

1986

Prophetic Consciousness: Obedience and Dissent in the Religious Life

Sandra Marie Schneiders

Jesuit School of Theology/Graduate Theological Union, sschneiders@scu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.scu.edu/jst>

 Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Schneiders, Sandra Marie "Prophetic Consciousness: Obedience and Dissent in the Religious Life" in *New Wineskins: Re-Imagining Religious Life Today*. New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1986.

Much of the material in the following essay was originally developed for the members of the National Religious Formation Conference, delivered at their bi-annual meeting in Philadelphia in November of 1981, and published in their 1981 Proceedings: *Formation in the American Church*. It was later reworked at the invitation of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious and the Conference of Major Superiors of Men, delivered at their joint annual meeting in San Francisco in August of 1982, and published in their 1982 Proceedings: *To Build a Bridge*. It has since been used by a number of congregations in their respective renewal processes, in preparations for chapters, and as input for committees working on revisions of constitutions.

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Jesuit School of Theology by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact rscroggin@scu.edu.

Chapter Thirteen

PROPHETIC CONSCIOUSNESS: OBEDIENCE AND DISSENT IN THE RELIGIOUS LIFE

Much of the material in the following essay was originally developed for the members of the National Religious Formation Conference, delivered at their bi-annual meeting in Philadelphia in November of 1981, and published in their 1981 *Proceedings: Formation in the American Church*. It was later reworked at the invitation of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious and the Conference of Major Superiors of Men, delivered at their joint annual meeting in San Francisco in August of 1982, and published in their 1982 *Proceedings: To Build a Bridge*. It has since been used by a number of congregations in their respective renewal processes, in preparations for chapters, and as input for committees working on revisions of constitutions.

Discipleship, as we all know, is a vocation to which one can never respond in a final and definitive way. It is a call to ongoing conversion, to an ever deeper appreciation of the mystery of Christ. To be a disciple is to incarnate the identity and mission of Jesus in our own personal, historical, and cultural context. For us, then, discipleship means living ever more deeply and effectively the mystery of Christ in the American Church of the late twentieth century.

There is a characteristic of our recent American Catholic experience that is at once glaringly evident and profoundly confusing, particularly because it is so discontinuous with the experience which formed most of us as American Catholic children. I am speaking of the deep ambivalence toward the authoritative institutions of both our country and our Church that many of us contend with on a daily basis. Nothing was more integral, even central, to the formation of young Catholics in the American parochial school system of the 1940's and 1950's than

the positive evaluation of lawfully constituted institutions summed up in the oft-cited, though decontextualized quotation from Romans: "All authority comes from God."¹

Obedience to parents, to Church law and personnel, and to civil officials was all of a piece expressing filial submission to the ultimate authority, God "himself," variously imagined as a stern father, a heavenly pope, or the policeman in the sky. Adult Catholics who were sophisticated and discriminating professionals in their secular lives lived unquestioningly with the virtual equation, on the moral level, of eating meat on Friday, murder, contraception, and missing Mass on Sunday. All were mortal sins that would send the unshriven perpetrator to hell. This was the authoritative teaching of the authoritative institution, and obedience to lawfully constituted authority was strictly identical with obedience to God (unless, of course, the action commanded was sinful).

Much the same attitude characterized the American Catholic in respect to the civil institution. Catholics were, of course, taught that in a conflict between Church and state it was not only legitimate but obligatory for the Christian, in imitation of all the martyrs down through the centuries, to obey God rather than human authority (God = Church; human authority = state). However, two factors conspired to keep this teaching largely theoretical for most American Catholics. First was the position in moral theology resulting from the affirmation that just civil law, although human, was sanctioned by divine authority. Therefore, Catholic moralists were never really comfortable with the theory of the purely penal law, that is, a law whose infraction, though entailing a just penalty, was not immoral. To deliberately break any just law, however morally neutral its content, was a rebellion against lawful authority and therefore against God in whom all authority originated. The second factor was the American political system itself. The separation of Church and state enshrined in the First Amendment guarantee of religious liberty made the likelihood of a real conflict between the civil government and the Church remote and assured legal redress of grievances if it should ever occur. America was the promised land, born in the passionate quest for religious liberty, and committed to assuring the freedom and well-being of its

own citizens and of all the world's huddled masses yearning to breathe free. The civil government of the United States was, American Catholic children learned, a just government of, by, and for the people, and therefore legitimately enjoyed divinely sanctioned authority. Respect for and obedience to civil authority was just as much an obligation as obedience to religious authority.

This attitude toward authority which characterized most Catholics in their relations with both ecclesiastical and civil institutions was not mindless subservience. It was the expression of a profound conviction that both Church and state were, despite human weaknesses, divinely instituted social orders, perfect societies, designed to foster the common good on earth and lead eventually to eternal life in heaven.² What I want to explore in this chapter is the radical change which has taken place in the American Catholic consciousness in the last twenty years in regard to institutional authority, both ecclesiastical and civil. The basic trust in the overall soundness of these institutions and therefore in the legitimacy of their authority which grounded the presumption in favor of obedience even in conflictual situations has been seriously eroded by events of the last two decades. The result is a profound ambivalence of many Catholics, including many religious, toward both Church and civil government and a resulting need to rethink the entire problematic of authority and obedience as it concerns institutions.

For some combination of historical reasons, the exploration of which is beyond the scope of this chapter, human consciousness has undergone some kind of quantum leap during our lifetime. Humanity has always, up to our own time, accepted as inevitable and therefore legitimate the determination of some people's lives by other people's decisions. Masters have controlled slaves, the rich have controlled the poor, whites have controlled people of color, men have controlled women, clerics have controlled the laity, superiors have controlled subjects, and so on. Hierarchy was considered the natural, universal, God-ordained principle of all sound social organization. For the first time in world history, in our generation, this arrangement has been repudiated on a worldwide scale. Group after group, in nation after nation, has claimed the right of self-determination.

Every liberation movement of our time is the expression of the claim to self-determination by some previously subordinate group. Whatever the cause of this phenomenon, it is indeed a fact, and the massive failure of both Church and state to come to grips with it is in my opinion a, if not the, major factor in the undermining of institutional authority. Conflict after conflict in both institutions has taken the same shape, namely, the resistance of a sizable group of members to the institution's attempt to limit their self-determination. American blacks rose up against their imprisonment in a second-class citizenship. For the first time in our history young men in America during the Vietnam War decided that they would not kill or be killed because the government said they should. Catholic spouses responded to *Humanae Vitae* with a resounding refusal to have the role of sexual love and procreation in their marriages determined in an absolute and unilateral way by ecclesiastical authorities. Women in both Church and state have decided that men must no longer sit in all-male council determining the nature and function of women in secular or ecclesial society. Examples abound, but the point is that neither Church nor state has been able to come to terms with the claims of its members to equality and self-determination and the result has been a rapidly increasing series of situations in which large numbers of American Catholics are resisting the institutional authority they once accepted as the evident manifestation of God's will in their lives.

The situation is complicated by the fact that these resisters do not dispute the legitimacy of the institutions as such nor the existence of genuine authority. They are not planning to overthrow the American government or the Vatican. Nor do most of them intend to renounce their American citizenship or their membership in the Catholic Church. They intend both to remain and to resist. It is this phenomenon of dissenting membership that is the focus of these reflections. How are we to make sense of this experience, in which many of us are involved, of ongoing radical criticism and behavioral non-conformity within the institutions that most profoundly structure our lives and identities? As a journalist once asked me, "Are we not talking about Catholicism (or citizenship) *a la carte*?" In other words, does it make any sense to talk about accepting authority if one

reserves to oneself the right to decide when and if one will obey? Can we realistically talk about an ecclesial or civil community if each member takes to himself or herself the right to determine his or her own position on matters of vital common concern and the right to act on that position even when it contradicts the directives of institutional authorities? In short, is radical dissent compatible with loyal membership and, if it is, how are we to understand that compatibility?

I suspect that neither I nor anyone else has a fully satisfactory theoretical solution to this problem which is, after all, quite new. But what I would like to do is suggest a way of thinking about this experience of dissenting membership which might at least allow us to situate ourselves within the question with a little more clarity and conviction.

In what follows I am immensely indebted to a wonderful little book by the Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann entitled *The Prophetic Imagination*.³ In the book Brueggemann explores the ongoing tension between the monarchy and prophecy in ancient Israel. I am going to use Brueggemann's analysis to explore the meaning and relationship between the prophetic and royal dimensions of Christian identity and mission. My thesis is that there is a dialectic, a tension which can be either creative or destructive, between these two dimensions of Christian discipleship and that it is precisely this dialectic which is at work in the phenomenon of dissenting membership. If prophecy and royalty can come to function in our lives as they did in the life of Jesus, they will energize our commitment to bringing about the reign of God in this world by the effective preaching of God's Word. If, on the other hand, our royal identity degenerates into a participation in what Brueggemann calls the "royal consciousness" our prophetic mission will be domesticated and denatured; and if prophecy loses touch with the reign of God that it must serve, we will become rebels without a cause, blind leaders of the blind.

Let us begin our analysis by briefly recalling certain features of the history of Israel's experience of prophecy and monarchy. Israel was constituted a people by her rescue from Egypt and her entrance into the covenant with Yahweh at Sinai. From that time on Israel was a holy nation, the people of God (cf. Ex

35). Yahweh alone was King and Lord, and so, while Israel had judges and elders, military leaders and priests to facilitate the ongoing religious and political life of the people, Israel had no human king, no monarch who stood above the community as a superior source of law and order. All the members of the community, whatever their functions, were subject to the same Law, namely Torah, which did not originate with any earthly ruler but had been given to the community by God.

When, in the eleventh century B.C., for political and military reasons that are quite understandable, the people asked the prophet Samuel to give them a king so that they could be like other nations, the prophet protested that setting up a king in Israel would be idolatrous (cf. 1 Sam 8:4–21). God is presented as interpreting the people's request as a rejection of Yahweh's reign in favor of a human monarch (1 Sam 8:7). Nevertheless, God acceded to the people's demand and Samuel was sent to anoint Saul, thus inaugurating the Israelite monarchy. It was understood from the beginning that the king was chosen by God, was anointed by God's servant, and was subject as were all the people to Torah, God's Law for the covenant community. The king was Yahweh's visible representative among the people but in no sense a vicar, one who took the place of God. God was always present and active among the people. The king was a concession to the community's need for security, in other words, to its lack of faith. Consequently, the monarchy was always an ambiguous reality from a theological point of view.⁴

In very short order the monarchy became concretely problematic in the disobedience and superstition of Saul, whom God finally rejected (1 Sam 15:22–29). David, Saul's successor, came closer than any of Israel's kings to realizing the truly religious role of the monarch as God intended. David, despite his sins, never forgot who was really king of Israel. But after David's death, his son Solomon progressively appropriated to himself the divine royalty, and so, after him, the monarchy was divided and slipped deeper and deeper into infidelity until both the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah came to ruin⁵ and kingship in Israel became a glorious memory founding a messianic hope for the renewal of the Davidic dynasty (2 Sam 7:8–16).

Throughout the period of the monarchy the prophets constituted a kind of loyal opposition. They were so consistently opposed to the policies and procedures of the kings that opposition to the monarch came to be almost a sign of a true prophet, whereas telling the king what he wanted to hear raised a strong suspicion of false prophecy (cf. Jer 23:16ff). The prophets did not oppose the institution of kingship as such. They opposed the way it operated. And the kings never disputed prophecy in principle; they exiled the prophets for their opposition to the royal regime. Although prophecy and monarchy were both accepted as divinely established institutions in Israel, they were almost always in tension with one another.

What Brueggemann does is to abstract from the concrete experience of Israel the inner structure and reality of the conflict. He discusses not the historical struggle between King Zedekiah and the prophet Jeremiah, between King Ahaz and the prophet Isaiah, but the tension between what he calls the "royal consciousness" and the "prophetic imagination." It is this paradigm whose potentialities I want to exploit in relation to the dilemma in discipleship of the American Catholic which I have called dissenting membership in Church and state.

First, let us try to understand what Brueggemann calls the *royal consciousness*. What primarily characterizes the royal consciousness is its identification with the present, with the current regime, with the political and social status quo. Obviously, it is only within the present structure that the king *is* king. If the monarchy falls the king's reign comes to an end.

Now there are various possible grounds for asserting that the present system should remain in force. One is that it is really serving the true interests of the people. But this is, in one sense, a very precarious basis on which to found one's royal claims because, if it should happen (as it well might) that many people become unhappy or discontented, the legitimacy of the monarchy, or at least of the incumbent's exercise of it, becomes open to question. The king whose reign is justified by its efficacy, its capacity to meet the real needs of the people, is really in a position of dependence on the people rather than vice versa. Such a monarchy is not an absolute one at all. It might be a monarchically structured regime, but in substance it is a genuinely

communitarian arrangement because the community's needs have a real priority. This, of course, was the kind of monarchy God intended for Israel, one in which the king pursued God's own concerns for well-being and justice among God's people.⁶

There is, however, another way to legitimate a regime, one that can claim that the present system is permanently and irreversibly legitimate regardless of its efficacy in meeting community needs, namely, to claim that the regime was instituted by God and therefore enjoys perpetual legitimacy which is not subject to review nor accountable for performance. This is the claim of Israel's unworthy kings, of Egypt's pharaohs, of Rome's emperors, of divine right monarchs down through history and, frequently enough, of ecclesiastical hierarchy. We notice in each of these regimes the tendency of the monarch to self-identification with the divinity which is characteristic of hierarchical social structure when it wishes to lift itself above the vicissitudes of human change and possible revision. The pharaohs and the Roman emperors deified themselves; Louis XIV called himself the "Sun-King"; the Church talks of its officials as "other Christs" and of the Pope as the "Vicar of Christ"; religious superiors have often claimed that their will expressed the will of God for their subjects. The royal consciousness legitimates its identification with the status quo by claiming that the present regime is of divine institution and the presently reigning personnel are God's vicars.

Once it is established that the monarchy is not the product of human initiative but of the divine will, the monarch ceases to be truly answerable to the people. He is accountable only to God. The people, on the other hand, are accountable to the king who controls access to God as well as to all material benefits. This double control of both divine and earthly goods gives the monarch immense power which he can then exercise with sovereign liberty because to call his arrangements into question is to oppose God's will. As the monarch accumulates power and wealth the people become progressively more dependent, and only those who are in favor with the monarch have assured access to well-being. We see this dynamic at work in our own day in Latin American dictatorships, in some American dioceses, and occasionally in the houses or provinces of religious orders.

This is, of course, exactly what happened in Israel. Solomon represents the ultimate realization of the royal consciousness. As he became immensely powerful and wealthy the people became progressively poorer and more powerless (cf. 1 Kgs 5:13ff). Solomon so appropriated to himself his divine identification that he eventually took it upon himself even to mitigate the demands of monotheism. When it served his political purposes he allowed the cults of other gods to flourish in Israel (cf. 1 Kgs 11:1-13). Solomon considered himself, and the people considered him, immune from opposition, for he was, after all, God's anointed, not the representative of the people.

The only voice that could be raised against the divine right monarch was the voice of the prophet who spoke for God. The prophet was a member of the community, subject like other community members to the royal authority. But the prophet had an independent, charismatic access to God, an access which the king did not control, and on the basis of which he could call the king to account in God's name. The prophet spoke for the community not as its elected representative but as God's representative. In the prophet, championing the rights of the people, we hear the voice of God reclaiming the covenant people from the unfaithful shepherd who has failed in his trust, who has not pastored and protected God's people, but has victimized them for the sake of his own regime (cf. e.g. Jer 23:1-8). The prophet challenges the king's claim to divine immunity from accountability and reminds him that he was to represent, not replace God; that he, too, is subject to Torah, not above the Law (see also Is 3:14-15; 10:1-4 and elsewhere).

Let us look, then, at the *prophetic imagination*. The prophet is one who can imagine, against the royal contention that the present regime is an eternally valid and inviolable arrangement, an alternative reality. The prophet refuses the royal injunction to worship the status quo as the inevitable and divinely sanctioned dispensation. The prophet looks back to the past, to the promises made to the ancestors and the covenant which enshrined those promises, to the people's free commerce with the living God when they cried out from their needs (Jer 2:1-3). And the prophet laments the incongruity between what was promised and what now exists (Jer 2:4-37). Because the

prophet sees the inadequacy of the present against the fecundity of the promises, he can imagine and announce a different future (Jer 3:11-4:4). This is the danger of the prophet to the king. The prophet, by his evocation of the past and his imagining of the future, undermines the present order of things and threatens to bring the king's reign down around his ears (Jer 26:1-11). And the prophet does all this in the name of the very God to whom the king appeals for the legitimacy of his regime.

To sum up briefly, then, the royal consciousness is structured by its identification with the status quo. It tries to present itself as the eternal now, the unchangeable order. It is an order in which power and wealth inevitably accumulate at the top of the hierarchical system and which is immune, as divine institution, from accountability to those at the bottom. It is a system which even God cannot change because, to do so, God would have to act against God's own dispensation.

The prophetic imagination, by contrast, nourished by a living remembrance of the past, threatens the present status quo by its capacity to imagine and announce an alternative future. For the prophet, God is not irrevocably implicated in any earthly dispensation, no matter how it originated nor how sacred it is. God remains sovereignly free to act again in favor of God's people if only they will recognize Yahweh as the one on whom their true good depends (Jer 3:12-18; Hos 14:1-9). The prophet sees clearly what neither king nor people see, namely, the difference between the God whose representative the king is called to be and the self-divinized monarch who has surreptitiously taken God's place in the lives of the people (e.g. Jer 22:1-5). The prophet announces that God is still on the side of the dispossessed, the lowly, the poor, the powerless as God was on the side of the Hebrews against Pharaoh (Jer 22:13-23). The prophet recalls both king and people to the covenant, to trust in God rather than in human strength, to true worship which repudiates any and every claim of king or foreigner to take the place of God among the people.

Now, it is crucial to our purposes to realize that the royal consciousness and the prophetic imagination are not limited to realization in historical monarchs and ancient prophets. The royal consciousness asserts itself in any situation in which the of-

ficials of an institution so identify with and invest themselves in the institution that preservation of the status quo begins to take precedence over the real good of the people the institution was created to serve. This perversion does not have to be the expression of deliberate malice. Usually this self-investment in the institution results from and is expressed as a conviction that the preservation of the status quo is identical with, or at least necessary for, the good of the community.

By the same token, the prophetic imagination emerges whenever fidelity to a community's founding inspiration is effectively evoked to energize movement toward an alternative future which stands more in continuity with that past and thus stands a better chance of improving the condition of those victimized by the present regime.

Basic to the situation with which we are concerned in this chapter, namely, that which involves many American Catholics, and especially religious, in the experience of dissenting membership, is the fact that there is an inveterate tendency of institutional responsibility to give rise to the royal consciousness in even the most well-motivated officials. People are elected or appointed to office in institutions because the institutions are necessary instruments of the common good and these institutions cannot perdure or function without the responsible dedication of those who administer and lead them. Officials are chosen precisely because they see the importance for the community of the institution. It is this insight that frequently leads the office holder to opt for the institution over the members. The classic principle of institutional expediency, "It is better that one person die rather than that the whole nation perish" (cf. Jn 11:49-50), contains a built-in escalation factor. During the Vietnam era it was invoked to justify the sacrifice of a whole generation to a misguided notion of national honor. There is a grim possibility that it will be the epitaph of the earth incinerated for the same empty cause. It has been invoked in religious congregations to justify the repression or expulsion of truly prophetic members in order to ward off the descent of ecclesiastical wrath on the whole order. The royal consciousness is seldom the result of freely chosen malice or naked hunger for power. It is the creeping disease that is the occupational hazard of office.

On the other hand, the prophetic imagination, precisely because it is a charismatic quality deriving from personal experience of God and the resulting commitment to God's people, especially to the most oppressed, is notoriously difficult to discern. Jim Jones offered an alternative future to some of the people most victimized by the American system. Only the spectacle of nine hundred people dead at their own hands around a cauldron of cyanide revealed the horrible character and tragic dimensions of his ego-blinded vision of salvation. Hitler offered an alternative future to a humiliated Germany and eloquently persuaded a whole nation to look the other way while he exterminated six million Jews to bring it about. There is nothing simple about the struggle between the royal consciousness and the prophetic imagination.

My suggestion is that it is only by contemplating, and making our own in disciplined practice, Jesus' living of the tension between the royal and the prophetic dimensions of his vocation that we can begin to mediate between our own legitimate institutional commitments and our prophetic vocation to combat the royal consciousness which corrupts those very institutions into shrines of the status quo rather than servants of the community and its purposes.

The early Church recognized in Jesus the fulfillment of all Israel's messianic expectations. He was the long-awaited Davidic king; he was the transcendent realization of the prophetic vocation of Moses, Elijah, and Jeremiah. But we have become so used to speaking of Jesus as prophet and king that we often fail to attend to the fact that he related very differently to each of these two dimensions of his messianic identity and mission.

During his public life Jesus resisted any application of royal titles to himself and fled from the people who wanted to make him king (e.g. Jn 6:15). It is important to note that he not only refused to allow himself to be made a political king in opposition to the Roman imperial rule; he also avoided participation in the religious power structures of his own people. Jesus was not a Pharisee, a lawyer, a scribe, a member of the Sanhedrin, or a priest. He was a simple layman who held no official position in either the ecclesiastical or the civil sphere. Consequently, while he manifested an appropriate respect for both institutional re-

gimes he was not personally identified with either (cf. Mt 5:17; 22:15-46; 23:1-31 and elsewhere). By his own choice, there was no soil in the human experience of Jesus in which the royal consciousness, in either its religious or its civil form, could flourish. Jesus did not assume his royal identity until he entered Jerusalem to be handed over for execution by the institutional authorities (cf. Jn 12:13). It is interesting that tradition has never been able to establish conclusively whether Jesus' execution should be attributed finally to the animosity of the Jews or of the Romans. It is perhaps more to the point to realize that at the deepest level, the level of their opposition to Jesus, the two institutions were identical. Jesus the prophet was put to death by the institution in the grip of the royal consciousness. The fear of the Jewish authorities that the continuance of Jesus would lead to the Romans "taking away our place and our nation" (cf. Jn 11:48) and the Roman fear that this man would overthrow the representative of Caesar (cf. Jn 18:33-38; 19:12-13) are the same fear. Jesus' message was as dangerous for the synagogue as it was for the palace because what he was announcing was that both regimes, even though legitimate, were provisional, relative human institutions. God was alive, well, and present in Israel and God had not transferred the divine preference from its age-old object, namely, the poor and the oppressed, to the prestigious and powerful who held office in Church and state. Jesus announced the end of both regimes by calling into question their identical false claim, to be eternally valid, divinely sanctioned, absolute dispensations. For Jesus the only absolute regime which made the only truly royal claim was what the evangelists call the *basileia tou theou*, the reign of God. No civil or ecclesiastical regime was identical with or the exhaustive incarnation of that reign. All human institutions, religious and civil, exist to help realize that reign among God's people, not to take its place.

The true royalty of Jesus, which had nothing to do with the royal consciousness, but was rooted in his divine filiation, was expressed in his identification with the reign of God. Consequently, it was not something he could claim during his public life because he knew well that the royal consciousness was as much at work in the hearts of the victims of the oppressive re-

gimes as it was in the officials. The people wanted to make Jesus king, not because he inaugurated among them the reign of God by preaching the good news to the poor, but because he seemed to be a better version of their earthly rulers. They wanted to replace their current institutional idols with a new idol. As Jesus says to the crowd, "You seek me, not because you saw signs [that is, not as a locus of divine revelation], but because you ate your fill of the loaves [that is, because you think I could fulfill your immediate material needs better than the current regime]" (Jn 6:26).

Jesus refused a royalty already corrupted by the royal consciousness and functioned openly only as a prophet. As prophet he evoked the past, the covenant God made with the people in their poverty and powerlessness, and he energized them to hope for an alternative future. He announced that the reign of God would belong to the poor, the meek, the hungry, the dispossessed, the powerless (cf. Mt 5:3-12; Lk 6:20-23). It is a reign in which mutual love among equals (cf. Jn 13:34-35 and elsewhere)⁷ will replace all the hierarchical relationships built on inequality, the relationships of power and domination which structured the society of the pagans and oppressed the people of God (cf. Mt 23:8-12; Mk 10:42-45).

But Jesus did not just promise a future reign; he acted to inaugurate it in the present. He broke the grip of the ecclesiastical establishment by declaring all religious laws except that of love relative to human good (e.g. Mk 2:23-28) and by giving free access to divine forgiveness to those who did not qualify for it by meeting institutional requirements (e.g. Lk 7:36-50). He broke the grip of the political establishment by declaring the equality of people as children of God called to mutual love and thus announcing the relativity of Rome's dominion in the present and the inevitability of its demise when the reign of God would come in all its fullness. He broke down the barriers of stratified society so necessary for hierarchy to function by eating with sinners (Mt 9:10-13), consorting with Samaritans (Jn 4:4-27) and pagans (Jn 4:46-54), and calling women to be disciples and apostles along with men (Lk 8:1-3; Jn 20:17-18).⁸ Jesus the prophet reminded the people that God's covenant was still effective, announced the reign which was coming, and inaugu-

rated it among them. But he avoided identifying himself publicly as a king until the moment when he was beyond the corrupting reach of the royal consciousness in the people, as the victim of the royal consciousness in the institution. Only when he was definitively involved in the ultimate reversal that characterizes the divine reign, in the poverty and powerlessness of death from which only God could rescue him, did he claim his royal identity. From the cross he reigned as king (Jn 19:19-22).

Our faith teaches us that all of us participate in the royal and prophetic dimensions of Jesus' identity and mission. But from the Council of Trent until quite recently it has been customary in Roman Catholic circles to speak of the hierarchy alone as participating actively while the laity participated passively in Christ's mission. The prophetic dimension of the active Church was usually equated with teaching established doctrine and the royal dimension with hierarchical government. In fact, the teaching function came to be exercised as an aspect of government, resulting in the notion of an absolute authoritative magisterium characterized by the same authoritarian triumphalism that marked the Church's government by a clericalized hierarchy. The laity, whose participation in the identity and mission of Christ had been characterized as passive, were thought to take part in his prophetic identity primarily by being docilely taught and in his royal identity by being meekly ruled. Little attention was focused on the way Jesus had related to his royal and prophetic vocation.

Obviously, Vatican II has legitimated a massive revision of this Counter-Reformation approach to discipleship. But it has not provided much clear guidance for the ordinary Christian disciple in understanding what it might mean for us to participate actively in the prophecy and royalty of Jesus. What I have been trying to suggest in this essay is that participation in the royalty of Jesus has nothing to do with identification, active or passive, with ruling institutions, ecclesiastical or civil. It has to do with identification with the reign of God, an identification in hope that anticipates its final realization, but also an identification in action in helping to realize it here and now by an active and effective commitment to peace and justice for all God's people.

One of the most important insights of post-conciliar ecclesiology is that the Catholic Church is not identical with the reign of God but exists to serve that reign.⁹ To absolutize the institution of the Church (and *a fortiori* the nation) is not a recognition of, nor a participation in, the royalty of Jesus. It is an exercise of the royal consciousness against which, as prophets, we must cry out, for it is an idolatry that blinds people to the coming of the reign. To participate in the royalty of Jesus is to so identify with the reign of God that we see clearly the relativity of all human regimes, that of the ecclesiastical institution as much as that of the civil institution. To participate in the prophetic identity of Jesus means, at least in part, to combat the royal consciousness in ourselves first of all, but also in the Church and state, especially when they sacrifice persons to systems. As humans and as Christians we participate in institutions; but as disciples of Jesus we recognize only one regime as absolute, the reign of God.

I suspect that many committed American Catholics are acting out of an experiential but unthematized realization of the relativity of institutions to the absolute claim of the reign of God when they dissent from oppressive institutional policies and practices of both Church and state while remaining respectful members of both. What they are refusing to do is to concede to the royal consciousness, no matter where it emerges, its claim to absolute validity. They are not refusing to admit the real but provisional legitimacy of human institutions.

It may well be that the ecclesiastical institution presents a more painful challenge to conversion for the contemporary Catholic, especially the person actively involved in ministry, than does the civil institution. It is easier for most of us to exercise our prophetic discipleship against the government because the blasphemy of a claim to absolute validity and authority is more blatant when it is made by a non-religious institution. It is much more difficult for Catholics, especially those of us who were brought up in the most absolutist period of Church history, the Counter-Reformation, to relativize the institution of the Church. The great temptation is to connive with the royal consciousness when it emerges in ecclesiastical officials, even if we ourselves are the victims. We have been so educated to re-

spect the religious claim to obedience which the institutional Church makes that we are ill-prepared to accept ourselves as dissidents, even when our most fundamental individual and collective rights are at stake or the good of the people we serve is being subverted.

There are times, of course, when we can legitimately suffer persecution for justice's sake as Jesus did. But we pervert the Gospel ideal of meekness when we make it an excuse for allowing ourselves to be dominated rather than face the struggle to achieve maturity in our relationship with institutional authority. Not to resist the royal consciousness is to support and encourage it. What victimizes us today will claim a sister or brother tomorrow.

Even more problematic is the temptation to stand by silently while others in the local or wider Church are victimized by the abuse of power. It matters little whether those in power are being deliberately and maliciously oppressive or whether, like the religious officials Jesus warned of, they think that by destroying their ecclesiastical enemies they are giving glory to God (cf. Jn 16:1-2). Our commitment to the reign of God is a vocation to prophesy, in season and out of season, against the royal consciousness whenever it prefers the good of institutions to the good of human beings.

One of the most difficult aspects of the responsible assumption of our vocation to prophecy is accepting the necessity that falls eventually on most of us to resist or to criticize those institutions in which we are most intimately and immediately involved, for example, the local Church or our own religious congregation. Jesus warned us both that our enemies would be those of our household (Mt 10:34-36) and that the prophet would be least acceptable in his or her own country (Mt 12:57; Mk 6:4; Jn 4:44). It is difficult enough to denounce injustice and oppression in distant lands and in remote institutions—this must, of course, be done—but it is more psychologically painful and dangerous to denounce them from within the institutions in which we live and minister. It is easier to challenge our government's participation in Latin American oppression than Vatican persecution of theologians. We are more comfortable denouncing civil discrimination against women than crying out

against the oppression of women in and by the Church. We will more willingly align ourselves with the struggle for self-determination of South African blacks than with the struggle for self-determination of our own religious congregation. Examples could be multiplied but the point is painfully obvious. We must bring our prophetic ministry to bear within the community of the Church. As the Synod of Bishops declared in its 1971 document, *Justice in the World*, "The Church . . . recognizes that anyone who ventures to speak to people about justice must first be just in their eyes."¹⁰ And the same Synod went on to honestly indicate that there are numerous aspects of Church life in which contemporary people cannot readily recognize the justice which the Gospel demands and the Church proclaims. It is upon these issues that the prophetic dissent, criticism, and even resistance of loyal Catholic individuals and groups, including religious congregations, is increasingly and rightly coming to bear.

In taking our bearings from the Scriptures, especially the Gospels, we must remind ourselves that the prophets of old, including Jesus, were people called to rise up in the midst of their own religious community. They were sent, not primarily to foreigners, but to the house of Israel. The primary objects of their critique and resistance were the religious authorities to whom the community, including themselves, owed obedience, the religious establishment to which they belonged and which they never ceased to love, the Church for whose salvation they were willing even to be persecuted, banished, and executed by those who sat in the chair of Moses. This is the root explanation of that painful paradox of the prophetic experience, the marriage in the heart and activity of the prophet of compassion for and condemnation of the religious institution to which they belonged and even of its highest representatives. Jesus both wept over Jerusalem and predicted its well-earned destruction (cf. Mt 23:37-39), and in this he only followed in the great tradition of Hosea, Jeremiah, and the other prophets of the Old Testament.

We are doubtless correct to question seriously our own credentials for this lonely and agonizing vocation. Indeed, anyone who aspires to be a prophet is either completely uninformed or clinically insane! Probably one of the surest signs of the call to prophecy in the Church today is the experience of that same ter-

ror in the face of such a task that made Moses stutter, Jeremiah rebel, and Jesus sweat blood. The more afraid we are of the consequences, the more unworthy we feel in the face of our own sins to call anyone to repentance, the more deeply we love the Church and reverence its ministry of leadership, the more resolutely must we face the implications of the vocation to prophecy in the contemporary Church. This will only be possible if our wholehearted commitment to Jesus gives rise in us to a passionate and ultimately fearless identification with the reign of God, that regime of reversals whose great sign is the resurrection of an executed Prophet.