

Archbishop: Sing no sad songs for me, or happy ones either

Eugene Cullen Kennedy | Sep. 16, 2010 Bulletins from the Human Side

The real problem may be that archbishops don't have enough to do. That probably explains why Archbishop Denis Hart of the Melbourne, Australia archdiocese recently banned "romantic ballads, pop or rock music, political ... and football club songs" at funerals -- explaining that the ceremonies should be devoted to prayer for the soul of the deceased.

Fr. Bob McGuire, a priest of the Melbourne archdiocese and Australian media personality, said that he would "salute and conform but I'll have to be creative to give people access to their own local and tribal customs" -- noting that these often include the very kind of music that apparently displeases Hart.

It may be that Hart just had a bad day. He sounds as if he were finally venting long pent up irritation or trying to get an organized group of complainers off his back.

Or this may be the latest chapter in the reform of the reform. You may recall the New Jersey bishop who, a few years back, forbade anyone who wasn't ordained from speaking at funerals. Such edicts may be shorthand among the hierarchy to let them know that they are with the pope in recreating the old church.

Would anything do that better than a drear funeral, all in black vestments carried out in the presence of Catholics who know to sit in passive silence as the priests say the Mass as if it were a matter just between them and God?

As poet Robert Frost once said that he would want to be sure of what he was walling in or walling out, so Hart may well reflect on what he is ruling in or out of the liturgy that, in fact, does more than offer an opportunity to "pray for the soul of the deceased."

The Mass of the Resurrection proclaims that central mystery of our faith in which everyone in the church is involved and on which, as they pray for the deceased, they may well meditate. This also proclaims the unity of human personality, something that -- whether the archbishop observes it or not -- is characterized by play, a concept whose symbolization may not, therefore, be out of place on these occasions.

It may annoy Hart but anthems, ballads, and athletic songs mark the stages and relationships that define the lives of persons and their families. You cannot, as archbishops often do, condemn treating humanity as an anonymous mass while forbidding people to remember the large and small things that made the deceased persons individuals.

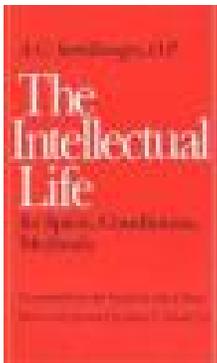
What do archbishops mean when they rule out "secular" songs?

They call their own priests secular, after all, and for a good reason. Secular derives from the Latin *saeculum*, meaning "age" or "time." Secular priests are supposed to be men of their age, of their time. A secular song or ballad may sing better than anything else of the times of the life of the deceased person, recreating a sense of his wholeness and liveliness that, as St. Irenaeus long ago told us, is "the glory of God."

Indeed, one of the defining elements of being alive is our capacity for play. When we enter wholeheartedly into play we forget ourselves and shed the burden of our self-consciousness.

Self-conscious people cannot play at all. That is one of golfer Tiger Woods' problems as he struggles to recapture his once free and graceful way of playing. Purgatory may well be imagined, not as time in a holding cell outside Heaven, but as a rite of passage in which, in an instant, we are freed of our self-consciousness -- that absorption with how we look and how we perform that is the last link in the manacles that bind us to time. Then we are at last free to enter Eternity the only way you can -- playfully.

Homo Ludens, Latin for humans at play, was the term that in the Middle Ages celebrated this distinctly human activity. The word's roots are in *plegen*, which means to pledge or to guarantee, as well as in plight and danger -- associations that remind us of the profound implications of playing in which forgetting ourselves is integral to our pledging ourselves in difficult times. What glory of the deepest meaning of play do genuine heroes display when, after rescuing others, they literally downplay themselves saying, "I didn't do anything special."



Something sacred, therefore, lies at the heart of play. In his famous book *The Intellectual Life*,

Antonin-Gilbert Sertillanges noted the intimate relationship between play and contemplation -- activities in which we lose ourselves when we give ourselves to them for no reason but to surrender to them. They are self-justifying and self-enhancing experiences that are mortgaged when we do them for some other reason.

It may not be so obvious with contemplation, but something happens to the human essence of play when people do it for money. Oh, there are still flashes of the sheer joy of playing, but some of the magic vanishes under the weight of signing bonuses, contract negotiations, so-called free agency, and the many attendant complications -- including the raised ticket prices that make it difficult for a father to bring his family to a professional game. The same thing happens with children who, left alone, will play for the sake of playing, but, managed by hustling parents in little league, may permanently lose the wonder that goes with spontaneous play. Just ask Reggie Bush who returned his Heisman Trophy this week for accepting gifts that ultimately undermined the spirit of playing college football for its own sake.

People who sing songs, even football songs, are recapitulating the human story -- reminding us not only of what the deceased was like but what we are like. They remind us of the relationship between play and contemplation -- and how both give us an experience of the eternal.

Maybe Archbishop Hart is so busy with administrative tasks, those faux eternal details, that he doesn't have enough time to play and get back in touch with the eternal in everyday life. Maybe he and other archbishops should think of what sex abuse does to children by taking away their playfulness, often for a lifetime.

Play is too vital a Christian virtue not to be contemplated for its role in human life and in celebrating those who now know the truly playful nature of the eternal.

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