

The sacramental revelation of Newtown, Conn.

Eugene Cullen Kennedy | Dec. 20, 2012 | Bulletins from the Human Side

Here the uncomforted Rachel weeps once more for her children, and Mary and the other women huddle once more beneath the cross of Calvary rudely raised on a Friday around the ninth hour in the Connecticut town that is Bethlehem for all of us this Christmas.

We are pilgrims together in the early darkness of the year's longest night, less sure the closer we get to the wounds that throb with such grief that we wonder if we should have come at all.

What can we say or give these people rubbed so raw that even our well-meaning embraces may only intensify their pain? What do we know and what can we say to these people who have already drained the cup of suffering to the dregs? Perhaps we are learning that in events so much larger and in sadness so much deeper than any we have known that there is a time for embracing, and a time to refrain from embracing, as well.

We step back, unwilling to intrude on private sorrows that have been put on glaring but brief public display by the commentators and camera crews who then pack up and leave the sorrowing town they have, as they say, covered, then abandoned like miners' camps after the gold runs out.

There are commentators enough asking religion to find meaning that is supposedly curled like an explanatory gene in the cellular structure of this tragedy. Religion cannot, and it has never pretended do that, of course. If this emboldens atheists to increase their we-are-superior-to-you feelings by shaking their fists at a cruel and unjust God, it plunges us more deeply into the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, the utterly overwhelming and gripping Mystery of our existence that is the central Mystery of our faith.

Research in the psychology of religion tells us that the more mature and integrated a person's faith is the less it settles things with facile answers and the more it prompts the person to ask deeper and more unsettling questions.

And that is where we would be left in Newtown if it were not for the sacramental revelation of an event that will always be too terrible to name. There was revelation from the religious leaders who responded so simply and directly to the loss. St. Rose of Lima's pastor, Msgr. Robert Weiss, revealed to Catholics how many good priests there are who, precisely because of their goodness, never get their names in the papers.

Newtown, like 9/11, is the site of a profound sacramental revelation, one that is just right for the feast of Christmas that celebrates God's becoming human, like us, as we read in the scriptures, in everything except sin. The profoundly sacramental revelation is not of the shimmering glory of angels or the sanctity supposedly attained by holy wannabes through shunning the world for a life of fasts and self-administered mortifications.

The revelation is of the simple goodness of all the people we mistakenly term "ordinary." Their everyday virtue, the richness of its hues, like those of a saddle deepened by daily use, is what is left standing after a tragic blow such as the Newtown killings levels everything else. Such goodness blinds atheists who prefer to gaze into the darkness and see nothing rather than use the light of this commonplace goodness to see, as the mystical poet

Blake expresses it, "the world as it is, infinite."

One must doubt the claim that "the age of Revelation has ended" when we find goodness, heaped up, packed down and overflowing, in the living revelation of the parents and families and, most of all, in the trusting children, the holy innocents of this Christmas season. We seem to be seeing them off so that their last words and gestures, the goodbyes of these good boys and girls never spoiled by life, break our hearts and make us stand back in wonder.

These children do lead us, and of such the Kingdom of God is called into being, or perhaps we can speak of "attendance," to which they raised their hands, affirming their presence -- yes, we are here -- every day in the school in which they broke free of time and entered fully the eternal of which, because it is the freeing energy of play, they had no fear.

Longing to comfort, even from afar, we are ourselves comforted by these children and their families. Many people speak of the evil that visited Newtown in the last week but one before Christmas. But it is the goodness that has always been there that we discover as the great revelation of this Christmas season.

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