



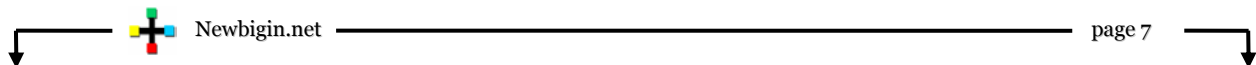
An X-ray to make God visible in the world

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In the last of this series I would like to think about the role of the Church in the world.

At the turn of the last century there was a call for 'the evangelisation of the world in this generation'. The Church was to convert the world. Thirty years ago the slogan was 'The Church for Others'. The Church was to serve the world. Today the slogan is 'Church Growth'. The Church is to multiply Christians.

All agree, surely, that Christ is Saviour and Lord of the whole world, and that the Church is sent to continue his mission of salvation for the world. How are we to understand this calling?

I would like to dwell on a biblical expression which has not been much developed in our tradition. The Church (according to 1 Peter) is a holy priesthood, as Israel was called to be (Exod 19:6).

Priests are often unpopular. 'We do not need a priest,' it is said; 'We can deal with God directly.' If that were so, we would have no need of Jesus, who is called in the Letter to the Hebrews our great High Priest, the one who heals the broken relationship between God and his human family.

The priest has a double role, spelled out in Peter's letter. He is to represent God for us and he is to represent us for God. The Church, according to I Peter 2:4 and 9, is called to be a holy priesthood with this double task: 'to declare the wonderful deeds of God' and 'to offer up spiritual sacrifices to God through Jesus Christ'.

This priesthood of the Church is not primarily an affair of Sunday, but of the working days at the working place. Christians are to 'declare the mighty acts of God', to make God believable. Like an X-ray photograph which makes visible the hidden bony structure of the body, they are to make visible the hidden rule of God in the world. And they are to 'offer up spiritual sacrifices', something which is part of our daily work in the world where we offer to God whatever we do and all those moment-by-moment acts of love and obedience which God puts in our way to offer.

This priesthood of all believers is exercised in the working days of the week. On the Lord's Day we gather to renew our membership in the body of Christ, the one great High Priest. Those who are called to leadership in our gathering, though in our tradition we do not call them priests, are called to help us in renewing our priesthood.

Just as we set apart one day as 'the Lord's Day', not so as to leave the other six days to the devil but so that they may all belong to the Lord; so we set aside some (by ordination) not to take away the priesthood of the whole body but to enable and strengthen it. In our public worship we offer up the whole life of the world to God through Jesus, and we go out to our daily work to make manifest his blessed rule to the whole world.

So 'Church Growth' is good if we understand what membership is for. 'The Church for Others' is good if it is 'for' the world in the way that Jesus was for the world, not letting the world set the agenda but fulfilling God's agenda for the world.

And 'the evangelisation of the world' is good if the word of the evangel is not separated from the doing of the deeds which God wills for the life of the world – public as well as private.

And if we are to be in truth a holy priesthood, we need a secret altar, a place in our innermost life where, day by day, we offer to God through Jesus Christ every bit of our lives, our most secret thoughts and our most public actions, and where we receive afresh through Christ God's ever-new gift of grace and mercy.

We need also the time together on the Lord's Day when he can take us as a whole community and renew us for his priestly service in the world. But this corporate and public worship can become lifeless if it is not constantly nourished by the time we spend each day alone, to keep fresh and clean the channels of love and obedience to God and of his grace and mercy to us.

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