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Reform of reform out of sync with Easter season

by Eugene Cullen Kennedy

Bulletins from the Human Side

The Easter season, as we observed in the last Bulletin, is set, as is Passover, to the rhythm of the universe, to the springtime moon's throwing off its shadow, the symbol of our overcoming death with new life.

The powerful underlying theme of the season is our need to surrender old and deadened images of ourselves and our lives to embrace new and fuller spiritual realizations of our resurrected life. We must, as the association of eggs with Easter signifies, peck our way free of the shells that contain us if we are to be born to the resurrected life.

So, too, are we to understand the rabbit as an Easter symbol because its image is thought to be found on the surface of the moon, whose cycles display the season's death/resurrection theme across the skies.

Passover reminds Jews of their breaking free of their captivity in Egypt, leaving their desert-fashioned trinkets behind to pass through the symbolically parted waters that symbolize their depths, to enter the Promised Land of the Spirit. Easter reminds Christians that they must leave their old selves behind and pass through the waters of Baptism that purify their depths to enter the new life of the Kingdom. A dying to all the unnecessary trinkets, the shell bits, so to speak, of an earlier world is the necessary condition for entering the resurrected life.

"Letting go" is a perennial spiritual theme that the reform of the reform applies backward. Its advocates are doing what is common when people are faced with enormous change. They are, as Marshall McLuhan described people shrinking back from the demands of the 21st century, "driving into the future looking in the rearview mirror."

The reform of the reform wants to let go -- not of the world of Vatican I that reinforced an era already battered by the coming 20th century, but that of Vatican II, which opened the church to the space age of

the 21st century.

Indeed, the dynamics of the space/information age rather than the actions of supposedly heretical Vatican II Catholics lie beneath the inexorable cosmic change that so dismays the so-called reformers now in ascendancy in the Catholic church.

As Joseph Campbell expressed it in the conversation to which I alluded in the last Bulletin, "Easter is not Easter and Passover is not Passover unless they release us from the tradition that gives us these feasts. ... We are challenged both mystically and socially, because our ideas of the universe have been re-ordered by our experience in space. The consequence is that we can no longer hold on to the religious symbols that we formulated when we thought that the earth was the center of the universe."

"The space age," Campbell continued, "demands that we change our ideas about ourselves, but we want to hold on to them. That is why" -- and these words apply to the Reform of the Reform -- "there is a resurgence of old-fashioned orthodoxy in so many places at the present time. ... We cannot hold on to ourselves and our in-groups as we once did.

"The space age makes that impossible, but people reject this demand or don't want to go back, so they pull back into one true church."

This space age reveals a no-horizons universe in which there is no longer an up or a down and an earth that is in the heavens rather than separated from it. This unity in the universe restores our sense of the unity of the human person and means that teachings and symbols that divide mind and body or flesh and spirit have lost their resonance with and their relevance for human experience.

The reform of the reform, therefore, wants to preserve the hierarchical form in every way that it can and to suppress the more traditional collegiality that matches the institutional needs of the church in the age of space.

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The Easter season's emphasis on letting go of the deadened past in order to enter the abundant life of the future allows us to see that, granting their good intentions, the proponents of the reform of the reform are fundamentally rejecting the challenge of new life for the spurious comfort of memories of a golden age that never was.

This longing for a romanticized and forlorn ecclesiology explains the range of initiatives that, like the literal translation of Mass texts now in use -- sort of -- seem so antiquated and ill-suited to modern tongues and contemporary experience. This desire to fend off a threatening future explains the efforts to restore the Latin Mass, to bring back a dead language to speak quaintly to living people, a clericalism as be-cassocked as it is besotted with its own superiority to the laypeople who have finally been put in their place outside the altar rail.

When we think of the smug rejection of women priests and the edgy reluctance to deal with sex abuse victims, we sadly realize that the good ship Reform of the Reform never heard of the lifeboat rule "Women and children first." Perhaps that is why, despite its now noisy glory as it keeps to its fated course, we can make out the legend TITANIC on its hull.

The 100th anniversary of the sinking of that vessel comes early in this Easter/Passover season. The

biggest challenge for the reformers is that of letting go of their course, of shifting direction before they enter the iceberg field. They really have nothing to fear from the Easter season's urging us to let old things die so that new and richer life may replace it. As Campbell noted of the deeper understanding of our tradition and its symbols demands of us, "Understanding these symbols in their transcendent spiritual sense enables us to see and to possess our religious traditions freshly." That, in fact, is what the Easter season and Vatican II are all about, and that is what the reform of the reform does not seem to understand at all.

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