

Priests and the Priest

Saint Peter writes in his first Epistle (2:9), '*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*'.

When Saint Peter wrote this, he was speaking to the whole Church – not just the clergy. We all become the royal priests of the Lord when we were Baptised, Confirmed and admitted to Holy Communion, so that *you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you*. At this point we need to be clear about what we mean by the word priest. One of the definitions comes from the Latin, *pontifex*, which means a bridge-builder, and this what we see in in our Lord's ministry. To those who felt outside the forgiveness of God, our Lord became the bridge to connect them back to the love of God and the Kingdom of Heaven. Many of these people, had an inner desire to seek out the Lord. One group said, "*We want to see Jesus*" (words of Greek gentiles to the Apostles at Jerusalem). Even though many do not know it this is really the question of everyone today, and they don't want Christians just to *talk* about Christ — the world wants us to *show* them Christ. That's our job: to let the light of Christ's face shine before the generations of today. The best placed Christians to do this are the laity. I know this from my own experience – the example of my headmaster, and other teachers at my school, my Great Aunt Annie when I first came to Australia, and a lay person at my first Australian parish. No clergy were involved in bringing me to Christ. It was not as if I was a pagan having a dramatic conversion experience. My family were Christians and I was brought up in that tradition – but I had not yet made the faith my own. Unknown to me I needed to see Jesus – and it was lay people who helped me. Later I came upon some amazing clergy who built on what lay people had done for me. So, when we talk about mission this what the lay people, as the holy nation and royal priesthood do, they are the bridge builders.

So, what about the ordained priests? Well there is another word for priests from the Latin, *sacerdos*. It was applied only to the minister of worship and of the sacrifice. In Psalm 110, which we use at Evensong, we hear this word, '*Thou art a priest forever, according to the order of Melchisedech*'. The letter to the Hebrews defines our Lord in the same way, because of his Sacrifice on the Cross and perpetuating that in the Mass. This verse used to be sung at the ordination of a priest, which identified the priest with the Lord. In that sense, the ordained priest (*sacerdos*) is a priest to the community of Christians in their vocation to be bridge-builders (*pontifex*). He is a sanctifier; the one who sanctifies God's holy people, especially through the sacraments, and most especially through the celebration of Holy Mass. He is a shepherd, the guide of the community in their own priestly vocation, he should point the way to contemplate the face of Christ, so they can reveal the face of Jesus to those who seek him. Both forms of priests – the laity and the ordained have the priesthood grounded in the life and ministry of the Lord, and both are representative of him.