

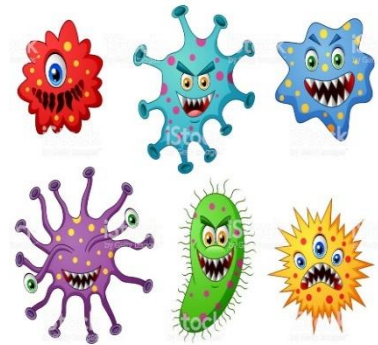


# The Corona Chronicles

Reviewing the Church through a time of crisis

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## Ministry and Priesthood in the Church

Most of us today would accept the need for an ordained priesthood in our Church to be quite reasonable along with the division between the ordained and the laity as the norm. However, if we were to go back to the early Church, we would find things to have been very different. It would be fair to say that the biblical Church communities were reticent in applying the term *priest* to anyone. The Letter to the Hebrews does apply it to Jesus but only in the context of stressing the difference between the priesthood in Israel and that of Christ. ***No other person in the N.T. is given that title.***

What we do find are references to the Church being a *priestly community*. This descriptor was used as a way of teaching how Christ's priesthood is shared by the full, entire people of God. All are priests. Here are the relevant texts:

*1 Peter 2:5,9* like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, ***to be a holy priesthood***, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ...<sup>9</sup> But you are a chosen race, ***a royal priesthood***, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.

*Revelation 1:5-6* and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood,<sup>6</sup> and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.

*Revelation 5:9* you have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God, and they will reign on earth.'

*Revelation 20:6* Blessed and holy are those who share in the first resurrection. Over these the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him for a thousand years.

Of course, what these texts are speaking of is not an "ordained" ministry as we might understand it today. What they stress is the way all baptised men and woman share in

the priesthood of Christ. We share a common priesthood. This is a key teaching as it speaks of the radical equality baptism bestows on all – men and women alike.

Baptism draws us into Christ's covenant community. This community is a fellowship of life, of charity and of truth. This same Church is used by Christ as an instrument in the redemption of all peoples. To achieve this, the Church is sent out into the world as **the light of** the world and **salt for** the earth.

It may come as something of a surprise to discover this to be traditional theology in the Church, even for so called “conservatives”. It was the theology with which I was fed as a student. This teaching speaks of the way *all the faithful join in the offering of the Eucharist by virtue of their royal priesthood...they likewise exercise that priesthood...by witness of a holy life, and by self-denial and active charity (Lumen Gentium 10.2).*

### **All share in the Church's Ministry in the world**

Behind this understanding of ministry is the Holy Spirit. This Spirit of God distributes his sacred gifts and graces as he chooses. These are poured out on every baptised person empowering them to undertake Church works. Ministries are far more abundant than we might have believed. **Question:** Is everything done by Christians in the parish a ministry? “Yes”, *if* it is for the renewal and upbuilding of the Church for its role in the world. *How might this enrich the way we value and celebrate the actions of all those who carry out all kinds of works in our parish? Is gardening and flower arranging ministry? Is answering the phone or visiting the sick all ministry?*

### **Apostolic ministry belongs to the laity by right**

Church leadership does not need to authorise or mandate ministry for lay people in the Church. It is a ministry given at baptism. For the good of the Church these ministries are ordered lest conflicts and inadequate service by unsuitable individuals cause harm to the overall mission. The right to ministry, however, is a right for all, a right and responsibility founded in Jesus.

And the ordained priesthood? Ordained ministry is there to support, encourage and better enable the priestly ministry of the common priesthood. *But is this the reality?*

**Note:** It would be incorrect to see this as being a “new” theology proposed by Luther or other reformers. But it is found across the Ancient Fathers of the Church because of its scriptural warrant.

### **Reflecting on the text of 1 Peter**

The notion of Israel being a priestly people is one deeply entrenched in Judaism and it is this sacred insight that is used by the author of the letter (written in the 80's or 90's).

What is vital in the writing is the focus given to the suffering of Christ and its place in Christian discipleship. This becomes the pattern for all Christian living. He begins with a strong affirmation of the great dignity bestowed on the followers of Christ by a loving God, a dignity not lessened by their present sufferings – and the Church was going through a variety of persecutions.

The writer makes great use of the Exodus, the time the Hebrew people spent in the wilderness and the promised land. He does this to illustrate how the Christians are now the people of God and so heirs to all of the promise God made to Israel. Hence, he is free to use titles associated with election used of the Jewish people.

Among these titles are – we are new creatures in God who is our Father; we are a spiritual temple, a holy priesthood, a chosen race called out of darkness into light. With all of this behind them, Christians are therefore called to be out in the world, participating in the wider society and not shrinking from it to form some kind of special privileged sect. **1 Peter** proclaims our responsibility to be leading the world to give praise and honour to God. It is not called to condemn the world (**Bernier**).

### **Two basic principles espoused by 1 Peter**

1. Christians are called to participate in the structures of the world *as light* and *as salt*. It urges disciples to be active in their living out of the Kingdom and to refuse to retreat back inside of itself, even when it is experiencing persecution and suffering.

Here is a tough teaching following on from the above. The letter tells slaves to remain with their cruel masters. Wives are encouraged to remain with their husbands who are hostile. How could that be? From out of his understanding of the suffering of Christ on the cross. Suffering is an opportunity to share with the healing love of Jesus on the cross. That is so counter-cultural it brings about a change in the world.

It is only through living fully the Christian life in the midst of the world can we spread the Good News of God's reign on earth. God is understood to be working in and through all faithful Christians as He brings the world to its true destiny – the fullness of redemption brought by Christ.

2. The letter speaks of the need to develop an *inner freedom*. This means a life free from the pressures to conform to the sinful structures and pressures of the world. It means a freedom from what he calls destructive passions. Our eyes must be focussed on Christ so that we are confident of His divine love for us, a love leading to his death on the cross – for our salvation. This is manifested in our determination to live the vocations to which we have all been called.

### **Witness spirituality**

In **1 Peter** it is this *witnessing to the Kingdom* that is more productive in growing the Church, better than any preaching or teaching. He understands the way it is service and love that builds the community, that challenges the world in ways words itself cannot. People yearned for meaning in life – remember this is after the destruction of the Temple by the Romans – and this Gospel witness does this in a powerful way.

As Christians come to know Christ, are baptised and strive to live in Christ-like ways, they witness to what they have and who they are. Here is the basic ministry of the Church – the witness of faithful discipleship to a hungry world.

This is the way they share in Christ’s priesthood. It is Christ who transforms the world through the offering of his body on the cross. It is this priesthood in which all Christians share. By offering our lives as a witness to the love of Christ. Christ is the only priest and his sacrifice was given once for all times on the cross. We are drawn into that ongoing priestly ministry and so have a share in this divine priesthood.

### **Spiritual sacrifices**

When **1 Peter** speaks of Christians offering “spiritual sacrifices” he was not trying to distinguish them from what might be called the “real” sacrifice of Jesus. The *spiritual* sacrifice of Christians needs to be understood as the authors way of distinguishing them from the Jewish sacrifices in the Temple and the pagan sacrifices at their altars. As St Paul writes... *I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship (Romans 12:1).* **St Augustine** writes in a similar manner: *the future offering consists of every act we make with the intention of uniting with God in a holy and living communion.* **Note:** every act we make in our search for union with God.

### **Revelation and the New Testament**

The major focus in Revelation is on the way God is victorious over evil and over the world of sin. But we are not passive subjects in this new world, as we are all declared to be co-rulers with Christ. By this John means the priesthood of all Christians - which is a share in the one Priesthood of Christ – is a collaboration with the works of Christ the Messiah and Saviour in bringing about a renewal of creation. What we do in the world as Christians, we do in grace and in Christ. It is this Christ-element that brings about the transformation though. We are caught up in the sacrifice of Jesus made on the cross for us and for all. As we die to ourselves and live for Christ (i.e. persevere in giving witness to the Kingdom) we are joining our offerings to those of the Son.

**Importantly**, this common priesthood is imposed on all who are baptised, laity as well as clergy. It is wrong to hold that it is the priest alone who offers up the “true” sacrifice of Christ and all the laity manage to contribute their own lesser “spiritual” offerings. One is not better than the other, or holier

The emphasis in Revelation is on the importance of faithful witnessing and endurance in faithfulness. This is the element of great importance as we strive for Church renewal. As sharers in the Priesthood of Christ our lives become sacrifices to the glory of God. That is what assists us in renewing the way we live in the world. We are encouraged to ask questions about our day: is this thing I am doing now; are the things I said and did with that person; are my plans for today; are my failures to act in a Gospel manner when people were crying for love and mercy all worthy of being brought before the throne of God? This is where our common priesthood comes to the fore.