



Readings II in Faith & Science

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Apostleship

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Apostleship

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We live in a world with no memory. Events of thirty years ago are so far in the past that they rarely mean anything to us. Try thinking of an event of twenty five years ago that you think about in relation to your daily life. Can you come up with one? It's hard to believe that President Kennedy was assassinated about forty years ago.

We more routinely fly from Iowa to Thailand than we ponder our history. We are very broad "horizontally" and very shallow "vertically." We have gone a long way in conquering space and all but forgotten time. Is this important? What in the world might it have to do with being apostles of Christ in our neighborhoods?

The biological sciences are unraveling the secrets of our past in our DNA. We now have enough solid scientific evidence to assure us that we are merely the tip of a genetic iceberg that goes all the way back to human beginnings. Iceberg is not a good comparison. It melts; we grow. Let us compare ourselves to a tree living into the future. Each of us is a branch of a tree as old as the race; we are the source of further growth into the future; other branches can grow from us. If that is true genetically, is it true in other ways?

Is Christianity a faith that looks to the past -- to Christ's life, death and resurrection -- or that looks forward? Certainly it looks backward to Christ. If it didn't, in what way could it be called Christian? If we don't find our source and strength in Christ's dying and rising, where do we find them? Certainly not in ourselves or in our fellow Christians! We and they are at best sinners trying to cope with our own weaknesses and sins. We are not the source of God's favor to ourselves or to others. It's not my faith or your faith that has redeemed the world nor makes it more suitable for God. God working in us, though, will achieve that full redemption we look for in faith.

The first question in the old Baltimore Catechism asked why we were made. It answered that we were made to know, love and serve God and be happy with him in heaven. How can we know, love and serve him if we do not look back at his life, death and resurrection -- at his history on earth? But that is not enough!

We must live in the present (it's the only time we have) and we must look forward to our destination lest we completely lose our way. In short, the history we live extends from the "beginning" to the "end" of time. We can't serve him in the past or in the future; we must serve now. Yet, we cannot be of full service if we do not know about him or about his will for the creation. We can't know him or his will in the same way that we know the properties of a material in the lab or as we assume in a computer model how a complex physical system would work. We can know him (then only mysteriously) only in history, in events and in people.

Even then we shall not know him fully as he is. We can know him only in faith. In both Jewish and Christian faith God is known primarily as a saving God and only secondarily as a creating God. He is known more clearly as a God who acts personally in human affairs in favor of his people than as the creator. The central fact of the Old Testament is the Exodus of the Jewish people from Egypt, not the creation and the Garden of Eden. The central axis of the New Testament is the death and resurrection of Christ, not his birth. Clearly the Exodus presumes the creation and the death/resurrection presumes the birth. But, the emphasis in the Bible is on redemption, not creation. But it's "redemption toward" as well as "redemption from."

How did God arrange this “redemption toward”? He established a covenant with his chosen people. The covenant he entered into with Moses at Mount Sinai created the people of Israel. That covenant is the supreme moment of God’s self-revelation to the Jewish people. All of the Old Testament is an elaboration on that covenant. The historical books relate how Israel lived (or didn’t live) that covenantal pact. The earlier prophets proclaimed how they should live it. The later prophets told Israel the deeper meaning the covenant had. Christ fulfilled the covenantal revelation at Sinai by being the sacrifice that made amends in his own blood for the people’s sin and guilt.

It is not simply to make amends for the past that Christ lived and died. He died to return creation to its fullest and highest destiny in God. St. Paul tells us this in his Letter to the Romans: “. . . but creation still retains the hope of being freed, like us, from its slavery to decadence, to enjoy the same freedom and glory as the children of God.”

We look forward to all of creation being redeemed and returned to God in the splendor he intended from the beginning. The universe was created in Christ; it is redeemed in Christ; it will be glorious in Christ. How? Creation is being restored to God in the New Covenant in the body and blood of Christ. It is being freed from decay in the lives and actions of his chosen people, those who have accepted and try to live in and by his covenant. It is, in short, being returned to God in the Church. In even more personal terms, it is being redeemed in us and through our lives in Christ. This is our duty; this is our glory.

One way in which we can work to free nature is our scientific activity -- if done for the right reasons. To want to know as much as we can about the universe to satisfy our own curiosity and to be at home in it is a good goal. To know as much as we can about it out of respect for its creator and his gift is a better goal. To know as much as we can about it to help others is an even nobler goal. To learn as much as possible to worship and praise its creator is a still higher aspiration. Does saying that mean anything or is it just words? That’s something each of us has to decide for herself or himself. That’s part of trying to learn what it means to be a Christian, what it means to belong to a “people set apart by God to sing his praises (First Letter of Peter).” Note that Peter does not say only “set apart”; he says we are set apart to do something.

I can hear you saying that I still haven’t said anything about being apostles to the scientific community nor about what that means. True enough! But I have given the reasons for it, namely, to bring creation to its fullest destiny by living our lives in Christ and helping others to live their lives in Christ. God is calling all of creation (including, of course, the scientific community) to life in himself -- to the only life that we Christians know. We are the messengers of this new life to the community in which we live and work and whose ideals and goals we share. We owe it to God and to our brothers and sisters in the scientific world to sing the praises of the creating, revealing and sanctifying God. It’s that simple. We are called to share with our colleagues and ultimately with all creation the gifts God has given us.

Now comes the hard part. How are we to do that? It may be easier to start by saying how we are not to do it. It won’t be accomplished by “bible-thumping.” It won’t be achieved by intellectual (or any other) posturing. One way it might be accomplished is being very good scientists. We can show our colleagues that we are as interested as they in discovering the beauty and wonders of creation. We can show them that we are as adept at scientific work as they. In short, we can prove by our scientific lives that one can be a dedicated (and excellent) scientist as well as a Christian believer. We can show by our own living that there is no contradiction between believing and scientific learning.

We are called to be messengers. The first responsibility of a messenger is to get the message correctly. How? I suggest that the best way to do that is prayerfully to study the message as it is contained in revelation -- in the Bible. In our time we have become somewhat defensive, deferring to the biblical experts about the meaning of the revelation. This is nonsense. That book was not written for experts. It was written for you and for me. Let us trust that the Holy Spirit working in the Church is a better guide to our understanding the word of God than all the exegetes in the world.

This advice is no different from the advice we get in beginning a science. Learn the fundamentals. Leave the graduate material alone until we have mastered the fundamentals. It is no different with God's message; learn the fundamentals. They are revealed to us by God in the Bible. After we have mastered the basic principles we can turn to more "scholarly" questions.

How do we deliver the message to our brothers and sisters in the scientific community? There is the problem. There is no one answer to that. The most that can be said is: it depends. We Americans so often get hung up on "how-to" questions. I have not done a formal study, but I'm willing to make a modest bet that "how-to" books sell better than "what" books or "why" books. A first step after learning the message is to live it ourselves. No one will follow someone who does not practice what he or she preaches. Our lives must reflect Christ; our thoughts must reflect his thoughts; our love must share in his love. How this develops is more Christ's problem than ours. It is his role to make his seed grow in us. We have to keep the ground clear and fertile.

The details of how to be an apostle, however, depend on many factors like our personalities and those of the people we work with. The details change from place to place, time to time, person to person, task to task. There is no "how-to" valid for all, or even most, cases.

Perhaps one of the greatest challenges of the apostle is creativity in his or her discipleship. Beyond learning the message and living it in one's personal life, being an apostle must come from the individual in his or her situation. Remember, we are not talking about "bible-thumping," and even less about political (Democrat vs Republican) position-taking. In our day many of the great and most neuralgic moral issues have become political positions. The political arrangement is not the center out of which the apostle acts. The Christian community is the matrix within which we operate, not the political parties. We are not called to be politicians nor are we called to be "divine freelancers." We are called to spread the Good News of Christ's presence to us in the Church. So, we must learn the fundamentals of God's message, we must take our place in the Church as apostles and we must try our best to determine how it is to be done. Generally it is best to do it with others. There is apostolic strength in numbers.

The final note might simply be a quote from St. Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians: "We all have knowledge; yes, that is so, but knowledge gives self-importance -- it is love that makes the building grow."

Questions

Is 21st century thinking "horizontal" or "vertical"? Explain. How does Christianity encourage us to think both horizontally AND vertically and how does the Cross and Resurrection relate to this thinking? In what concrete ways can I, a Christian in science, the humanities, etc., be an apostle to the scientific community? Should we just leave it to the clergy? Can we just leave it to the clergy? The faith/science apostolate is basically the work of the laity. It was only an historical accident that gave the clergy the opportunity to lead the real apostolate. How? Why?

How do the Fathers of the Church regard the cross in terms of horizontal and vertical union? Can you look up this sort of thing on the Internet? They do relate them to the union of Christ and Christian. How? Should we stress more the writings of the Church Fathers? Who are the Church Fathers and how can their teachings of 1500 years ago help us in the 21st Century? Can the same thing be said about Scripture?

"In our time we have become somewhat defensive, deferring to the biblical experts about the meaning of the revelation. This is nonsense. The Bible was not written for experts. It was written for you and for me. Let us trust that the Holy Spirit working in the Church is a better guide to our understanding the word of God than all the exegetes in the world." Can we add our little bit to the interpretation of Scripture? Of course. Legitimately? Of course. Can we add our perspectives to the doctrine of the Church? Some, no; most, yes, if it remains in the realm of orthodoxy. How can we ensure that we remain orthodox? Probably best by comparing our thoughts with those of the Saints and martyrs? After all, that is one of the ways the doctrine of the Church was built. What can we do about all this? Discuss.

What is an apostle? Who is an apostle? Can I (whoever I might be) be an apostle? To what extent? Does the Church - does the science? - really need me? Yes, indeed they both do. If one sits on the sidelines, one is not in the game.

“Now comes the hard part. How are we to do that? It may be easier to start by saying how we are not to do it. It won’t be accomplished by “bible-thumping.” It won’t be achieved by intellectual (or any other) posturing. One way it might be accomplished is being very good scientists. We can show our colleagues that we are as interested as they in discovering the beauty and wonders of creation. We can show them that we are as adept at scientific work as they. In short, we can prove by our scientific lives that one can be a dedicated (and excellent) scientist as well as a Christian believer. We can show by our own living that there is no contradiction between believing and scientific learning.” Is there a better way of showing the scientific community that we care about science than by being an excellent scientist? Is there any better way of showing the religious community that we are passionately involved in Christian concern for creation than by being an excellent scientist and a believing (and working) Christian? Why be involved with the creation when we are serving God? The best way (and probably the only way) we can serve God is by serving creation. There can be no conflict between serving God and serving science from a religious motivation.

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