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Heaven a homecoming for Andrew Greeley

by Eugene Cullen Kennedy

Bulletins from the Human Side

Fr. Andrew Greeley

Andrew Greeley, who was so deeply involved in the things of time, broke free of his shackles last week to enter fully the eternity whose boundaries he broke as easily as a champion miler does the tape on almost every day of his long and remarkable life.

I knew Andrew for half a century and, thinking of his quick smile and his twinkling eyes, I recall his telling me once that he expected heaven to be a homecoming, the scene of a family reunion whose joy is not threatened by the certainty that its magic and mystery will end with sundown.

He led and enjoyed a very public life in which he broke Teddy Roosevelt's mantra by both speaking loudly and carrying a big stick in confronting the injustices and shortcomings he identified in the interlocking worlds of church and state. Although he acted like the scrappy Irishman whose persona he at times mischievously inhabited, I remember Andrew as a man who did not live nearly so much as a Celtic battler as he did the contemplative life of a monk who wanted to cast light on the depths of human existence.

That is why, of all his titles and degrees, he preferred that of priest. Through the many talents with which he was gifted, he saw his first calling as a minister to the needy and brokenhearted all around him. If that sometimes led him into places and into people's lives in unexpected and sometimes uncalled for interventions, he always entered with the heart of a priest who, in the words Blessed Pope John XXIII used to explain why he convened the Second Vatican Council, wanted "to make the human sojourn on earth less sad."

It is no surprise that he wrote a series of mystery novels featuring a hero based on his own musings about himself, Fr. Blackie Ryan. These were really glints from his preoccupation with and absorption in

Mystery with a capital M. That is, as he understood from the Catholic tradition, far more than religious practices or even creedal statements, the core of real religion.

That Mystery includes the things some people think incompatible with the existence of God, the storms that strike haphazardly, the deaths of the innocent, the losses that pile up in the lives of good people, the heartbreak often found in the heart of the greatest of love stories. Andrew drew on these themes even in the novels that Graham Greene would have classified as "entertainments." These notions emerged as the fruit of the contemplation of the world to which, in the quieter and deeper side of himself, he immersed himself un-self-consciously every day. And every day, unlike many Christians, and even unlike many priests, he strove to practice what he preached.

We called each other friends and counted on each other, but our friendship was tested by times in which we drifted apart but could still hear each other's voices. Irish brothers have a way of falling out then finding each other again. In our case, the cause of the falling out is complex and now irrelevant. The finding of our friendship again was the important thing, and it was all his doing.

When I had cancer surgery and was sitting quietly, sorting out the situation with my wife at Northwestern Hospital, Andrew came through the door to bring me his blessing, to cheer us up and, in less than the time it takes to tell about it, to restore our friendship. As he said to me later with a smile, "Reconciliation is supposed to work that way." But he was the architect of the renewal of our friendship, for, as he also said to me later, "I wasn't sure if you would throw me out of the hospital room."

That generous, brave, big-hearted man is the one I remember, the priest caught up in contemplating the Mystery of our existence who in both word and deed lived by it. Andrew was caught up in the Mystery of suffering beyond our capacity to understand it for the last five years of his life. His death has freed him from the grip time placed on him and has now allowed him to enter, like a pilgrim throwing his crutch away at Lourdes, the eternity whose depths were so familiar to him.

Remember him as you will, as novelist, professor, or even as a general agitator for the good and challenger of the bad, for all these are masks he wore at one time or another. I will remember him as a friend who bridged the gap of estrangement, who made our friendship whole again and did it by fully entering the Mystery, even as he hails us now to join him at the family reunion he foresaw at the end of time.

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[Eugene Cullen Kennedy is emeritus professor of psychology at Loyola University, Chicago.]

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