

POSSESSED BY MYSTERY

by

Eugene Cullen Kennedy

What is it that we feel together, living in a sanctuary that offers none, our ears filled with the plaint, *Peace, Peace, and there is no peace*, hostages to a moment in history in which we can barely breathe, haunted by the cowed pundits in the choir stalls - and no really wise, much less holy, man among them - chanting endlessly the same antiphons of risk and death and doom?

We pray as best we can, tormented and distracted prayers for a terrible swift sword of war if war there must be, for all those servicemen and women who are our human shields, in harm's way in a cause that, if as well defined as many others that have summoned ignorant armies to clash by night, remains a source of conflict for some, of great deeds for others, cheap and sacrilegious politics for still more, and a weight as heavy as the world for the rest of us.

What is this that has taken charge of us as roughly as a man grabbing and forcing us to go some place against our will? Have we ever experienced a more brutal irony than this Reality whose blood red dragon's eyes do not blink as we steal a glance at what we think are our lives flashing before us in the pseudo-adventures and second hand sinning of *Reality TV*?

At times like these, we feel the pulse of life as it is, that rhythmic beat that is lost in the white noise of our distractions and the discharge of our daily routines. We inhabit and are inhabited by Mystery, not the Hercule Poirot kind, but the spiritual mystery of being alive that sums up religion pure and simple.

We are experiencing what the great saints wore themselves out with vigils to achieve, a direct encounter with the Divine. St. John of the Cross wrote of the human puzzlement at what he learned by scaling heroically to the summit of mystical prayer, *There is no way here*.

No way, he learned and we already know, by storming it through fasts and penances and other punishments for our human condition. We never lay siege to the Divine by laying waste to our humanity.

Perhaps John of the Cross learned that it was simpler than he thought and, if he wrote that *there is no way here*, he may have concluded that *there is only your way here*, in the pilgrimage you make through your own life, that, accepting the religious mystery of life and death and loss found in that, you are at the center of God already. You make it by way of the simple ascetic of everyday life and have no need, and, indeed, would feel

self-conscious at falsifying yourself so much, to try out for the Sanctity Olympics of self-destruction through self-denial.

These intense moments return our attention to the sacred places that are so simple and often homely that we do not have names for them. They include lovers' catching sight of each other after being apart, the feel of the wind or the sun on a walker or a runner on a Spring day, and the innocence lifting like Grace off the crib of a newborn. At such everyday points that do not seem intrinsically spiritual and that demand our total immersion in time, we embrace the Spirit and drink from the cup of the eternal.

We live the great Mystery out in these human ways but we are so absorbed by them that we seldom think of them as our real lives in God. But in these events, we recognize that the transcendent lies in the simple, the eternal signals from the core of time, and that everything and everybody we love are at risk every day.

We are best defined as believers as those who are possessed by Mystery. We are on such easy terms, nodding to it like a neighbor in everyday life, that we do not feel how it overflows our depths until war casts its terrible light on them. We are winded because we have already made the climb to John of the Cross's summit and have found there what we brought with us, God face to face, the Mystery we feel so keenly this week..

(Commentary for February 23, 2005)
SHOULD THE POPE OR HIS AIDES AND
OBSERVERS RETIRE?

by
Eugene Cullen Kennedy

Pope John Paul II's return to the hospital has set off all the alarms in the firehouse of speculation about how he really is, who might succeed him, and, of course, whether he should resign from his office.

Can a good case be made that Pope John Paul II, who has never hidden his illness from the world, should step down before the vivid colors of his personality and accomplishments fade, much as his vigor has, before our very eyes?

A better case can be made for allowing the gallant Pope to stay and for forcing the retirement of many of his aides, possible successors, and those who report on and speculate about his every hitch, limp, and hiccup and would inspect the array of tea leaves in his cup and the contents of his waste basket if they could.

Pope John Paul II is not diminished by his brave endurance of illness but he is diminished by all those who are ever ready to give an opinion about or observe him, often as awkwardly as the bumbling Inspector Clouseau, to find clues about his wellbeing, his intentions, his handlers, or his possible successor.

Indeed, the eager legions who track the Pope's progress are making low comedy out of what may be the high point of his validation *urbi et orbi* of the sacredness of human life that he has championed throughout his years in office.

Some rush into print or onto websites to advertise their expertise on papal elections and the odds on possible successors with the enthusiasm of Las Vegas odds makers and with just possibly the hope that they will be quoted and that their name will be spelled right.

Perhaps the greatest danger to the Pope's health comes from the hysteria that fills St. Peter's Square every time he appears at the window of his apartment. This can lead even normally steady observers to report of John Paul's first appearance after his recent hospitalization that although "his voice was weak and raspy, the body language seemed relatively good ... at a couple of points he straightened up and seemed in control of himself..." This is the same uninformed level of diagnosis — *his legs are moving* — given from the booth by commentators whenever a football player is injured. (*The Word from Rome*, February 11, 2005)

The report also informs us that "the most reassuring element ... was that his doctors permitted him to sit for roughly 10 minutes in front of an open window on what was another chilly Roman morning." We are also told that it was the Pope's "time in front of an open window ... that ... brought on his flu." Yes, and some tribes put their

elderly out in the freezing weather to catch their last cold and maybe the Pope should call 911 the next time one of these doctors says *Sit here, Holy Father, the fresh air will do you good...*

The Pope is being stalked rather than reported on when we are told that "a debate broke out over whether or not what we heard was actually the pope's voice or a recording...there does appear to be a clear shift from a exceptionally weak and soft voice ... to a stronger, louder, and deeper voice ... and between the two ... a distinct 'click' that some interpreted as the sound of switching on a tape recording." But by week's end "many were convinced that ... the clicking and shift in voice quality were related to moving the microphone in the room."

The *Who, Me Worry?* Award goes to Archbishop John Foley, a chief Vatican spokesperson, who replied when asked if the Pope's physical condition is having any impact on his work, "I personally have not experienced a slowdown or lack of direction."

Then there was a "mini-tempest" when Cardinal Angelo Sodano, the Vatican Secretary of State, after saying that he hoped John Paul would live through 2010 and so surpass Pius IX's 32 year reign, answered a question about papal resignation in a phrase reminiscent of Vito Corleone's pointed rhetoric, "He knows what to do."

The Pope is valiantly struggling to maintain his dignity while many around him, high on Roman gossip, ambition, or career worries, are stripping it away from him. They should stop observing him and start observing themselves before the paranoid fizz on their heady brew reaches Oliver Stone and he will make a movie about it.

Most people, including Catholics, are too busy with their own lives to pay much attention to such fevered speculation. They have lives, the Pope has one, and this crowd hovering around the Holy father badly needs to get one.

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(Commentary for March 2, 2005)
9/11, SACRAMENT OF LOVE AND LOSS

by
Eugene Cullen Kennedy

Grief arises at dawn as big and blinding as the sun itself, riding the symbol of the eternal that floods through the mystery of loving each other in time. So it did on the morning that New York City's medical examiner's office announced, that "it had exhausted all possible means of identifying human remains" from the 9/11 destruction of the Trade Towers (*New York Times*, 2/24/05, p. a23)

This story, a fragment in itself, was more revelation of mystery than reportage of fact for the message to the families of the 1161 victims that remain unidentified was addressed to everyone who has ever loved or wept for its loss, reminding us of how invested with the eternal are the flesh and bone of the persons we cherish in time.

Most of last week's news concerned invisible ink events that intrigue us briefly and disappear without a trace. They were well symbolized by the slug-like television trucks with divining rod antennae feeding off two events in that Valhalla of the ephemeral, California - the Academy Awards and the Michael Jackson's trial. These vehicle herds record America's one night stands with celebrity that it can barely remember in the morning, much less a month later.

9/11 rises above these as great actors do above the awards because it remains the great sacramental event of our age whose mystery makes time holy even as it transcends it. In the heartbreak of its stricken families we recognize our own so that we can see in each other's faces that we are all indeed within six degrees of separation.

The announcement dashed Kathy Bowden's hopes that "some part, any part, of her brother, Thomas H. Bowden, Jr., might be included in a burial ... her family will probably go ahead with a burial this spring with only some personal effects and some dust from ground zero."

Matthew T. Sellitto wondered whether he would now get another phone call. After city officials had "informed the family three times that they had pieces of his son, Matthew C. Sellitto, he asked them not to call again until all the forensic work was completed. 'We knew the day was coming eventually, but it's still bittersweet,' he said."

And Meena Jerath stroked the razor-like double edge of loss when she spoke of Prem Nath Jerath, "... I am very sad and hurt that the identification process has ended without finding any trace of my husband On the other side, part of me is relieved that no tiny fragment was found....If only a small piece were found, I would wonder what happened to the rest of him. What were his last moments like? Did he suffer a lot?"

All the heartache of all of time is found in these stories about people whose names may never appear in the newspapers again. They are Lenten acolytes bearing the invisible but searing mark of the ashes that they long only to bury tenderly, knowing that they contain the wholeness of the persons they loved so much. "These fragments," T.S. Eliot wrote, "I have shored against my ruins." (*The Waste Land, What the Thunder Said*)

This is *our* mystery because there is no explanation for why it engulfs us except that if we are blessed with love that is eternal we must accept the losses, great and small, that come through experiencing it in time. A thousand small losses shower down on us in fragments, seeping into our days like time released aspirins.

The mystery is that lovers live at such close range that they can hurt each other easily, thoughtlessly, forgetfully, without ever meaning to do so. Lovers grow closer together by collecting, mourning, and burying these little fragments all the time.

9/11 was not a triumph for terrorists but for these lovers who reveal the depths of the mystery of ordinary living in their simple yearning to touch again those taken up in the twinkling of an eye on that day. We read again in a different light (John 6) the instruction of Jesus after he broke the loaves to feed the people, "Gather up the fragments that remain that nothing be lost."

(Commentary for August 11, 2005)
WHAT REALLY HAPPENED TO US AS
THE SHUTTLE CAME HOME

By
Eugene Cullen Kennedy

What really happened to us as the Space Shuttle Discovery came streaking home on Tuesday? Most Americans were so relieved that it landed safely that they did not pay much attention to their other feelings – or even noticed if they had any – as the ship's light descended in the California darkness.

So dominant was the anticipatory anxiety, according to the New York Times, that some Americans, having witnessed two shuttle disasters, planned not to let their children watch the event “to shield them from what could be a traumatic experience.” They thereby deprived them of a true mystical experience.

As relief recedes perhaps we sense in a general way that we shared something greater than a dangerous adventure with a brave crew or a technological triumph with extraordinary scientists and engineers.

For this experience pulled us all into the story of Creation in which we and the universe itself were born again. Measured by the finest of clocks and altimeters, the vessel's voyage was less about mathematics than it was about mystery.

Overheard on every radio as its images bloomed on every television screen, this expedition was far more than the background noise to our daily existences. Beneath the roar of the blastoff and the caressing silence of space it spoke not just to our eyes or to our intellects but to the deepest levels of our being.

Seldom have we shared an event that mixed our human condition with our human destiny. The crew members revealed that we all belong to the same family, that in a real sense we were making the journey with them. They also reminded us of what the late Nobel laureate Saul Bellow called “Our universal eligibility to be noble.”

A flag of our humanity fluttered from this sleekest of modern machines as bits of cloth flapped from the door just as they do from ill-packed vans on family vacations. This was the pennant of our glorious fallibility as it outwitted impersonal technology. The human hand that finally made a correction looked like basic home repair, “Let's just see if tugging at this will work,” revealing that a person as alive as us rather than a robot as inert as a parking meter was guiding the journey.

That subtle shifting within us during the long days from lift-off to touch-down was not from anxiety about the outcome as much as from hearing its song about our very beginnings and of the great elements of earth, air, fire, and water with which philosophers have always associated it.

The Discovery's trajectory took the ship out of the hold of gravity and free of the grasp of time as we know it. Mythologically, its voyage was into the realm of the sun, the symbol of the eternal on which all the things of time depend for their light. The great drama took place at the border crossing between time and eternity.

We move back and forth across that border every time we forget ourselves to take care of somebody else, lose ourselves in our work, or fall in love. This journey was an epic re-enactment of this mystery of how we humans live both in time and eternity every day. This journey let us feel the mystery of living in these two realms that we only catch hurried glimpses of most of the time.

And as the vessel brooded over the void and then made its arc back from the eternal into grip of time, its light shone in the darkness and the earth came into being. We were present at the creation and looking on the world we could see that it was good. The space official said "Welcome home" to the Spacecraft Discovery but he was really talking to us.

(Commentary for August 18, 2005)

9/11 VOICES EXPRESS ALL
HISTORY'S HIDDEN SORROW

by

Eugene Cullen Kennedy

Instead of climbing a mountain top to find God or religious experiences, come to noisy Manhattan where the mystical is more accessible than in most monasteries.

The voices of the living, the dead, and the dying now speak to us out of the fiery whirlwind of 9/11 on the just released "oral histories, dispatcher's tapes and phone logs so vast," according to the New York Times, "that they took up 23 compact discs."

This contemporary Greek chorus also serves as a drill bit tapping into the unnamed sorrows that have long rumbled inside history waiting for someone to remember and release them.

We must imagine the voices that speak to us from the silent Titanic or the cemeteries at Normandy. The Jews who wore yellow stars and the slaves who raised manacled hands weep as silently as Rachel far beyond our hearing.

These people now speak on their behalf.

Monica Gabrielle, whose husband died in the south tower, reacts to the tapes in that touching manner through which the heartbroken in all centuries reject pity to take a hard look at their sorrow, "Today we are one step closer to learning what happened ... where we excelled, where we failed."

Hear the anguish of all those who have battled death in the lament of the firefighters who watched medics treating a comrade struck by a fallen body. They "continued to work on him, carrying out hopeless resuscitation efforts in deference to two shocked firefighters who kept yelling 'Danny, Danny, Danny!'"

A brave Everyman speaks for all those who long to learn more about their loved one's last moments. Wall Street executive Richard A Pecorella describes an "image he believes to be that of his fiancée, Karen Juday." She is standing by a window, a fire behind her. "And I'm pretty sure there is another picture of Karen, falling....I can't be sure that she was a jumper. But it looks like her."

Pecorella aches in the name of millions before him as he refuses to avert his eyes from but gazes directly into the mystery of loss. Perhaps the tapes, he says, "can help me better understand the reality of what happened....I would like to better comprehend the intensity of the panic, and the threat of the fire."

Others name the devastation of loss's small uncertain and increasingly painful steps. Margaret Arce, whose firefighter son, David, died in the attack, tells of how just

the arrival of the discs on her front porch was a wrenching experience. "She has now moved the package to her dining room table. Psychologically, she said, she had to prepare herself. 'It's not going to be today. There's too much hubbub. I need the quiet of my soul.'"

Another mother, Mary Fletcher, says aloud what the grieving legions also know, "This is a long grieving process and I think each individual has to make a decision about how to deal with this information."

Her plaintive cry rebuffs those who want to package humankind's grief quickly and so hurry counselors to disaster scenes or insist that the sorrowing should set out immediately for the false grail of "closure." Mrs. Fletcher says simply "I don't think I'll expose myself to this. I have to be very careful. I think that to know what happened inside that tower is not healthy for me, personally."

Such events break the earth open so that we can hear the long suppressed cries of all those who have gone before us and who are so much like us. The searing heat burns away our superficial differences and our shallow pieties and we learn the simplest and greatest of spiritual truths. As psychiatrist Harry Stack Sullivan expressed it, "we are much more simply human than anything else."

(Commentary for March 1, 2006)
NEW AMERICAN CARDINALS
SHOW LAW STILL RUNNING AMERICAN CHURCH

By
Eugene Cullen Kennedy

Why did the Pope name Archbishops Sean O'Malley and William Levada cardinals last week? Many pundits, including Notre Dame's R. Scott Appleby, who should know better, opine that their experience with the sex abuse crisis signals Vatican determination to find an ending or at least an intermission for a scandal that is as tragic and unending as an old fashioned opera.

The real story hidden in plain sight in the headlines is less about these men than about their mentor, Bernard Cardinal Law. Although he was forced off the podium as archbishop of Boston by the boos of the people and the press for not knowing the score on handling priest pedophiles, he still picks the music, runs the auditions, and casts the leading roles in the American ecclesiastical production. He is, in short, the operator behind the opera.

Both Cardinals-designate would not have found favor in Rome if they had not first found it with Bernard Cardinal Law who became the eminence grise of the official Catholic Church in the United States through his close relationship with the late Pope John Paul II. After his 1984 appointment to be archbishop of Boston, Law became that pope's go-to man about who-went-where in the ranks of American bishops.

Law increased his influence by giving his total support to John Paul II's restoration of top-heavy hierarchy by a systematic undoing of Vatican Council II's return to the collegiality of the early Church. Collegiality means that bishops do not receive their authority by delegation from the pope but from their ordination as bishops. The pope himself derives his fundamental authority from being the bishop of Rome. He is first among equals but not the all powerful monarch who can treat the world's bishops as lesser emissaries. They are, in fact, brothers working together in the Church's mission.

The meaning of these appointments has nothing to do with tested insights being borne to Rome by O'Malley or Levada on how to resolve the sex abuse scandal because there is no evidence that they possess any. Its signifies that Bernard Cardinal Law is not a Napoleon killing time in powerless Roman exile but an undiminished leader spending time as a potent presence at the center of the Church. It is not about their future pull but about Law's present clout.

When Law left Boston at the end of 2002 he remained a member of several congregations, or Vatican administrative departments, including that which processes the appointment of bishops. Two years ago Pope John Paul II revealed his regard for Cardinal Law by making him archpriest of St. Mary Major Basilica in Rome. He thereby symbolically affirmed Law as *the* victim of the American press's sensational coverage of

clergy sex abuse, while just as symbolically ignoring the hundreds of *real* victims of that scandal.

The *Guardian* reported the political paternalism in this promotion with the quote that "the pope is merely doing what any father would do for a child" attributed to that ever present but always mythical "Vatican prelate asking not to be identified."

Both archbishops O'Malley and Levada are good and gentle men but, following the old Chicago political saying, "You've got to dance with the guy who brung you," they will not now challenge or bring innovations to the vague and defensive hierarchical policies that are heavy on outrage and low on insight into the origins of the sex crisis among priests.

The worldwide sex abuse crisis in the Church is far from over. Indeed, the efforts of such groups as the lay commission established by the American bishops to look into the matter have been deflected and delayed. Perhaps Pope Benedict XVI, characterized by Judge Anne Burke, former head of that lay commission, as the most sympathetic of all Vatican officials, will encourage efforts to get at the root cause rather than to cover up the symptoms of this deadly fever in the Church.

The coming colorful ceremonies of investing the new cardinals will be televised as the Vatican counterpart of the Olympics. Prelates from all over the world will receive the equivalent of gold medals for ecclesiastical excellence. But, as Cardinal Law's continuing domination of American Catholicism attests, the heads on which the red hats will be placed will contain no temptations to criticize hierarchy and no new thoughts about resolving the sex abuse crisis.

(Commentary for March 15, 2006)
CATHOLIC EXPERT CALLS FOR
"HOME GROWN CHURCH"

By
Eugene Cullen Kennedy

An "autochthonous Church" may be a mouthful of Greek to most American Catholics but it may also be the best hope for the future of Catholicism in this country. So contends Robert Blair Kaiser in "A Church in Search of Itself" just published by Knopf.

The big fat Greek word derives from KHTHON or *earth* and it means "one sprung from the land itself." For Kaiser, who has covered religion for TIME and CBS and is now a contributing editor in Rome for NEWSWEEK, it describes a "home grown Church," one that is loyal to Rome and true to its American values at the same time.

Kaiser surveys the Church in such apparently differing places as South America and Asia, noting how these "local churches," as they are called, draw on their own traditions and customs to express themselves in their own true cultural voices. This leads him to a spellbinding account of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger's measured but unmistakable campaign to succeed John Paul II in the papacy.

Ratzinger was the great crimson hope to many conservative Catholics. Writer George Weigel interpreted his election as a validation of John Paul II's tightening the screws of orthodoxy and centralizing all authority in himself. Whether Benedict will fulfill these longings or not, Kaiser's play by play of his election is as mesmerizing as it is revealing of the low politics that take place, as my grandmother used to say, "everywhere, including Hell."

Benedict XVI and the cardinals who elected him are not diminished by these conclave revelations. In fact, they seem more human, a word that comes from the same Greek word KHTHON found in an autochthonous or home grown church. As a theologian, Ratzinger had supported such local churches.

Kaiser, who covered Vatican II, foresees a return to churches that, following that Council's documents, recognize the collegial rather than autocratic structure of the Church and that have authority to resolve their local issues without submitting everything for censorship by Vatican bureaucrats or the approval of the Pope. Collegiality recognizes the theological principle that local bishops have their own authority from their ordination rather than by delegation from the Pope.

In an interview, Kaiser noted that "Autochthonous churches are nothing new and Cardinal Ratzinger wrote that the patriarchates allow local churches to embrace unity with the pope without "being incorporated into a uniform administration but only being inserted into a unity of faith and communion, in which the pope is acknowledged to have the power to give binding interpretations of the revelation given in Christ."

Kaiser describes the home grown Church as an "ancient idea" and the answer to the question raised by many Catholics about what they can do to strengthen their Church after the devastation of the sex abuse crisis.

"The idea is already in practice in the Catholic patriarchates that include the Melchites, the Maronites, and the Copts. They are all part of the Catholic Church but they have their own patriarchs, their own language, and their own traditions, including a married priesthood.

"In 1925, Cardinal Mercier proposed that Anglicans could be brought into communion with Rome following this principle. The Archbishop of Canterbury would have remained as their Primate and they could have retained their own language and other traditions. Unfortunately Pope Pius XI killed this initiative.

Kaiser argues that the American Church would be re-invigorated through more participation by its well educated members in electing their own bishops, another early church practice. The sex abuse crisis, he feels, is a function of the autocratic church top heavy with clergy who feel that, by being hierarchs, they are above the people and above the laws that bind everybody else. "They got away with it, Kaiser claims, "because, in Bill Clinton's phrase, 'they could.'

"If there had been mothers and fathers involved in making decisions about pedophile priests, here would have been no shifting them around, no covering up, no scandal."

The time is coming, Kaiser says, when theologically sophisticated American Catholics will expect a regional council to be convened like the 19th century Council of Baltimore. "Canon Law says that up to 50 percent of delegates can be non-bishops and non-priests. This would be a Church in which Catholics would feel they were citizens. The first thing new citizens say is 'I can vote now.'"

"A Church of 1.1 billion members," Kaiser contends, "cannot be micro-managed by one man in Rome. This Church was defined by Vatican II as a People of God rather than a collapsing Clerical Church in whose ruins the sex abuse scandal sprouted. We have reached the moment to implement that theology that supports the local church as springing from the land itself."