NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

What do you have in your wallet?

Eugene Cullen Kennedy | Mar. 12, 2012 Bulletins from the Human Side

These familiar words aren't so much a question as they are an advertising copywriter slithering into your garden with a modern reworking of an old temptation: Bite this apple and you will have knowledge of how godlike you are in displaying your material wealth to the world.

That goes along with the question in *The Little Prince* about why, when you make a new friend, people always ask questions that are answered with numbers, such as how old he is and how much money does his father make, when the more revealing questions concern more than wealth, such as what are the color of his eyes and does he collect butterflies?

We are moved to inspect what we carry with us because of the recent tragedies that, against the horrific backgrounds of wars and tornadoes, have spread piecemeal before us not only what people carry in their pockets but inside their homes as well.

These turn out to be things that transcend the measurement we apply to worldly goods. We are moved instead to wonder at how deeply spiritual these haphazardly strewn bits and pieces are in their mute but moving testimony about the simple but deep humanity of those who carried them in their pockets or stored them in their homes.

If you really want to understand the much-discussed theological notion of "revelation," inspect the terrorist victims with their pockets turned out with their miniscule treasures, so like the ones you carry in your own wallets, scattered on the ground, too small to attract the attention of the looters who quickly scooped up the bills and coins that are just like those taken from the nearby dead.

These items constitute, however, unique collections, the one-of-a-kind collages that are unlike those of any of the other victims. This miscellany reveals, in its very randomness, the depth and breadth of this individual person's existence. So, too, the dwellings, slit open by the knife edge of tornado winds, like envelopes whose crumpled letters tell us that these were not just houses but homes. The contents proclaim that the people who lived here loved each other deeply. The devastated owners reveal their spiritual values as they return, always looking for the human treasures of family pictures and keepsakes that speak of the sacredness of the life they shared under these now-blown-away roofs.

The great English writer G.K. Chesterton once found himself standing before an audience without the manuscript of his prepared lecture. Ever inventive, he emptied his pockets and gave a talk on the meaning of the various objects he found. He was alert to the sacramental nature of the items that, hodgepodge though they seemed, revealed so much, even to him, of what he valued, whom he loved and the work that defined his life.

What do we carry in our wallets, perhaps transferred from one wallet to another over a lifetime, that tell us what we value and whom we love and who loves us that has kept us going all these years? Whose picture is that, and what is that scrap of a note from your spouse, or that receipt from a time so good that it comes back to mind when you look at it? What is there, besides your driver's license with that bad picture of you on it, or Social Security card, that tell what numbers cannot, about what and whom you cherish and maybe even if you collect

butterflies?

Perhaps you will find a surprise, as I did, after I looked once more at the picture of my wife, whose blue eyes look at me over the edge of the pocket that holds it. After I emptied out the wallet, I found a pair of ticket stubs from the first major-league baseball game to which my father took me a long time ago. He seemed 10 feet tall to me then as I entered the ball park feeling that the universe had just opened up. He was only 5 foot 8, of course, and I know more about the way the universe can close down without warning now, but it was a revelation, because he is still 10 feet tall to me and the universe still overflows with wonder.

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