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What Jesus taught us about his prophetic ministry

by Sandra Schneiders



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This is the third part of a five-part essay by Immaculate Heart of Mary Sr. Sandra Schneiders on the meaning of religious life today. In this part Schneiders, professor of New Testament Studies and Christian Spirituality at the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley, explores the life of Jesus and the prophetic ministry that flows from it in her essay "Religious Life as Prophetic Lifeform." These essays run from Jan. 4 through Jan. 8.

The Prophet's Life

We turn now to Jesus' life out of which his prophetic ministry flowed. Is it a realistic model for the life of ministerial religious today? If so, what are the implications of the prophetic character of religious life for the behavior of religious in ministry and in relation to the hierarchy?

First, Jesus' prophetic vocation was rooted in and expressive of his mystical life, the intense contemplative prayer life that the Gospels present as the root of his experiential knowledge of God. He not only took part in Jewish vocal prayer and liturgy (e.g., see Lk. 4:16; Mt. 26:17). He spent long periods -- whole nights (Lk. 6:12), hours before dawn (Mk. 1:35), times of decision making (Lk. 6:12-13) and anguish (see Mk. 14:32-42), and, at least once, "40 days" -- in prayer to God (see Mk. 1:13 and pars.). Jesus not only knew about God; he knew God intimately. He experienced God as his "Abba" (Mk. 14:36),

his loving parent, from whom he drew his own identity, and whose project was his own. In John's Gospel Jesus speaks of being "one" with God (Jn. 10:30) whose words he speaks and whose works he does (see Jn. 14:10).

The prophet's direct and immediate experience of God is the root of her or his words and actions. But this activity is often enough critical of or even in opposition to the positions of the legitimate ecclesiastical authorities who are usually presented as, and in fact are, God's institutional representatives. Jesus' confrontation with the officials over the woman taken in adultery was not an isolated case. He was frequently in heated conflict with the hierarchy.

We can be tempted to think that such opposition to institutional authority was fine for Jesus in relation to the Jerusalem hierarchy in the first century but not for us in relation to ecclesiastical authority in our own time. Jesus, after all, was God so he knew all the right answers. And the Jerusalem hierarchy was degenerate and filled with evil hypocrites.

To sanitize (and even trivialize) Jesus' prophetic ministry in this way is to miss the point entirely. Jesus did not claim personal divine authority when he acted prophetically in relation to the religious institution. He claimed to be speaking for God, not as God. And it is important to note that his adversaries were claiming exactly the same thing, that is, to be God's official representatives to the people which, in fact, they were. They actually had the ecclesiastical authority of office on their side, which Jesus did not because he was not a priest, an elder, a scribe, or any other kind of religious official.

Jesus had prophetic credibility among the people because he "spoke with authority," precisely not as the scribes, that is, not by virtue of institutional position nor backed up by texts (see Mk. 1:27; Mt. 7:29). He spoke "like no other person ever has" (cf. Jn. 7:45-46). It was not because he was God in thin disguise or because he was credentialed by the religious establishment, but because his truth telling, despite overwhelming personal threat when what he said and did ran counter to what the laws or the officials required, manifested to the people that he was indeed representing the true God. Only later, only after the Resurrection, did they realize that this "prophet, mighty in word and work," was indeed the Son of God. During his public life, his authority flowed from what he did and said. No one can confer, and no one can "claim," moral authority. It belongs only to one earns it. Jesus was powerfully, personally authoritative and that is why he was recognized as a prophet.

Furthermore, the religious officials of Jesus' time were no more wicked, hypocritical, oppressive, immoral, or corrupt than officials of state and Church in other ages. They had the same status among their contemporaries as do our legislators, priests and bishops, presidents and popes. The presumption of legitimacy and competence was theirs by virtue of their office. The officials Jesus confronted were not wearing signs saying embezzler, hypocrite, pedophile, adulterer, pornographer, so that anyone looking at them would know that Jesus was certainly right to call them to account. Jesus was seeing in them, in their teaching and their behavior, what his contemporaries, like so many of us when we deal with people in high places, were conditioned not to see, or were afraid to name. And he bore witness, at risk of his life, to what he saw.

The problem for Jesus' contemporaries was the same as ours today. How are we to judge between voices competing for our acceptance? How do we recognize the prophet, the one who "speaks for God"? Obviously, as the horror of the Holocaust made clear for all time, it is profoundly immoral to uncritically "follow orders" simply because they come from someone in authority. Jesus warned his contemporaries to beware of the official teachers, of the priests and elders and Pharisees who "sit in the chair of Moses" but are hypocrites (see Mt. 23:1-5), whited sepulchers (see Mt. 23:27), self-serving oppressors of the poor in the name of God.

There were, of course, sincere men among the ecclesiastical officials of Jesus' time, like Nicodemus (Jn. 3, 7, 19); and the scribe who was "not far from the kingdom of God" (Mk. 12:28-39). But there were many others, like Caiaphas (Jn. 11:49-50 with 18:14), who were "the blind leading the blind" (see Mt. 15:10-14). We face the same challenge today. There are many men of integrity, holiness, and compassion holding office in the Church. But popes can be wrong, even culpably so; bishops can be criminals; priests can be embezzlers or sexual predators. One thing is certain: hierarchical status, office in the Church, is no guarantee that the speaker or his message comes from God. An office holder may be prophetic, or a prophet may hold office, but the two charisms as such do not imply each other. And history suggests that there is virtually always tension, if not opposition, between institutional and prophetic authority.

Besides an intense life of prayer which unites the prophet to God, a second requirement of prophetic identity and mission is a certain freedom from attachments which pressure the person to prefer personal or institutional goods, the maintaining of the status quo within which one's own position and interests are protected, to God's interests or the good of those to whom one is sent. Jesus was extraordinarily "unattached," not only inwardly, but even in his personal lifestyle. By his own choice, he had no family to provide for or to protect. He owned no personal property that he could lose. He held no official position of power, political or ecclesiastical, that his actions could jeopardize.

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Of course, family, property, and power are not necessarily impediments to prophetic freedom. Like St. Thomas More, many people in high places, with much to protect personally, professionally, and politically, have given their lives in witness to the truth. But being without such attachments is a bulwark of prophetic freedom simply because it makes it easier to "hear," without distortion from one's own inner voices or outer demands, the voices that are relevant to the issues one must discern. With less "static" from legitimate competing interests the prophet can more easily listen full-time, with all his or her attention, for the truth to which witness is required, the truth that must be done regardless of orders to the contrary. Discernment based on attentive listening, not submission to the will of another, is the essence of prophetic obedience.

Third, a major and non-negotiable criterion of the true prophet is the coherence between the prophet's message and the prophet's life. The more insensitive one is to the devastation one's teaching or legislating causes in the lives of real people, the more willing one is to "stone the sinner" in order to bolster official authority and guard public morality, the more likely it is that, no matter how highly placed, one is a "blind guide," one of those Jesus described who "tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; while they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them" (Mt. 23:4). Rosa Parks and Nelson Mandela were willing to pay the price for their witness for racial justice. Jesus defending the woman taken in adultery was risking his life for hers. Witness to the truth is never comfortable or self-aggrandizing for the true prophet, and the risks are usually high. "Witness" from the favored side of power is dubiously prophetic.

The issue that emerges as central when the prophetic charism conflicts with institutional authority is precisely the one operative in much of the current struggle between the institutional church and religious, namely, obedience. Can we equate obedience to God with doing what we are told by people who hold office? And can we submissively abstain from interpreting the present situation in light of the Gospel and responding to the present needs of real people, because those who hold office require that we do so?

We will return to this topic shortly, but, by way of anticipation, it appears from Jesus' practice and

especially from his life that religious obedience cannot be adequately understood or defined as "blind or absolute submission to official authority," whether to people, teaching, or laws. No matter how highly placed in the religious institution they might be, human beings do not take God's place in the life of believers. To pretend otherwise is blasphemy on the part of those who claim to do so and idolatry on the part of those who accord to humans the obedience that belongs to God alone. There is no avoiding the challenge and the obligation of discernment and "blind obedience," i.e., uncritical submission to power, is neither discernment nor obedience. Nor can it ever be a substitute for either.

Coming to grips, in genuine obedience to God, with the tension between their prophetic vocation and the demands of ecclesiastical authority is at the heart of the current struggle between religious and the Vatican. So we turn now to a focused examination of contemporary ministerial religious life against the background of the understanding of Jesus' prophetic vocation in which religious are called to share.

Thursday: "The tasks for those who choose to live the prophetic life."

The essay in five parts:

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