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The liturgical season of autumn

Eugene Cullen Kennedy | Sep. 30, 2011 Bulletins from the Human Side

Liturgical seasons, such as Lent and Advent, are meant to open us less to articles of the creed and more to the essential character of religion, the experience of Mystery.

That's not the Hercule Poirot small letter mystery with everybody grouped as if for a family photograph as the Belgian detective neatly answers the questions about and explains a death in which everyone is a suspect.

It is rather the capital letter Mystery in which we are on our ordinary rounds, as W.H. Auden observes about suffering's taking place "while someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along," the Mystery for which there are no neat answers or explanations and in which everybody is a participant.

Autumn harvests the liturgical field of Ordinary Time, laying its sheaths before the candles of Advent that burn low as swiftly as the light of the year's last days do before Christmas. If there is a time for summing up, for reflecting on the Mystery in which we are all caught up, it is tawny autumn that is infused with hints of its Mystery and our own.

Perhaps that is because, despite New Year's Day and its ever hopeful resolutions, the year really begins in autumn when schools open again and everybody gets back to work after the interludes of summer. But, despite its yeasty symbolization of endings and fresh beginnings, autumn also mixes melancholy into its days and death into its mood much as April mixes "memory and desire" in Eliot's *The Waste Land*.

Autumn speaks to the poets who speak to us of its sacramental nature, not solving its Mystery as much as revealing its Mystery in us and to us. We are not surprised to learn that, as the *Titanic* listed toward its last plunge into the deep a hundred years ago next April, its musicians did not play *Nearer My God to Thee*, as is often reported, but rather a melody called *Autumn*.

The *Titanic* is, of course, a sacramental Mystery whose scattered wreckage lies in the Deep, the waters that

symbolize the mysterious and the ineffable that are, in fact, aspects of the ordinary time of each of our lives. The final faint music from the dying vessel evokes Paul Verlaine's "long sobs of the violin of autumn" that "pierced" his "heart" -- and ours -- "with monotonous languor."

How right is that word "monotonous" for that catches the plainchant of ordinary time when we don't seem to be doing anything but looking backward at moments and places we can no longer enter and looking forward to the events, like weddings, baptisms, and graduations that transform the rowboat of routine days into vessels of expectation and fulfillment.

Languor is a good word for it is the inlay of this season in which we feel more deeply than at any other period of the year just how profoundly human we all are. Autumn is *our* liturgical season and the musicians on the *Titanic* -- can't you hear them now? -- are playing for us. This season may go unnamed by the Church but it is celebrated by all of us.

[Eugene Cullen Kennedy is emeritus professor of psychology at Loyola University, Chicago.]

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