

Address at the Conference of Self Supporting Priests of Oxford Diocese
The event's theme: 'Where do we meet Christ today?'
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SEEING AND HEARING: THE VALUE OF IRREGULAR CLERGY

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Thank you so much for the opportunity to be with you and to consider the place and possibilities of the SSM role in the life of the church.

I shall use the term 'SSM' even though I don't like it and even though it covers – you might say – a multitude of sins. 'Unpaid clergy' seems to me altogether more accurate as well as slightly teasing and provocative, so that too may find mention.

A term I plan to use with more confidence is the slightly clunky *church-as-institution*. I think it is essential in our thinking to distinguish between the organisational entity and the wider, mystical and significant body of women and men who seek to follow Christ – the real 'church'. Indeed, my strongest image of the church has always been the rag-tag fluid body of the faithful (including the tenuously faithful) – all those followers of the enigmatic Jesus, of varied or even without denominational ties. Such a conception takes priority for me over equating the church with the institution, which I see as called to serve that primary body in its wider purpose and work.

I think of the church as also *promiscuous*, in the sense of always 'putting it about'; of irresistibly wanting to be everywhere, to understand everything, to share every conceivable human situation, to know every human grief and every human delight. More of that later perhaps, though here it is worth noting that SSM clergy are often slightly better placed to realise these *sacraments of engagement* than are others who are more fully domiciled within the church-as-institution.

Some bio

I should begin with some biographical context. As a teenager I rejected 'religion' as many do at that stage of virgin perceptions, on the ground that it was the evident practice of hypocrites. I looked at the church and church people and found them unappealing. What was said and professed appeared to be very different to how they behaved. An example: war struck my teenage senses as repellent and tragic and in every sense destructive, and yet seemed to be tolerated by 'mature' Christian people and their official spokespersons, especially when their interests were threatened.

The same with poverty and social distinctions which so obviously (as it seemed to me) limited people's opportunities, depending on where, and to whom, they were born. It was to be some years before I came across A E Housman's line which summed up my overall teenage reaction to Planet Earth and its inhabitants: '*I, a stranger, and afraid/In a world I never made*'. I could not make easy sense of the adult world I was entering and I had neither the means nor the opportunity to confide that to anyone.

I don't know why, and it must surely have been part of the urgent need to make sense of the apparently absurd, but when I was seventeen I felt impelled to consider afresh this 'God' thing and so began attending the village church in which I had been baptised. But it did not work out for me, and I left after a few months.

A little later I stumbled upon a book which turned out to be a life-changer. Geoffrey Hubbard's *Quaker by Convincement* held out a heady vision of an exploring band of merry souls, seeking God in humility and without dogma and taking their brains with them on the adventure. I became a Quaker.

Taking Christ seriously; ordination

It was a few years later that I became explicitly Christian. So far as I recall it, it went something like this. I had realised that life is short, and that depth is usually to be preferred to breadth, certainly in *Important Matters*. I decided against a then popular approach which I perhaps unfairly called the 'pick and mix' approach: a bit of Jesus, a dash of Buddhism, possibly a hint of Karl Marx and a thick topping of New Agey stuff. And was I doing the initiating or was I responding to *The One*? Whatever was going on, I decided I should try to follow and to live by the not-always-entirely-unambiguous message of the itinerant Nazarene of the Gospels. As to his church and his modern-day friends, I was keeping my powder dry.

All that may sound too rational. There was certainly a rational aspect to it. And I recognise that I was influenced by culture, and that had I been born a Jew or Muslim, I might have made different decisions or have responded differently to the facts of my circumstances. But deciding to follow as far as I can the Jesus of Nazareth as described in the Gospels is something I have never regretted or renounced, even if the following has at times been at something of a distance. And at various moments I have lost him in the crowd or have myself slipped away, out of sight, for the metaphysical equivalent of an illicit smoke.

By unexpected and far from linear steps I was ordained, at the age of 33. Prior to that I had sought out someone who could teach me about the Christian faith in a way that was not available to me within the Society of Friends. I found Aelred, a priest-monk of the Community of the Resurrection who became friend and mentor. Later I dropped out of Quaker Meeting, finding Home Counties Friends more Universalist and less Christian than the Yorkshire ones who had nurtured me. In due course I started attending Evensong at the parish church, then the Eucharist. I was confirmed. Unexpectedly, the question about serving God as a priest visited me. I was a few years into being a local authority social worker – something I regarded as itself a vocation. All this was in the mid-1980s. I did some reading, found out about the French Worker Priest experiment and asked the church to consider me for ordination as a priest-worker NSM (as the acronym then was).

I was ordained 26 years ago; I find myself as astonished as the next person at how quickly time passes. In many ways it seems like yesterday. And it's been a terrific adventure.

I stayed in social services for another 15 years or so, and in that time moved from managing a social work team in the East End to head of children's services. Of the many things I learnt, the theme to fascinate and trouble me the most was (and remains) the life of large organisations – the powers and principalities of our day. For the past ten years I have worked for an endowed foundation operating in London. Through grant making we fund activity to help people trapped by poverty gain the confidence and skills most likely to secure them decently paid work across their working lifetimes. So as you see, I have been – and am – entirely unproductive in any plain economic sense.

What are priests for?

I know a few of you here but not many and so am in the dark about your own journeys and of how you conceive of being a priest. Views of ministerial priesthood vary in the Church of England, as we know. They straddle the simply functional to the sacramentally ontological. It can all be very confusing. I suppose SSMs reflect this spectrum – how could they not?

Perhaps this variety explains the difficulty unpaid clergy have in organising themselves, not as a church equivalent of *Militant Tendency* but as a constituency within the institution likely to represent both a valuable resource and a valuable perspective. Our collective failure to organise in this way seems to me a failure of our evolution as a clerical sub-species. This brings me to a further distinction which seems significant. Amongst our SSM family we have different types operating from different impulses. I have always felt hugely excited about the priest-worker model. The Church of England has never recognised the term or very seriously the vocation. It sometimes refers to MSEs: ministers in secular employment. It has never understood corporately the potential value of this focus. It is telling that whereas the Roman Catholics in France more than half a century ago authorised an experiment in which priests would take up the life of ordinary work *for theological reasons*, the Church of England made it possible to ordain working men (at the time it was only men) for solely pragmatic reasons: to have more hands helping out in the traditional parish model.

I maintain a website ¹ about and for MSE clergy in the Church of England and as part of that decided to visit every diocesan website to see what it said about the MSE model and about the SSM model. The results were unsurprising but disheartening. I will mention just two recurrent elements: first, hints that those would-be ordinands judged not to possess 'leadership capability' would be suggested for SSM work; and secondly the general mood music that a vocation to be an unpaid priest arises only in those over 50 or 55.

One diocesan website illustrated its meagre content about SSMs by confusingly blending ministerial, hierarchical and gender stereotypes in a photograph of a collared SSM female priest hanging out the washing in her garden. As Victor

¹ www.with-intent.confiteor.org.uk

Meldrew might say, *I don't believe it*. You may, of your charity, write off these as simple mistakes. Another view is that they reveal the entrenched and operative views and attitudes within the church-as-institution.

I know these are familiar gripes. The structural position of SSMs in the life of the church-as-institution has been well documented. And there is the valuable research in this area done by your own Teresa Morgan, and by Charles Sutton in Bristol Diocese, both of whom are running workshops later today. There is nothing wrong with 'familiar gripes'; anyone who has thought about the history of justified causes will note that initial claims of injustice are often written off with that kind of put-down.

Clericalism and SSMs

But back to differing views about priesthood. I'd like to spend a moment or so on a widespread contagious disease affecting the church you and I serve, and other churches beyond. This is not entirely irrelevant to our theme, and I think it should be of interest to unpaid clergy.

The condition is known as *clericalism*. Now, I have discovered over the years that it is very hard to raise this and have a good discussion about it. The question seems to belong to that order of questions guaranteed to upset people just by asking it – a variant of the 'have you stopped beating your partner' kind of question. Clergy tend to go tight and defensive at the mention of it. Of course, this helps no one and it limits the discussion of what ought to be regarded as a significant aspect and disease affecting all church people, lay and ordained.

The best clarification of the condition I have found – without attribution of blame – appears in a footnote to an article by The Revd O A Dyson called *Clericalism, Church and Laity* in the 1985 C of E publication *All Are Called: Towards a Theology of the Laity*. He says: '*In discussing 'clericalism' [in this essay] the author is not imputing to individuals bad faith, lack of integrity or ineffectiveness. Clericalism, understood as the undue influence of clergy, is not to be interpreted in individual terms but as a pervasive reality in which clergy and laity are deeply involved whether or not they want it, and whether or not they know it. Openly to discuss clericalism which can be found amongst clergy and laity may help us to understand more accurately a significant feature of the Christian environment to which we belong and to analyse some of the hidden, and none too attractive, influences to which our Christian lives are exposed*'.

Clericalism is really, at its heart, a mind-set, supporting a reality, in which control of the church rests principally or wholly with the ordained class. I reckon it ought to be a notifiable condition, followed by strict isolation and a programme of decontamination during which the wearing of the collar is banned and the patient is required to make their way in the world without any reference to their clerical status. But like many states of ill-health (especially of the psychological variety) it is not always immediately visible and can easily be disguised.

Clergy are the organising principle of the church, and their central role is too often at the expense of the laity. One consequence is the infantilisation of the laity. This claim is often met with ridicule. I raise it here because it is important and because it might be claimed that SSM clergy, not entirely unacquainted with the subtle hierarchical nuances of English clerical life *and* because of their experiences elsewhere may – in part – be an antidote to this condition.

The dangers of socialisation into roles

Yet this requires such individuals to resist the ways in which being *formed* into the role of a priest tends also to form one into *the ways of the institution*. You may be familiar with the idea of *professional socialisation*. When we train in a role we are taught not only the knowledge needed, but – subtly – the ‘shape’ and culture of the role and office; taught *how to be* a police officer, lawyer, teacher, night club bouncer or whatever. The same kind of thing operates in other spheres: we are subtly taught *how to be* a man or woman, a mother or father, a white or black person. Some kinds of cultural transmission can be positive and in other respects rather dangerous.

In case this sounds too general, let me give an example. Not long ago many professions would teach (not in an explicit but a coded way) that they – the experts – knew best and that the role of the consumer of their services was just that: to consume; to take what was given. Yet now we realise such an approach sometimes did harm and weakened accountability. We ‘consumers’ of services – think of medicine and education and policing – are now encouraged to play a role; to ask for explanations, to share in decision making about our lives, to be consulted. This has been a major shift in really no time at all. It may well be a bore when the patient turns up having done the rounds on Google, but overall this trend must be welcomed. True, it can allow the ignorant and opinionated to remain both of these things, but it may also help move us from being passive to taking responsibility.

Now consider these trends in relation to the life of the church and (far more importantly) in relation to our individual responses to God and Grace and the life and meaning of Jesus of Nazareth. Much clerical training and formation has not only imparted knowledge but has also transmitted attitudes not dissimilar to those I have mentioned. The net result has tended to be that the laos are not treated as equal partners in the adventure of faith. You may know the sloganized description of the role of the laity as being there to *pray, pay and obey*. It seems faintly comical. It does however sum up an aspect of a truth of the church-as-institution and I doubt that even the most egalitarian and humble amongst us has not at times caught a whiff of the intoxicating aroma of being a cleric within a clergy focussed church.

There is more I’d like to say on this but I realise it is a bit of a hobby-horse and that on the whole it is not rated as serious or significant. Perhaps in a dying institutionalised form of the church it may not be that important. Yet it is something that SSM clergy are well placed to consider. Leslie Newbigin wrote “*The primary action of the Church in the world is the action of its members in their daily work*”.

How true. And how scandalous are the ways in which unseen institutional practices curtail that.

Conversations as tools in the life of the church

One final variation on this theme if I may, and it is to do with the place of *conversation* in the life of the church. I have begun to think of this as rather like those surveys that ask about the frequency of sex, and the conclusion of the researchers that people say they have far more of it than they do. Likewise conversations. Perhaps we confuse communication with conversation. There is certainly a lot of that.

The reason *conversations* should be important in the collective Christian life is because they mirror – indeed, draw us into – the great conversation we see embodied in the Incarnation. An unlimited God choses to enter the muck and muddle of our human condition; choses to do so surreptitiously, obliquely, gently and courteously. A disclosure is made, a response is sought; there is patience: room is made for a conversation over our short lives with the God who made us. At times we are responsive conversational partners. At others we turn a deaf ear or cease to listen because we are busy talking or preparing to talk. What is prayer but part of this lifelong conversation with God? And how limitless in form is such prayer, only occasionally involving words.

Yet the church appears to favour communication over conversation. Liturgically, the conversations are mostly vertical: clergy to laity. Mono-voiced liturgy is still the dominant form.

Conversations amongst clergy do not always fare better. Your experience may be more positive than mine, but I have never found clergy chapter to be a place of undefended, exploratory conversation.

For some years I have played in my imagination with the idea of SSM clergy and their sympathetic stipendiary friends regularly meeting in the upper room of a pub where we might experiment with – learn to hold – conversations. The working title for this gathering is ‘Chapter & Verse’. There’d be none of the popular ‘theological expert’ speaker stuff followed by questions; instead we’d seek new ways of sharing knowledge, learning from one another, caring for one another, seeking God and reading the signs of the times. We’d aim to retake theology back from the academy and the ‘experts’ (or at least from its specialised annexation from our lived lives) and seek to learn afresh what it means to be stewards of the mysteries of God as Paul invitingly puts it.

Some of you may know of Alan Ecclestone and his model of Parish Meetings which he instituted in the Sheffield parish he served from 1942 to 1979. He wanted the local church to discover what exploratory meetings and true conversations might look like (and give birth to) when not dominated by the clergy. His Parish Meetings are described by Tim Gorringer in his book *Alan Ecclestone: Priest as Revolutionary*. Church events and meetings tend to be dominated by clergy – though ‘dominate’ may

suggest too strong an element of wilful or conscious control. Yet it is they who usually call them; they who usually define the agenda; they who usually open and close the event by invocation and benediction. The laity tend to comply with these patterns, indeed, to expect them.

This model seems a poor one, and to my thinking is infantilising. It is common elsewhere in hierarchical structures. Modern corporate events (sometimes diocesan corporate events) are often over-managed, highly controlled and with limited opportunity for questions and dialogue. There is no real conversation – which is always horizontal in nature. At such events communication tends only to the vertical.

By way of an aside: Some of you may have attended the ‘Self Supporting Ministry Consultation Day’ in London in May, organised by Ministry Division. It was my first. One of the three aims of the day one was to ‘resource conversations’ (about) self-supporting ministry’. If you enjoy being over-managed and hemmed in on every side by Post-It Notes you might have thought you had died and gone to heaven. I felt rather angry by the experience. We were told what topic to discuss with a neighbour and given an unrealistically short time in which to do that; then we were instructed to share our thoughts with the other people around our table before having to write down key points on post-it notes. Inevitably these were collected, collated, typed up and posted to the web. It was like some time-and-motion man’s version of the Offertory. All seemingly very efficient but as far from proper conversations as one can imagine. The Post-It Note tyranny is well rooted now in churches and organisations. I have nothing against Post-It Notes – I like them – but not when used in this misleading way as short cuts to collective discernment and wisdom or pretend conversations. God is said to have invited Moses up the mountain to be given tablets with the law and commandments [Exodus 24:12]. Now we send Post-It Notes in the other direction.

Alan Ecclestone thought it vitally important that the church (the gathered body of Christ's followers) should meet outside the liturgy and services so that its members should be enabled to speak from their experience, gain a measure of confidence and be listened to. He realised this might take time, as people found their voices and also learned to truly listen to one another. It is always worth the effort. This is being the local Church. Local and at once universal.

SSM clergy – by definition – are *likely* to have wider experience of multi-voice team activity and of conversations as equals with a variety of people, and of handling varied roles. In many cases they have had more extensive experience of being laity. I am not saying all SSMs are great; some can be as clerical as the extreme Anglo-Catholic and some can be as unsubtle in presenting Christ as the worst smash-and-grab Evo. But leaving those extremes aside, as an element in the church-as-institution this recently emerged SSM sub-species can and should make a difference.

The Joy of Irregular

I rather like the use of the term *irregular* to convey mild alarm and surprise whilst married to a welcoming, pragmatic embrace. I have no evidence he ever used the term, but in my mind I can hear Robertson Hare as Archdeacon Henry Blunt in *All Gas and Gaiters* saying 'it is rather *irregular* bishop, but I see no harm in it..'

You and I are irregular and whilst it's no reason for smugness it should be a reason for thankfulness and a little fun. You may have heard of the *Baker Street Irregulars* – the fictional characters who appear in various Sherlock Holmes stories as street children who are employed by Holmes as intelligence agents. They get to the places the regulars find harder to reach.

Perhaps so with us and our kind. We can get to some of the places the regulars find it harder to reach. This is true of MSE clergy for sure, operating as they do in a myriad of different occupational settings. It is true too of all SSMs, save for the most clericalised or narrowly focused. And it is not only a case of getting to more places, but at its best – at *our* best – of *seeing and hearing a little differently*. Remember, please, O A Dyson's earlier definition of the clerical mind-set where he is at pains to say '*the author is not imputing to individuals bad faith, lack of integrity or ineffectiveness*'. This is not a criticism of parish-based stipendiary colleagues but an observation about the narrowing effect on us all when we are too fully and exclusively tethered to specific roles within specific confines.

How then might the irregulars become even more useful in the life of the church-as-institution?

Individually, by being the best we can be. In this we are no different to stipendiary colleagues. We must remain inquisitive and adventurous; fierce in self-appraisal, generous in giving of ourselves, attentive to the leadings of the Spirit, anxious to read the signs of the times, suspicious of dogmatic claims about the mind of God and exploratory – even tentative – in preaching, always drawing on human experience as the vehicle in which and through which we meet Christ.

As a body of SSM clergy the answer is going to be different. I would very much like SSM clergy to better organise themselves, and to make requests – demands even – and to lobby for change. I am doubtful that this is likely, for the reason given – that we are such a varied group. Some SSM clergy seem rather churchy and have little if any interest in the world beyond sanctuary and parish. Others seem to operate with something of a firewall between their church and beyond-church lives.

More relevant perhaps is that process of *professional socialisation*. In-bred into ordinands and clergy is something of a submissiveness in relation to authority in the church, most obviously in relation to bishops. Maybe this is because we have done that dangerous thing of spiritualising it, so that we somehow think that in being submissive towards bishops and other 'senior staff' we are being submissive to Christ. A Benedictine thing, you might say. A dangerous thing, too.

I can see for myself the impulse to regard bishops as Fathers (and now Mothers) in God, wise and to be obeyed. Observation and experience have taught me otherwise.

But really, there is a primordial aspect here, you might even say a romantic one, which can do a very great deal of harm. And often in parish church life the clergy enjoy (or endure) similar fanciful projections from laity, and must decide whether to feed on such things or use them to help both parties to greater maturity; a maturity hinted at when we hear Paul speak of 'the glorious liberty of the children of God' and when our Lord calls us no longer servants but 'friends'.

If SSMs were pushy...

So I suspect that an obstacle to SSM clergy playing a fuller and necessary role in the life of the church is that we shall remain – collectively – rather passive and 'humble' (though not humble in the right sense of the word). Yet, it is not impossible that sufficient of our number may come to see the benefit of organised action. I think this has to be outside the model of clergy chapter. I am not holding my breath, but if we were to rally (in a proper way, of course...) there are some changes SSMs may wish to see.

The first is that we begin to be properly integrated into the councils and structures of the church. London has just created an Associate Archdeacon role (though the post has, I think, gone to a stipendiary priest). That seems to establish a bridgehead of sorts. And there surely can be no principled reason why some form of bishop could not be appointed from amongst SSMs.

The second is that SSMs having charge of parishes ought to be expanded, and not only when it is expedient to do so.

Third, although I am no supporter of honours, if the church wishes to persist with titular honorary canons and prebendaries then SSMs must be proportionately amongst those chosen.

A fourth would be that the skills and knowledge of SSM clergy be gathered and recorded in such a way as can be called upon when needed by the church – across dioceses as well as within them. I am thinking especially of the vast amount of experience many SSMs have gained in other settings. This is an enormous pool of current knowledge and skill, and it is not mapped or tapped into as it should be. And related to this is the potential role of deployable SSM clergy in serving parishes during incumbent vacancies (I hope, like me, that you never use the term *interregnum* which means a gap between 'rulers' – the very model we should seek to change).

A fifth – and an easy one to deliver on – is having a bishop who holds a national brief for SSM clergy. I am told we had one, and that we have one no longer.

Even so modest a shopping list will trouble some SSMs, because it sounds *pushy*.

The suffragettes were thought *pushy* for wanting the vote for women. As were Blacks who sought equal treatment under the law. As have been gay and lesbian citizens seeking the same equality under the law. It is instructive to note that the

church-as-institution has rarely been in the forefront of these calls. Sometimes it has been vocal in opposing them.

This again brings us to questions of power, which I am sure you will have sensed in much of what I have so far said. We can't – in our short lives – escape power. It shapes our lives and our world; it is embodied in people and institutions and movements; it can be godly or demonic. And the demonic seems to have moved on from the odd herd of Gadarene swine into the powers and principalities of our day: into institutions and ideologies and 'operating principles'. And they operate rather more subtly than once they did. William Stringfellow's writing is incisive in exploring this (in the context of the USA of the 1960s and 70s), as is that of Walter Wink whom Stringfellow inspired. The powers and principalities of our age are always and powerfully anti-incarnational and they dominate and control. It is

SSM clergy are amateur in the very best sense of the term, and we give our labour and our minds without charge; we should therefore be freer: freer from ambition in the clerical careerist sense (rare amongst our stipendiary colleagues but not unknown), freer to engage in some holy agitation without worrying about our next move or future opportunities. Our relative financial independence should be put to helpful use in taking some greater risk. But it requires a growth in a proper self-confidence. I think there is some truth in the commonly reported perception amongst SSMs that they are regarded as a second class of priest; and part of the problem is that we may ourselves have internalised that to some degree. If so, our work and witness is hampered to that same degree.

There are classes of clergy

Maybe there is a distinction of clerical classes, but you don't have to be around for long to see that it is not, fundamentally, a stipendiary v. self-supporting one. God has been a little cannier than that. We may sometimes find clericalised and narrowly focused SSMs, and we often find open-minded, self-critical, questioning and fresh stipendiary colleagues. And sometimes they suffer under the constraints of their role as we do ours, and feel as unsupported or unrecognised by the institution as we sometimes might.

So the clergy constituency I value the most are those, whether paid or unpaid, who seem confident yet tentative; are fundamentally inclusive liturgically and pastorally; who can lead or follow as is needed, who are attentive to the affairs of the world as well as the interior life; who reject sentimentality and niceness in liturgy and in personal relations; who are in the institution but not wholly of it. Especially those who use their office to help others grow into Christian maturity and to grasp something of the meaning of the priesthood of all believers.

Perhaps what we need amongst SSMs and SMs are more *feral* clergy. If you think there is any truth in what I have alluded to about how we are formed in the clerical role and shaped by it in ways that are not always good, and that we are at risk of

becoming domesticated into the inoffensive, 'nice' and only peripherally relevant stereotypes of the Anglican vicar, then maybe we need to change. *Feral* can mean 'having returned to an untamed state from domestication'. Whatever you think about fast-tracked 'leadership' courses for the clerical high flyers I hope you might consider sympathetically our need for something vaguely opposite, or at least contrary: processes which strip us of the unattractive certainties of the institution and school, or re-school us, in the tentative certainties of the Gospel about love and mercy and comradeship and cooperation.

Where then do we meet Christ today?

Our theme is 'where do we meet Christ today?' The answer has to be: where we have always been able to meet him. But that is not quite as straightforward as it seems. It is – and ought to be – rather teasing, Zen like.

The Gospels do not insist that Christ appears only recognisably as himself. His presence is often disguised. Perhaps always disguised.

Earlier I said that I think of the church as *promiscuous*. I have known some people – clergy as it happens – who have reacted strongly against my use of the term, for reasons you can guess, I'm sure. They have heard it as meaning 'seedy' rather than 'indiscriminate'. As it happens, I was using it in at least both senses. Religion can lend itself all too easily to the splitting-off and to the evasions we ourselves embody, and we can use it to accommodate rather than transfigure our own distortions and prejudice. Unhelpful notions of purity and impurity often get thrown into the mix. I have no doubt that we can encounter Christ in the bordello as well as the sanctuary, and all places between, and in places of horror as well as places of peace. (I might mention perhaps my own horror when I hear clergy – often but not exclusively cathedral clergy – say something along the lines that 'people come to here (church or cathedral) *to find peace and God*'. As though God is domiciled in such buildings and must be visited there, like a housebound relative).

Christ, in whom we dare to believe and whom we seek is surely a great fan of disguise. It is not only angels we may unwittingly entertain when welcoming our brothers and our sisters. It seems very probable that God is the archetypal masquerader: buried, camouflaged, enshrouded, inconspicuous, masked, veiled; irresistibly making self-disclosures and revelations in all manner of indirect ways in a thousand and one different guises. And all under cover of what we rather blithely refer to as 'ordinary' life. The same 'ordinary' life in which we – as SSM clergy (ecclesiastically semi-detached and with a foot in other arenas, ourselves sometimes under disguise of one sort or another) have the great privilege to operate and serve.

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