

Catholicism's central teaching: how to be imperfect

Eugene Cullen Kennedy | Oct. 19, 2012 | Bulletins from the Human Side

Americans sighed with relief when the professional football referees returned to our contemporary versions of the Roman Coliseum to replace the substitutes on whom the fans, like jeering Romans of old, had turned their thumbs down for making allegedly bad calls in the early weeks of the season.

This is the latest version of the quest for perfection that can never be attained in any endeavor worthy of humans. The demand for being perfect, based on Matthew 5:14, "Be ye therefore perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect," became the deranged and deranging discipline that was brought to an end by Vatican II's healthier attitude toward spiritual growth.

One of the great, largely unseen and surely unsung tragedies of the old church to which Pope Benedict XVI's "Reform of the Reform" triumphantly proposes to return us was that of good-hearted and willing young men and women sacrificing their spontaneity and zest for life on the altar, more pagan than Christian, of trying to follow the Rule of Life that their superiors insisted was the perfect expression of God's will for them.

No wonder *docility* was the virtue dearest to the hearts of superiors in those days. "Keep the Rule," they would say in one of their most addled dicta, "and the Rule will keep you." Good-hearted young men and women thought these superiors, like the restored professional referees, knew what they were doing when they told them that spiritual perfection lay in following the rules -- most of them more like traffic regulations than spiritual insights -- that covered almost every waking moment in the lives of seminarians and aspirants to religious orders.

The seminary I attended instructed students with a solemnity unrelieved by irony, "Never appear at the window without your cincture on." Those who broke any of the rules, mostly by doing something healthy, such as talking to another human being during imposed periods of strict silence, had to report themselves to their superiors. In its most baroque form, this took place at a Chapter of Faults, a public event, in which candidates could accuse themselves, and sometimes others, of rule infractions. Being a seminarian or a novice in these circumstances was the closest thing to being an innocent bystander at the collision of inhuman but supposedly "perfect" spiritual nonsense with human and reassuringly imperfect common sense.

The so-called "Reform of the Reform" would love to bring back this idea that religion imposes some quest for perfection on us. That is an illusion akin to the notion that the professional football referees will call every play perfectly. Instant replay was only introduced when fans, owners and sportswriters complained that the professional referees made too many mistakes in their calls on the field.

The quest for perfection, which has no real application in the spiritual life, calls for a reach that is always beyond our grasp. Even instant replay, through which plays are examined from all angles in slow motion and in freeze-frame, does not always get it right and leaves onlookers frustrated. The same applies to baseball umpires whose calls of balls and strikes are now tested by radar images of where the ball is in relationship to the strike zone. Everyone can see that they practice, as we all do in life, an imperfect art.

The mystery of being human and certainly of being a Catholic lies in our embracing together the imperfect state

known as the human condition. First and foremost, if we could ever be perfect or do things perfectly, we would eliminate mystery, an essential ingredient in the good life and the spiritual life. Perfection is found, for example, in plastic reproductions that gave off a faint whiff of death, as Norman Mailer used to say, suggesting that a tax on that commodity would benefit mankind.

When we speak of mystery, we refer to the small everyday mysteries that, in fact, constitute the great Mystery in which we all live and without which life would be intolerable and, indeed, impossible.

We encounter and enter our richest, most humanly defining experiences by way of a tear in the fabric of things, because we are running late, or because we recognize, across a crowded room, a face whose lack of perfection allows a unique light to shine through and to stir us with uncommon wonder. This experience, often the first off-key note in a melody of love that only we can hear, would never take place if everyone had perfect features that hid the glow of their individuality.

The Mystery of love hardly ever occurs in ideal conditions, but almost always accidentally, often unexpectedly, and in homely settings, much as that other great Mystery, human suffering, which, as W.H. Auden wrote, takes place "when someone else is eating or looking out a window or just walking dully along."

If you ask people what attracted them to the person they love, they never tell you of some perfect feature that focused them on sheer surfaces but rather an imperfection that allowed them to see into their uncharted depths. Ulysses S. Grant, famous general and former president, would never allow his beloved Julia to have surgery for her slightly crossed eyes because they were the eyes of the woman with whom he had fallen in love, and he never wanted to change them.

There would be no need for love if perfection were possible. Love arises from our imperfection, from our being different and always in need of the forgiveness, encouragement and that missing half of ourselves that we are searching for, as the Greek myth tells us, in order to complete ourselves. In every mythic tale, it is where we stumble and fall that we discover the gold.

So beware of those who are currently trying to overturn Vatican II's understanding, as the late Cardinal Albert Meyer put it in a famous intervention, that the church is the home of sinners and home, as Robert Frost wrote, is "the place that when you go there, they have to take you in."

In short, blessed are the imperfect, for theirs is the Kingdom of God.

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