

My Father's House

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Faithful Dissenters

Stories of Men and Women who Changed the Church

By Robert McClory

Commentary by Fr. Bill McCarthy, MSA

Robert McClory has written a book, a prophetic book, showing what the Judaic-Christian religion has always acknowledged – that the role of the prophet is to tear down as well as to build up. The book was inspired in large measure by John Henry Newman's "On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine." Newman insisted that the creation of Church doctrine is not the exclusive reserve of the hierarchy; and that consultation with the laity is in fact necessary. Down through the history of the Church, it has been the laity at times who maintain orthodoxy.

A Rich Tradition

The prophetic often challenges the institutional whenever the institutional is not open to the Spirit. But the institutional must correct the prophetic whenever the prophetic is not open to the Spirit. The two can be and should be correctants of each other. Thus there is within the Church dissent which is valid and healthy and that which is invalid and rebellious.

John Courtney Murray

John Courtney Murray (*d.*1967), a Jesuit priest, was used by God to show the necessity of religious freedom in countries where the Church was not dominant and in control. Up to his time many within the hierarchy felt that the Catholic Church had to have privileged status, even in countries where the Church was not predominant. Almost single handedly, he was responsible for the Declaration on Religious Freedom. It can be rightly said that he was a prophet of religious freedom. He stressed that every human person is endowed with the dignity and has the freedom to grow without undue restraint from either Church nor government.

The Galileo Affair

Galileo Galilei is the best known dissenter in the history of the Church because he produced a Copernican Revolution from a geo-centric to a helio-centric model of the world in which the sun was central. It must rightfully be said, however, that the Church did not so much resist his conclusions as his arrogance. Nevertheless, he is to this day considered the Father of Dissent. He was never told to retract his views, but simply had been informed that his views at that time

could not be presented as absolute fact.

Pope John Paul II in his encyclical, *Fides et ratio*, stated that the truth of faith and science cannot be in contraction since both equally come from the same divine source. Separating faith from reason can only “diminish the capacity of men and women to know themselves, the world and God in an appropriate way.”

John Henry Newman

John Henry Newman felt that not only the bishops and priests should be consulted in the formulation of the understanding of certain dogma, but also the laity. For the Church herself has taught that there is a valid “census fidelium” – sense of the faithful. Newman wrote, “I think I am right in saying that the tradition of the Apostles, committed to the whole Church in its various constituents and functions through a kind of unity, manifests itself variously at various time: some times in the mouth of the episcopacy, sometimes by the doctors, sometimes by the people; and sometimes by liturgies, rites, ceremonies, customs, events, disputes, movements and all those other phenomena which are comprised under the name of history. It follows that none of these channels of tradition may be treated with disrespect.”

Vatican II

In the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church it states, “The body of the faithful as a whole, anointed by the Holy One, cannot error in matters of belief... allotting his gifts to everyone as He will ... The Holy Spirit distributes special graces among the faithful of every rank ... He makes them fit and ready to undertake the various tasks and offices for the upbuilding and renewal of the Church ... Christ the great Prophet, who proclaimed the Kingdom of God, continually fulfills his prophetic office ... not only through the hierarchy who teach in his name ... but also the laity. For that very purpose, he made them his witnesses and gave them understanding of the speech and the gift of faith.” Many have said that Vatican II was Newman’s Council.

Apostles and Prophets

St. Paul tells us in his Church epistle to the Ephesians that every new testament community should be founded upon Apostles and Prophets (2:20). The Apostles would be the hierarchical element. The prophets could be from any rank. Cardinal Avery Dulles believes that we have to restore prophets to the Church since they’ve always been there in both old and new testament times. If we restore the Office of the Prophet to the Church, it would be a vehicle for all prophetic voices. At present, there is no such structure for listening to the people.

If Not Official, Then Unofficial

Since the 3rd century, the prophets officially have gone out of existence. But God’s word, which acts as a two-edge sword dividing the things of this world from the things of God, has never been silence. Unofficial voices have been inspired to be a correctant to the hierarchy whenever the hierarchy was not truly listening to the Spirit.

Mary Ward

Mary Ward, for example, won against the hierarchy and started a woman's religious order (The Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary) that was not cloistered. Although she encountered great opposition by the hierarchy, she felt that her mission was "ordained and commended to me by the express word of him who cannot deceive nor be deceived." Pope Pius XII vindicated her in 1951 when he called her that "incomparable woman given by Catholic England to the Church in the darkest and most blood-stained periods." Her insights also gained a measure of recognition in Vatican II's Decree on the Appropriate Renewal of the Religious Life. Mary Ward must be regarded as a pioneer whose vision surpassed the time in which she lived.

Catherine of Sienna

When the Pope had moved to Avignon and was immersed in excessive wealth on the one hand and indifference to the poor on the other, Catherine came to enforce God's judgment to rouse the Church and the pope out of the depressing paralysis of the time. She clearly saw that wide ranging Church reform had to be carried out and that that would not happen until Pope Gregory departed and went back to Rome where popes belong. For Catherine, it was a life and death issue for she clearly saw that the Pope in leaving Rome had abandoned the blood and martyrdom of the Christians for the ease and luxury of Avignon. Catherine received this prophetic stand by hours spent in penance, prayer and meditation.

Matteo Ricci – An Open Door to China

In 1582, a 30-year-old Italian Jesuit went to China. Ricci shaved his head and beard and dressed like a Chinese Buddhist monk. He soaked up Chinese culture and religion. Later, he would adopt the silent manner of a Confucian scholar. He clearly saw the difference between Christianity and Western civilization. As far as possible, he let go of all the cultural trappings of Western Europe and adopted the Eastern trappings of the Chinese culture. He learned Mandarin Chinese. The years from 1600 to 1610 proved the most productive in Ricci's life. Spending most of the time in Peking writing and conferring with scholars, he developed more fully his ideas on a happy marriage between Catholicism and Confucianism. He concluded that Catholic Chinese converts could engage in Confucian ancestral rites provided they interpret them in an Orthodox Christian manner.

"An Open Door"

In his most important book on the True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven, Ricci made a heroic effort to incorporate Christianity in a non-European system. The doctrines of the creed were to be presented clearly but always adapted to Chinese history and culture. In short he tried to do for Confucius what Thomas Aquinas did for Aristotle. He died in 1610 at the age of 58 with fewer than 500 converts but leaving as his last words stated, "an open door." Once again, his efforts were later encouraged by the Church, in that the role of the missionary was to Christianize and not Westernize.

Vatican II, Once Again

The Second Vatican Council stated, "Other religions to be found everywhere strived variously to answer the restless searchings of the human heart by proposing 'ways' which consists of

teachings, rules of life and sacred ceremonies. The Catholic Church rejects nothing which is true and holy in these religions. She looks with sincere respect upon those way of conduct and life, those rules and teachings which though differing in many particulars from which she holds and sets forth, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men. Christ himself searched the hearts of men and led them to divine light through truly human conversation. So also His disciples, profoundly penetrated by the Spirit of Christ, should know the people among whom they live and should establish contact with them. Thus they can themselves learn by sincere and patient dialogue what treasures a bountiful God has distributed among the nations of the earth. But at the same time let them try to illumine these treasures with the light of the gospel ... So whatever good is to be found [already] sown in the hearts and minds or in the rites and cultures peculiar to various peoples is not lost.”

Ricci Vindicated

More recently, Pope John Paul II, in his encyclical *Redemptor hominis*, asked the question, “Does it not sometimes happen that the firm belief of the followers of the non-Christian religions – a belief that is also an effect of the Spirit of truth operating outside the visible confines of the Mystical Body – can make Christians ashamed of being often themselves so disposed to doubt concerning the truths revealed by God?” It was the kind of question that Mateo Ricci might have asked.

Hildegard of Bingen

One of the great prophetesses was Hildegard who had a public career of almost 43 years. She was a visionary, not an educated theologian. She saw much of what she wrote in what she called the reflection of the living light. She was extremely loyal to the hierarchy. She was a leading feminist in the truest sense of her day. She taught that since Jesus took his body from a woman, it is woman rather than man who best represents the humanity of the Son of God. And also, that contrary to the clear position of St. Paul, man was man from woman just as equally as woman was made from man. She further taught that Eve was far more the victim of Satan’s cunning than of Adam’s sin, and that in the inner being of God, there is an intense relationship of feminine masculine that is mirrored in the complementary relationships of men and women.

Many of her ideas she got from the Book of Wisdom. She encouraged women to celebrate holy days by wearing white veils, tiaras with gems and rings on their fingers so that they would “flash and radiate divine beauty.” Her writings on women were deeply rooted in the feminine found in God. She was especially fascinated with the woman’s role in the Incarnation and saw it as a kind of template for the call of all women to bring God into the world. Her insistence that God could not be imaged in an exclusively male context has been vindicated by the modern Catechism of the Catholic Church: “In no way is God in man’s image. He is neither man nor woman. God is pure Spirit in which there is no difference between the sexes. But the respective perfections of man and woman reflect something of the infinite perfection of God; those of a mother and those of a father and husband.” Pope John Paul I said, “God is our father, even more, God is our mother.”

Yves Congar

Yves Congar was a theologian whose ideas on ecumenism were at one time suspect. He was even forbidden to write on ecumenism and so he switched to writing about theology of the laity. It was his landmark book on the laity that greatly influenced the thinking of the Vatican II Council fathers, for as Congar showed, the word *laos* does not mean laity but rather the people of God and all the members of the Church, both priests and lay are members of the laos. Congar would later be vindicated by being invited to be an expert at the Second Vatican Council and Pope John Paul II elevated him to be a cardinal. Congar worked behind the scenes at the Second Vatican Council in developing the constitutions on the Church, the laity, Revelation and the Church in the world. He was especially active in advising Cardinal Bea and Jan Willebrands, the secretary of the Secretariat for Church Unity on the wording of the Decree on Ecumenism.

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