

## Why our priests remain silent

Published: Friday, October 15, 2010, 3:00 AM

[http://www.cleveland.com/opinion/index.ssf/2010/10/why\\_our\\_priests\\_remain\\_silent.html](http://www.cleveland.com/opinion/index.ssf/2010/10/why_our_priests_remain_silent.html)

*By The Rev. Donald Cozzens*

In her letter to the editor, "Silence of the priests" (July 31), Frances Babic lamented the silence of Cleveland's priests in the face of church closings by the Catholic bishop of Cleveland, Richard Lennon.

For some time now, Bishop Lennon has been the target of heated and often cutting criticism for the closing and merging of 50 of Cleveland's Catholic parishes. But the strongest cries of protest arose over the closing of perhaps 10 to 12 parishes whose spiritual vitality and ability to meet their bills appeared evident. No satisfactory rationale, it was claimed, was ever extended to these parishioners explaining why their churches had to close their doors - only the oft-repeated talking points of demographic changes, financial realities and the shortage of priests.

But the silence of Cleveland's priests, with the exception of the Rev. Bob Begin ("Priest sends public challenge to bishop on church closures," *The Plain Dealer*, March 13), goes beyond the fate of closed and boarded churches. We priests have remained silent because it is our way of life.

We priests have remained silent as evicted parishioners of closed parishes coped with feelings of disorientation and spiritual abandonment while searching for new parish communities -- and others decided not to search at all.

We priests have remained silent about our own tattered morale and the widespread spirit of discouragement in the people of our diocese.

I suspect Frances Babic and other Catholics are thinking: What have you priests got to lose? You have no family to support, no mortgage to pay off, no children to educate, and you enjoy unparalleled job security. Why do you remain silent?

Here is why I think we priests remain silent.

From our seminary days, we have been educated and formed in a quasi-militaristic, quasi-feudal clerical society. On the day of our ordination, we promised obedience and respect to our bishop and to his successors. In such a closed world, it's as difficult for a priest to publicly question or criticize his bishop as it is for a junior military officer to publicly question or criticize his commanding officer. Public questioning or public criticism, regardless of its merits, is perceived by many priests and many Catholic laity as disloyalty. And disloyalty is the capital sin of both the military and Catholic clergy.

Moreover, Catholics look upon their bishop as the vicar of Christ for their local church. For the faithful, and, in particular for priests, public questioning or criticism of their bishop is tantamount, in the eyes of some, to flagrant disrespect for both the office and the person of the bishop.

Finally, I want to suggest that we priests may not be as silent as Frances Babic thinks. She is right to propose that there is a time and place for public protest. But I suspect there are Cleveland priests who have spoken or written to Bishop Lennon expressing their concerns about the morale and vitality of the church of Cleveland. I believe there are Cleveland priests who have written to the Vatican's nuncio (ambassador) in Washington, D.C. They just haven't made their concerns or protests public. It may have been the wiser path to follow. And it may not.

In times of crisis, and I believe it is clear that the Catholic Church of Cleveland is in crisis, mature believers need to ask what they can do to help their church regain its equilibrium and renew its spirit. This is especially true of its leaders, its priests.

The book of Ecclesiastes (Chapter 3) tells us that there is "a time to remain silent and a time to speak." Frances Babic and many others are asking the priests of Cleveland if we know what time it is. We priests have different answers, of course, but I'm appropriately unsettled by the words of the theologian turned poet, the Rev. Kilian McDonnell:

*No grand betrayals*

*-- we lacked the impudent will --*

*we died of small treasons.*

*Cozzens is writer in residence at John Carroll University and author of "Sacred Silence: Denial and the Crisis in the Church" (Liturgical Press, 2002).*