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The Sacrament in the Gulf

Eugene Cullen Kennedy | Jun. 17, 2010 Bulletins from the Human Side

The rig rests in the depths of the Gulf bleeding oil from its ruins, bleeding symbolically for the fishermen and workers it has visited with loss. A Tower of media Babel has risen above it, from which pundits analyze the wreck as an economic problem to be calculated, a political crisis not to be wasted, or an engineering puzzle to be solved. But even religious leaders have not yet spoken of this event as a spiritual Mystery that tracks our daily pilgrimage as a biblical pillar of cloud by day and of fire by night did that of the Israelites in Exodus.

Like the Titanic, Pearl Harbor, and 9/11, the oil rig disaster is a sensation but it is also a sacrament. We can never get enough of these earlier events in books, movies, and television documentaries because although we may resolve their historical details because they partake of Mystery with a capital M, we can never exhaust their revelation. We stumble on the hard rock of mystery with a small m when religious leaders, whose calling is to help us identify and enter into Spiritual Mystery, speak about great tragedies in pieties whose shallowness is mocked by the depth of what has occurred.

How can it be that so many of our leaders speak so comfortably of visions in far countries and enthusiastically lead pilgrimages to them when they cannot see the sacramental events that happen before their eyes?

For the terrible events in the Gulf are filled with the images of Mystery and of the themes of the Christian spiritual tradition. The rig went down in an explosion of earth, air, fire, and water, the elements of Creation, embracing men in its grasp as, like the Titanic, it descended into the waters that symbolize our own depths. We are all Jonah in the belly of the great fish in the Old Testament story that prefigures the death and resurrection theme of the New Testament. Are we not all fishermen standing on the shore waiting to cast our nets into the deep for its catch of spiritual Mystery?

The Jewish people passed into Egypt by water, through the well in the story of Joseph, and left Egypt through the waters by making their way safely through the Red Sea. The Gulf draws us to this Mystery about which Joseph Campbell asks, "Who comes out of the water? Who went into the water?"

Campbell answers that, if the Patriarchs went into the water, a People emerged from them. The Gulf speaks to our depths of this biblical motif, for Egypt was considered a land of mud but as the Jewish people arise from alien Egypt as the pearl does from the sea, so Christ rises from the tomb. Out of these same mythic depths come the themes of the fish as a symbol of belief and of the waters of baptism as our spiritual cleansing.

From the muddy bottom of the Gulf where the rig lies like the fated tree of Eden, a spiritual revelation speaks from behind the headlines to us. Religious leaders find it difficult to identify these mysteries because they were trained to be bookkeepers and administrators. Poets and prophets are not recruited for the bishopric resulting in the contented paralysis of clerical culture. Its members are trapped in the muddy earth and cannot easily pull free to identify the coral reef wonders of Mystery that glow with sacramental revelation in the depths of the Gulf.

The Mystery that bubbles out of the Gulf parallels the way Vatican I Catholics would allow Vatican II to bleed

to death out of our sight. For if the Jewish Patriarchs went into the water but the Jewish People emerged, so the ecclesiastical Patriarchs went into the deep waters of Vatican II but a People of God emerged. In Vatican II the Church remembered that it was not a collection of buildings and laws controlled by powerful patriarchs, but rather the living Mystery of a People of God. The revelation for us is the reaffirmation of that vision of the Church as a People in the sacramental Mystery that now speaks to our depths from the depths of the Gulf.

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