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The eternal, hidden in plain sight

by Eugene Cullen Kennedy

Bulletins from the Human Side

A preacher to the papal household will not get in trouble by telling its residents that the world needs a renewed faith in eternity.

Although this cannot be news to Vatican insiders, it is the answer, according to a report on the *Catholic Culture* Web site, to the questions that secularization has raised as it has metastasized across a Europe once confident of its Catholic identity.

The perspective of eternity, according to the report on Papal household preacher Capuchin Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa's weekly Advent sermon, is important to those who wish to place a proper value on the peaks and valleys of human life.

Cantalamessa will not lose his place in the line of those who want to be Monsignors by such pious assertions but, with due respect, can he tell us something in depth about the eternal in our lives?

The people who can are all around us all the time -- ordinary people who experience it in greater or lesser ways every day.

Life is more than a little like a hillside barn that has survived a hundred winters. The rising or setting sun strikes it, slowly glazing its paint flaked boards and gilding the cracks and fissures worked into it by the weather. Beheld from afar the structure streams light, no longer a victim battered by time but become a vessel of the eternal that is symbolized by the saving sun.

The eternal does not find its way in through some richly appointed portal but -- echoing the scriptural description of how Jesus learned patience -- through all that it has suffered. The eternal enters our lives in a similar manner, through all that we have suffered or, more generally speaking, through all that we go

through in our experience of the simple mysteries of being alive.

Hardship and loss -- those thankless stepchildren of time -- break us open to the eternal that rises from the embrace of our family and friends in difficult times, in the gifts as simple as those celebrated in song, of those who stick with us or stand by without intruding when we are out of breath or worn down by our burdens.

As a synapse conducts energy from one cell to another so those who love us transmit the eternal across the gaps in our lives. How are we born again if not through this daily infusion of the eternal into what seems on the surface like ordinary time?

For those who understand the eternal there is no such thing as ordinary time and, indeed, nothing that is totally secular either. As Pope Paul VI once expressed it, the whole world is imbued with the sacred. We don't need to do an MRI to discover the eternal that buoys even the secular that the unknowing think can be scrubbed clean of it.

Think for a moment of the wonder at the utter goodness of the ordinary men and women victims of the knife thrusts of the airplanes into New York's Twin Towers. In them we witnessed the eternal as they revealed what people do when they know that they are going to die; they call up somebody -- their spouses, their parents, their children -- to tell them that they love them. In the midst of horror we all encountered the eternal that day.

The eternal is not a far country, a future hidden in the folds of the last century of time. It can be entered at any moment. The only ticket you need is that of being human. The eternal is not something waiting for us or for which, like the last plane out of the Casablanca of the human condition, we must wait for a lifetime.

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Ordinary men and women, who will be lucky to get their names in the papers when they die, traffic in the eternal every day. These people experience the eternal. They take their first taste of eternal life when they look into each other's eyes and fall -- yes, it is a fall rather than a jump -- in love. Time falls away, for, by love they break free of its grip, and, actually rather than fancifully, they enter eternal life.

This same experience occurs when we are lost in work that we love and look up to find that the morning has, as people say, "gotten away" from us. In fact we have gotten away from time, broken it as riders do a wild horse, and we never need fear that it can ever throw us again.

Drudgery is the product of time when we do not know how to engage it or when we are attempting something that is not right for us, whether it is the book we are reading or the task we are performing. Joy is the fruit of the eternal when we give ourselves to that which truly matches and tests us.

That is what the artists do for us. They strip away the sheath of time to reveal the eternal core in the world around us. Thus people often say that a book or a movie, even if it is about Devil's Island, can catch the eternal flavor of a religious experience while a church ritual indifferently celebrated is like doing hard time on Devil's Island itself.

The Vatican preacher said that "the perspective of eternity is important to those who wish to place a proper value on the peaks and valleys of human life."

Perhaps he meant to say what everybody who has dwelt in the sun shafts of the old barn of existence

already knows -- that the eternal is in the peaks and valleys of life and is too precious to place a proper value or any price on it.

The eternal may be entered by anybody at any time. Life points, indeed pushes, us in its direction all the time.

The more we look for it, the easier it becomes to recognize it and to appreciate, as Joseph Campbell expresses it, how all moments are "transparent to transcendence."

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