, what do you think we should call the laity? (Laughter) Do not let me offend you; but, serfs? But, see, a feudal system doesn't work when the serfs are educated. (Laughter) You are educated; and you read; and you think. Now this feudal system that I have been describing has worked rather well for the Church for centuries. It's not working anymore; and yet there are some of us who think, because it has worked so well in the past, it should continue to work in the future. We now see some of the historical reasons why it is so difficult to be even constructively critical of a bishop or a pope. How difficult it is to speak to power, to speak truth to power, especially Church power! Now it's true that Francis is attempting to change that dynamic. He is actually creating opportunities for believers and non-believers to speak openly and honestly with him; and Francis is inviting us to speak the truth and love to power. That could be a sign of a *Catholic spring*. But recently I heard of a diocesan bishop who told a group of his pastors - he said this with a certain amount of pride - he said, "I am a Pope Benedict XVI bishop, I am not a Pope Francis bishop." If he thought that, if this bishop thought that, the fact that he said this to some of his priests is very telling.

- And then, here is another reason. I'm not really sure we're headed to a *Catholic spring*, and that's what I am going to call a theology of security. Modernity and our secular society have made the hierarchical Church as nervous as it was at the time of the Protestant Reformation. In this condition of anxiety and fear, religious faith has been reduced to religious belief. This is an important distinction between faith and belief. I've developed it in the book that Bishop Gumbleton mentioned, *Notes from the Underground*, at some length; but I don't have the time to do that here. Let me just say this about that distinction. Our Church authorities want to be crystal clear about what must be believed, and who is in, and who is out, in terms of Church membership. In a theology of security, ascent to dogmas and doctrines, along with moral rectitude, especially in sexual matters, are the distinguishing marks of a real Catholic. Often here we find orthodoxy masquerading as faith. But faith, we know, is primarily and fundamentally relational and transformative. Faith is better understood as courageous trust that life is meaningful; that God is good; that Jesus is the Christ; and that the Holy Spirit is here in this space, on this earth, and in this universe. I remind myself of this relational, existential dimension to faith by making a silent one word substitution when I recite the Nicene Creed. "I trust in one God, the Father Almighty. I trust in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only son of God. I trust in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and giver of life." Faith, as I am speaking of it here, is fundamentally a cry of the heart, a brave act of trust in the hidden God, a ready to risk all conviction, that through God's grace, we are in a profound and mysterious relationship with the Divine, with each other, and with all of creation; that we are God's beloved; that we are saved. But that kind of faith is hard to measure. It makes some people nervous. And if there are Church authorities, and if they are Church authorities, these nervous people, only strict doctrinal compliance can ease their fears and insecurities. And so orthodoxy masquerades as faith! The Vatican's doctrinal hardliners fear that Francis is blurring the dogmatic and doctrinal truths of Catholicism; and they are ready to fight for the integrity of *the faith*. These guardians of belief don't quite accept Rabbi Abraham Heschel's simple, but profound, insight, "God is greater than religion. Faith is greater than dogma."
- The third reason for being wary of an imminent *Catholic spring*; and that is what I am calling a culture of privilege. It is hard not to be seduced by privilege. Those who enjoy privilege can't imagine being without it. It is very soon taken for granted. Privilege is one of the deepest roots of

classism, racism, sexism and patriarchy. We ordained have to remember that. Pope Francis certainly does. But many of his brother bishops don't get it. These bishops prefer to see themselves weighted with a heavy responsibility to defend the Church from the forces of materialism and relativism. The privileges these prelates enjoy, they believe, are meant to free them up for this noble defense. While some bishops are downsizing and trying to simplify their lifestyles, other bishops are ordering gold mitres. Privilege, like power, is difficult to surrender. So we would be naive not to see, now and in the months ahead, considerable pushback to Pope Francis' initiatives of reform and renewal.

Finally, and now let me move to the end of this talk, I'd like to propose three possible scenarios that we might see play out in the months and years ahead.

1. The first reflects what I have already mentioned: a *Catholic spring*.
 2. The second we can call a *Catholic thaw*.
 3. And third a *Catholic winter*.
- So the *Catholic Spring*. In this scenario Pope Francis' authenticity, his pastoral vision and prophetic imagination, lead to a reformed Roman Curia, a more humble college of bishops, and an honest listening to lay Catholics, especially women, and to religious, and to priests. The Catholic voice regains much of its lost credibility. There is a ring of truth and integrity as it shares the light of the Gospel and the Church's teachings on social justice and the dignity of human life. The vision spirit and hope embedded in the documents of the Second Vatican Council finally come to full bloom. Marginalized Catholics, divorced and remarried, gays and lesbians, among others, discover they are truly and deeply connected to the Holy Communion we call our Church. Under the pastoral leadership of Francis, the Catholic world offers a light of hope and new direction to our broken and violent world. The Church itself bears witness to the joy of the Gospel. The Vatican and its curial offices become friendly, less stuffy. Bishops and priests give off the smell of the sheep. The Church moves slowly, but steadily, towards becoming a humble Church of the poor and for the poor. A fresh theology of the priesthood acknowledges the negative ecclesial effects of mandated celibacy, and argues that all qualified, informed, baptized Catholics may be called by the Church to the diaconate and priesthood. While certainly not Camelot, the Church's *Catholic spring* continues to be surprised by the Spirit of God alive in the world.
 - The second scenario is what I am calling a *Catholic fall*. And by a *Catholic fall* I am proposing pretty much the present state of affairs. It's what writers speak of as the Francis effect. Certainly the climate is different since Jorge Bergoglio was elected Pope almost a year and a half ago. As the editor of *Time Magazine*, Nancy Gibbs, put it when naming Pope Francis their *Person of the Year* for 2013, "He hasn't changed the words, but he's changed the music." But many remain skeptical. Can Francis really reform the curia? Does he have the necessary support for his renewed Church from cardinals and bishops, from powerful Church people who are convinced the Church remains a static and perfect society, simply in need of some fine tuning? In the thaw Catholics remain hopeful, but wary.
 - And then the third and final scenario: the *Church Catholic winter*. I resist going in this direction, but it is certainly possible. There are powerful people, ordained and lay, who do not share Francis' vision for renewal and reform. Instead of renewing the Church, they believe that he is weakening it both doctrinally and morally. And I'm suggesting this might be their strategy. Francis is 77 years old, and has suggested, I've heard, that he might consider resigning when he turns 80. These powerful people are ready to wait him out. The pope succeeding Francis, they reason, might see things more their way than his. They remind themselves that the majority of younger priests today are more traditional and conservative than the generation of priests shaped by Vatican II. These traditional priests will be our pastors for the generation to come. And, moreover, they know most of today's bishops, having been appointed by Pope John Paul II, then Pope Benedict XVI, are men more comfortable with maintaining things the way they are. These powerful bishops believe they know how to deal with lay reform groups and movements. To their minds, the picture I am painting here of a *Catholic winter* is their idea of a *Catholic spring*.

So can we anticipate a *Catholic spring*? Yes we can! Will it come to pass and guide us into the future? I hope to God it does, though I wonder. But I do rejoice in the present Catholic thaw, and I remind myself

that it's the Spirit, who is loose in the world, that is guiding the Church and holding her in Holy Communion. It is the Spirit that is holding us and guiding us. And as important as bishops and popes are, it is the Holy Spirit that is holding us and guiding us.

I'd like to close with words from the seventeenth century Christian humanist and scholar, Erasmus. These words always bring me up short. Erasmus said, "Still, I put up with this Church, until I see a better one; and she must put up with me, until I myself become better." Thank you very much. (Applause)

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