

Christian juxtapositions: *Holy Things* and *Holy People*

by [Byron D. Stuhlman](#) in the [July 28, 1999](#) issue

**Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology.** By Gordon W. Lanthrop. Fortress, 236 pp.

**Holy People: A Liturgical Ecclesiology.** By Gordon W. Lanthrop. Fortress, 246 pp.

Though the World Council of Churches' consensus document *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* is a work of enormous significance, it may strike one as bland. Gordon Lanthrop, a Lutheran theologian, presents much the same material in two books (the first published in 1993) that are lively, provocative and challenging.

Lanthrop approaches the issues from the perspective of a theology of worship. His subtitles may be misleading, since liturgy is often understood as "scripted" worship. That is not, however, the true meaning of the word. Properly understood, liturgy is any form of worship that enables all members of a congregation to participate actively in a service, exercising the royal priesthood which is theirs through baptism.

Lanthrop's approach is rooted in the work of the Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann, who argued that the study of Christian worship should begin with an analysis of its patterns and structures—what he calls its *ordo*. Among those patterns and structures Lanthrop finds the word (story) and the meal which constitutes the Eucharist; the instruction (catechesis) and the bath of the baptismal rite; the Lord's day as the feast of the weekly cycle; and the Pascha (Lent, Easter and Pentecost) as the feast of the annual cycle.

These patterns are closely interconnected: since the church's beginning the Eucharist has been its normative worship on the Lord's day, and by the fourth century, baptisms at the Eucharist of the Easter vigil had become the centerpiece of the Christian year. Lanthrop's insights come from his examination of the juxtapositions in these patterns, such as the juxtaposition of readings from the Old and New Testaments during the Eucharist; of the catechesis and the bath at baptism; and of the passover of Israel and the passover of Christ at Easter.

In *Holy Things* Lanthrop examines the acts at the center of the church's worship; in *Holy People* he focuses on those who perform those acts. There is nothing

distinctively Christian about these central acts—word, meal and bath—or about Lathrop's term for the worshipping people—the assembly. It is the juxtapositions that make them distinctively Christian. The word interprets the meal and the meal interprets the word in the context of the Lord's day, and the bath and the instruction interpret each other in the context of the passover of Israel and of Jesus. The assembly is distinctively Christian because it engages in these juxtaposed activities. Lathrop argues that juxtaposition keeps the symbolic realities from becoming idolatrous and enables them to become the means by which God fashions a holy people.

In *Holy People* Lathrop addresses two issues of particular relevance: the church's unity and its engagement with the surrounding culture. Because he defines the church as an assembly for worship, Lathrop looks at how unity (or the lack of it) is manifested in worship. Ecumenical convergence on common patterns of worship provides a basis for unity, he argues:

The shape or ordo that unites us always carries the relationship of locality and "universality" within itself. It is a washing in local waters to bring our candidates into the catholic church, a reading of the universal canon of Scriptures to speak Christ to local need, a keeping of a local meal that causes us to participate in each other by our participation in Christ. It is the word and sacraments that unite us, "celebrated in ways appropriate to the dignity and gifts of each local place". . . , for the care for that local dignity is also a universal concern.

While we tend to think of the networking that embodies community on a denominational level or as a result of dialogue between denominations, Lathrop challenges us to find concrete ways of networking between congregations of different denominations on a local level.

Equally perceptive are Lathrop's reflections on how the church's engagement with culture finds expression in worship. He examines the strengths and weaknesses of two contrary approaches. "Seeker services" are concrete expressions of the church's mission to the contemporary world, but they seldom demand the active participation of seekers in the "holy things" which make an assembly Christian. Intentional countercultural communities of "resident aliens" take the demands of the gospel seriously, but they sometimes fail to engage the world for which Christ died. The concrete forms which word, meal, bath and assembly take are the result of the church's engagement with culture. That engagement needs to clothe these holy

things in a way that speaks to the local community, yet must make sure that clothing does not bring with it a significance contrary to the gospel. In this way the church speaks both a yes and a no to culture. As Lathrop puts it, the practice of the assembly exists

to tell the truth about God. And the practices of holiness, the acts whereby the assembly bears witness to the truth about God, are like beggars' hands out for mercy, naked bodies presented for the cloak, for only One is holy. But holiness itself, God's holiness as it is known in Jesus Christ, is not purity and arrogant distance but unity with all the needy world. The Christian faith trusts that the very signs at the heart of the assembly, the signs of word and meal and bath as these have been transformed in Christ, are gifts of God which communicate that holiness as an alternative vision of the world, a symbolic reorientation in all that is concretely real.

The ultimate function of the "holy things" around which the church assembles is to create a "holy people." Lathrop does an admirable job in suggesting concrete ways in which worship may serve this purpose. To illustrate the task, he offers the reader a stunning array of challenging texts, both ancient and modern, and equally compelling examples from Christian art. Those who take Lathrop's advice to heart will find their worship and witness immeasurably strengthened.

See also [Christian juxtapositions: How We Became Posthuman](#) and [Christian juxtapositions: Peace in Northern Ireland](#).