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Ordinary time: The time of our lives

Eugene Cullen Kennedy | Sep. 9, 2010 Bulletins from the Human Side

We talk about the quick end of summer but it actually dies slowly. We root for it as it fights, as doomed and gallantly as the defenders of the Alamo, to preserve its sunlit freedom against the assault of autumn that takes us prisoner and repatriates us to the routine days in which we live most of our lives. The sure sacramental sense of the church is nowhere more evident than in its designation of this period as ordinary time.

Ordinary time has actually been quietly with us, of course, because it refers to those parts of the liturgical year that do not fall in one of the seasons of Advent, Christmas, Lent, or Easter.

As homeward bound novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald gazed out of the train at the flakes drifting down on the Midwestern landscape to claim them as ?our snow,? so we may claim this interval as ?our time.? For Fitzgerald the snow was not a stranger but a friend in whose company he had grown up. So ordinary time, since it is most of the time in the church year, offers the comfort of an old friend with whom we can be ourselves. That is, beneath elaborated liturgical theories, the real reason that the church created ordinary time. It fits the human. It is our time, the place -- as Robert Frost wrote of home -- that ?when you have to go there they have to take you in.?

A climb up the family tree of ordinary is quite instructive. You will not be surprised to learn that the word comes from the Latin *ordo*, meaning ?order.? It signifies a person ?not distinguished by rank or position ... of low social position, as in ?the common people.? ? It refers to the ?commonplace ... the mundane ... the average or normal.?

Ordinary?s richer meanings reassure us of the majesty of Ordinary time and the common people who live in it.

Its most remote root is *ar* which means ?to fit together? and shows up in art and artist. The Latin *ordiri* means ?to begin to weave? just as believers begin to form a church out of the cloth of their relationships. The same root, trailing its sacramental tendrils, appears in *ritus*, or rite, as well as in kindred; these are foundational concepts for a people gathering to worship. This eucharistic nature of this gathering is confirmed and deepened in ordinary?s meaning as ?an inn in which ... food is served regularly in a community.?

Is it just a little surprising that, since it also means ?the lowest class of seaman,? it should also refer to the ?holder of a jurisdiction, attaching to an ecclesiastical office? -- in short, the bishop of a diocese?

A bishop was also traditionally the canonical holder of ?ordinary power.? He can -- as the man in the Gospel story described himself to Jesus -- order this man to come, and he comes, and order that man to go, and he goes. That functionary from the Gospel parable was struck, however, by the difference between his power and the authority he sensed in Jesus. Ordinary people, ?average people? as we are known, instinctively understand the difference between these notions. The church has understood and approved this capacity as the ?Gift of Reception? that is invested in all the average people who live in ordinary time.

The church acknowledges that everyday believers have ordinary power of a very different kind than that

attributed to bishops. The judgment of ordinary men and women is trustworthy and no teaching can be proclaimed by the church if it is not accepted by the healthier and larger part (*sanior et maior pars fidelium*, in Latin) of the faithful. The church accepts, in other words, the experience of believers as a valid test of any proposed teaching. Thus, the people have not completely accepted Pope Paul VI?s encyclical *Humanae Vitae* on birth control and -- despite strenuous papal efforts to make the teaching infallible -- do not accept the theological arguments against ordaining women priests.

Infallibility may well rest with the ordinaries gathered in a church council, but it may also be found in the community of ordinary people ?not distinguished by rank or position? who constitute the church as a people of God in sacramental relationship to each other. They can determine whether a pronouncement or teaching matches or falls short of their real life experience.

The doctrine of Reception is, appropriately enough, observable in lesser ways during ordinary time. It?s wonderfully human -- and therefore sacramental -- character identifies it. Watch as the preacher wanders during his homily and the patient pew bound believers begin to read the parish bulletin, clean out their purses, inspect the crayon scrawls of the very young, or, in the most decisive judgment of all, simply doze off.

These are the homely reassurances that the church as a people of God is a made up of ordinary men and women who know there is room for them at the inn where the hungry are fed, the grieving are comforted, and their own ordinariness is supported and celebrated.

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