

Eugene Kennedy, mentor and friend

Tom Roberts | Jun. 10, 2015 NCR Today

When NCR broke the clergy sex abuse story in the summer of 1985, for many of us in newsrooms around the country the story presented not only a journalistic challenge but a challenge to faith as well.

I know that for many Catholic journalists, at least, the healthy skepticism that normally provided a kind of padding against the occasional shock — the alcoholic priest, the bishop who had an affair or an addiction problem, the pastor who absconded with parish funds — was wholly inadequate to protect against the effects of the level of systemic deceit and corruption that began to surface in the sex abuse scandal.

The scandal broke shortly after I took over as news editor for Religion News Service, then located in New York, and sometime soon after that I began speaking regularly by phone with Eugene Kennedy, who died June 3 at age 86. (A fuller account of Kennedy's life and influence [can be found here](#) [1], and another tribute by colleague Tom Fox [can be found here](#). [2]) Kennedy became for me a mentor and guide through the horrible revelations that would continue for decades, and later a friend through my years at National Catholic Reporter.

What Kennedy, a psychologist, writer and former priest, understood were the deeper maladies in the clerical culture of which sex abuse was symptomatic. It all actually had less to do with sex than with the church's high notion of ordination. It had much to do with the thick layers of privilege that had accumulated over centuries, isolating the culture from the consequences of such behavior. It had to do, he allowed me to understand, with a culture so enamored of itself and its appearance that bishops could violate the trust of the community repeatedly, at a sacramental level, and repeatedly work out a justification for doing so.

Kennedy was a patient guide who understood that even the deepest sins of the institution did not ultimately define it. Beyond that fundamental insight — and a life that demonstrated that a critical eye and fidelity could coexist when it comes to the church — he understood the bigger picture in ways that illuminated the vast expanse extending beyond any editor's daily story budget.

The beginnings of such understanding in me were prompted by his 1985 reflection on Matthew's Gospel, *The Choice to be Human*, a title at first perplexing but then quite fitting as he moved through the text in ways that were both fresh and exhilarating for a young Catholic attempting to find how seemingly disparate pieces of the contemporary Catholic narrative fit together.

"The truth of faith," he wrote, "is a slender, glowing element that runs through even the seemingly ordinary and undramatic moments of existence. Even at low intensity, it is a steady source of illumination. Such religious truth is powerful even when it seems faint, even when it seems obscured by the larger events of history."

This Jesus he saw as so utterly human as well as divine ?understands the disappointments and disillusionments that fill every person?s life. His recognition of human weariness and woe is a sign, more powerful by far than miracles, of the salvation he proclaims. ? Faith bids us to raise the flame to life with the breath of our own spirits. That transaction, Jesus suggests, takes place in the secret places of the human heart more often than it does in temples and cathedrals.?

Kennedy loved to use the image of an audience in the lobby between acts of a play to describe the state of the church during the long papacy of John Paul II. It was ?an intermission? time between the Second Vatican Council and the church?s next act, he would say in describing how the church would make it through that period when so much energy was spent attempting to turn back the tides that were pushing the Barque of Peter in new directions.

If his understanding was grounded initially in an instinct for the significance of humans in our sacred texts, it was advanced, as well, by his perception of the larger dynamics at work in the contemporary world. Forces and explorations beyond any individual?s control or imagination were reshaping our grasp of the universe as well as the institutions that ordered societies.

The Space Age that dawned mid-20th century raised havoc with old certainties. In his 1989 book, *Tomorrow?s Catholics, Yesterday?s Church*, he wrote that ?earthbound authority, with all its landmarks and signposts, finds itself disoriented in the age of space that sweeps all of these away.? In space, he writes, ?the familiar directional orientations ? up and down, out and in ? no longer have any meaning. The perception of the horizon is an earthbound event; all horizons disappear in space and we are left shorn of the sweet roots that have held us to the earth, challenged to imagine what is truly present just before us, a unified and seemingly limitless universe.?

If the new natural order has no up or down, the immutable solidity on which hierarchies rested, then where is the authority? If, indeed, we are so demonstrably ?amid? one another, what happens to old notions of position and place, of authority based upon old up-and-down calibrations?

I remember talking about such ideas with him at length and pondering them on long bus rides between central Jersey and midtown Manhattan. Long before the Wall fell, he was telling me that the century that began as the sphere of kings and their domains was ending with a global, if imperfect, groaning for democracy.

What happened to old structures when what was intuited by so many became graphically affirmed in dramatic photos sent back to earth from space was evident in what occurred in the church, the last absolute global monarchy. The old forms weren?t holding. The secrets couldn?t be contained. The mask that portrayed some higher order of perfection and that once hid so much that was antithetical to the Jesus who understands the deepest transactions of the heart, that mask was shredding.

It was, in the end, God?s church, he would laugh, as I consulted him for insights into the latest pile of disturbing depositions or some chancery correspondence that had come across my desk. The faster it crumbles, he would say, the faster we get onto what?s next.

I am happy he lived to see the election of Pope Francis. And I?ll forever be consoled by the line he frequently used to sign off of those conversations, ?Remember, you?re the healthy one.?

If that was, indeed, the case, it was surely because of your help and counsel, dear friend.

Source URL (retrieved on 06/17/2015 - 11:11): <http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/eugene-kennedy-mentor-and-friend>

Links:

[1] <http://ncronline.org/news/people/writer-psychologist-and-lay-activist-eugene-cullen-kennedy-dies-86>

[2] <http://ncronline.org/news/people/through-expressive-writing-eugene-kennedy-espoused-rich-sacramental-vision>