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9/11 site, sacred in itself

Eugene Cullen Kennedy | Sep. 9, 2011 Bulletins from the Human Side

New York's Mayor Bloomberg has proven himself the Cirque de Soleil gymnast of political correctness by banning, on grounds of vague and affected nobility, the presence of any members of the clergy on the tenth anniversary of the attacks on the World Trade Towers.

Like a dignitary who does not know that his shirt-tail is hanging out while he tries to act solemnly, the mayor reveals that he does not understand his people, the nature of religion, or what happened on that crisp blue skied morning when terrorists slashed the towers as a killer would slit the wrists of a beautiful woman, staining lower New York with the blood of 3,000 good people.

Has the Mayor asked New Yorkers whether they want members of the clergy present on the tenth anniversary of the terrorist attacks? He should ask them what the clergy of various faiths meant to these people on that numbing day itself. Whom did they seek out, not out of fear of the End of the World or the realization of the Rapture, but because, having entered the overpowering Mystery of Love and Loss, they instinctively turned to their clergy, not for answers or cheap pieties but to draw deeply and wordlessly from their faith tradition with priests, ministers, and rabbis who stood with them as Mystery with a capital M coated them with its rolling clouds of dust and debris.

Does the Mayor understand what happened humanly as the firefighters, laden with gear, climbed up the stairs not seeking a way out of the dying buildings but trying to find a way in to save as many lives as they could? Perhaps he has never grasped the powerful symbolism of the firefighters, carrying their chaplain, Fr. Mychal Judge, as warriors once bore their dead chieftain on a shield, and placing him, dead of a heart attack as he worked to help others on that raging morning, tenderly before the altar of a nearby church.

Perhaps the Mayor does not understand that religion is not a substance manufactured in churches and temples and force fed to people from childhood. Religion -- a Joseph's coat of faith rather than the patched and platitude laden shawl clutched by politicians on the Fourth of July -- is a function of human personality. Men and women go to their churches and temples not to find faith but to bring their own faith there and to have it symbolized and strengthened by the rituals and sacraments that speak knowingly to their depths.

Indeed, 9/11 was itself a day of sacramental revelation in which, suffused in Mystery, we learned something about ordinary people that we had only speculated about before. We learned what ordinary people -- like those in all the random gatherings in which we find ourselves, in airports, lobbies, or at football games, and, of course, at the Last Judgment -- do when they know that they are going to die.

They do not cry out for mercy or run away in fear; they do not deny or look away from Death's eyes but stare unblinkingly into them. They do, in fact, something quite human. They call somebody else up to tell them that they love them. Under the pall of flame and smoke, the towers pulsed not with so much with groans of fear as with expressions of love as spouses, parents, children, and friends sought each other out to pledge their love knowing that it triumphed over impending death.

Those voices and their whispered messages of love will be heard in the soft winds that spiral up from the scars that remain, deep vessels now of the exchanges between ordinary people who, facing death chose life, and so made the site forever sacred by their commitments to each other.

The Catholic Church speaks of Feasts in Ordinary Time and that is what 9/11 was and remains, a celebration of the Mystery that was unraveled by ordinary men and women and their love for each other that was stronger than death.

Blomberg cannot remove or disguise the religious and spiritual qualities that infuse the 9/11 site. His decision seems so pitifully small in contrast to the greatness of the ordinary men and women who, by taking on the Mystery of Death with only their love as their shield -- like others in a Pennsylvania meadow and at the Pentagon -- made the space forever sacred on that morning.

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