PROPHECY AND HIERARCHY

By PHILIP C. RULE

WRITING ON THIS topic can be both frustrating and painful: frustrating, because one no sooner puts down pen or turns from the typewriter, than something new has been written, stressing the urgency of the leadership crisis in the Church and human society; painful, because political and ecclesiastical satires have reached the saturation point in their attacks on institutional leadership. Changing concepts of authority, credibility gaps, semantic hedgings, all stretch trust in current leadership – world and local – to the breaking-point.

Perhaps we are asking too much of institutional leadership at the very time when we are failing to cultivate an important form of charismatic leadership: prophecy. No single feature has, I think, so accounted for the strain on institutional leadership as has what a recent writer, Alvin Toffler, labelled 'future shock': a phenomenon that has merely aggravated the already precarious human situation.[1]

Each age likes to think of itself as standing on the brink of profound change. But no age has faced the future with such a sense of imminence and ambivalence as have the people of the second half of the twentieth century. René Marle says that 'in comparison with civilizations that have preceded it, ours is a civilization resolutely oriented to the future; it is disturbed or fascinated by the latter'.[2] The future is imminent in a way never before experienced. The rate of change in the modern world, the technological development and the knowledge explosion, have effected radical changes in our patterns of living. Computers, jet airplanes and television have produced a world characterized by complexity, speed, and the immediacy of experience.

That immediacy of experience has made christians – all men – throughout the world painfully aware of profound cultural differ-

[1] Toffler, Alvin: *Future Shock* (New York, 1970).

[2] 'The Beginnings of a New Era in German Protestant Theology', in *Lumen Vitae*, 23 (1968), p 645.

ences between nations, of gross inequities in the distribution of the world's goods, of wars, sickness, pain, suffering, and social injustice. To the faint of heart it would appear that the messiah has not yet come because the blind are still blind, the lame still lame, the deaf still deaf, and the poor do not have the good news preached to them.

We face the future with mixed feelings: part of the future is beyond our control: there are autonomous forces at work in technological development, unpredictable forces in nature, the whole evolutionary sweep of man as he moves through space and time. Yet in a sense we can manipulate and control the future in a way none of our ancestors could have dreamed possible. The seeds of self-destruction are planted. Yet because the stuff out of which man is made is hope, we can also see the world as open-ended, only partly determined. It is left to us to carry out the human project, to restore all things in Christ.

The shift in emphasis from certain past to open future, from absolutism to relativism, from complacency in national and cultural achievement to burning concern over the human problems that beset spaceship earth as it speeds through time, cannot help but work its way into the very fibre of christian life as the twentieth century draws to a close. Echoing the insecurity and lack of direction in secular society, many christians are crying out, 'save us, Lord, for we perish!' This of course is the question: Who shall save us? Who shall *lead* us? Traditionally the leaders in the Church have been the bishops, the hierarchy. Are these men alone capable of providing the leadership necessary to guide the Church into the future?

Looking at the troubles besetting fourth-century Athens, Plato saw the need for something besides the kings. 'Until kings become philosophers or philosophers become kings', he warned, 'there can be no cessation of troubles'. Looking around at the present state of the Church, one wonders if it might not be safe to say that until bishops become prophets or prophets become bishops there will be no cessation of troubles in the Church. Since that felicitous joining of roles is neither theoretically guaranteed by Christ's promises to his Church nor actually realized in many instances, it might be more realistic to say that unless we have both bishops and prophets the troubles will not cease.

Bishops, of course, can be had on order. Canon law provides us with the qualifications necessary for men who ascend the ladder to

the hierarchy: deacon, priest, bishop, pope. Unfortunately, or perhaps providentially, there are no canonical guides for establishing or recognizing the prophet in our midst; the Spirit blows where it will. The prophet is seldom a welcome figure in any society, be it secular or sacred; and the history of prophetic utterance is one of heartbreak, rejection, and persecution.

In the years following World War II, the prophetic voice, especially in secular society, has often been one that preached change through violence and revolution. Even within the Church that voice has sometimes sounded harsh and rebellious. But the call to change is always painful. In our age, inside and outside the Church, there is an increasing need for prophets precisely because there is an increasing pace of change. Aware of this, the fathers of Vatican II reminded us that we are a pilgrim Church, a people *on the move* toward the future.

Bishops and secular rulers can provide answers for their people as long as the questions asked are couched in the same categories as the answers. But today's world will not often allow us that comfortable situation in which traditional questions find traditional answers. The future brings its own set of questions and answers.

Hierarchy and prophecy represent two healthy polarities that keep the Church, any society, alive and developing. Hierarchy, by its very definition, bespeaks order, the arrangement of the present into meaningful harmony. Our hierarchy, based on historical succession, guarantees continuity with the past. But order often becomes rigid pattern; tradition can become antiquarianism. Prophecy bespeaks openness to the spirit and the future. Standing before God, the prophet is on the cutting edge of the future – for God is our future. Both roles, then, are necessary. One or the other by itself is dangerous: order can degenerate into static complacency, false dependence on the past; change and forward movement can splinter into chaotic, frenetic activity, into an *effusio ad exteriora.* Of bishops Irenaeus said: without them there is no Church. Of prophets Moses said: would that all my people would prophesy.

Rulers are appointed or elected to preserve the *status quo*, to preserve the identity of the ruled. Prophets arise, more often than not, to show that the ruling body is failing in its job, either by subordinating individuals to the system, ignoring necessary change, or not ministering properly to those they govern. They sometimes appear to warn a whole people that they have fallen away from their common purpose, from that which binds them into a com-

munity; or that they are turned in upon themselves, ignoring the needs of those around them, be they individuals or nations.

People, however, fear change, the ruled as well as the rulers. In many western countries today, the man in the street is willing to sacrifice more than a measure of personal freedom to preserve law and order. The same is true in the Church, where many, frightened by or distrustful of change, cling to the externals of the old order and suicidally shut their eyes to the inevitable change going on around them. (I use the word suicidally of set purpose, because not to grow, not to change purposefully, is to die.) This then is the dilemma: if we change too much, without any continuity of growth, we destroy ourselves by losing our self-identity; if we do not change at all, we die completely.

How, then, all men ask, achieve both change and permanence? We can do this by making room in our community, in the Church, for both rulers and prophets: two types of leadership necessary in any human society. Christianity, perhaps more than any other community of people, can show the world that this fruitful tension of the institutional and the charismatic is not only possible but absolutely necessary for life and growth.

Why is christianity so admirably suited for realizing this healthy polarization of leadership? First of all because it has a recognizable and meaningful past. No community can tolerate change at the cost of its total self-identity. And one's self-identity is, in part, the sum total of meaningful events stored up in memory, conscious and unconscious. We are what we have been, as individuals and as societies. In a community there must be a guaranteed consensus about that meaningful past. The living tradition brought forward by the Church and watched over by the bishops is our source of self-identity as christians. The christian feels that his lived past is uniquely meaningful because his past *is* the person of Christ. Revelation is not just words and signs. It is God in our midst. It is the presence of Christ, the same today as yesterday, mystically binding his people together.

Our remembered and lived past, then, is a source of stability as we move toward the future. 'No society', writes John Gardner, 'is likely to renew itself unless its dominant orientation is to the future. This is not to say that a society can ignore its past. A people without historians would be as crippled as an individual with amnesia. They would not know who they were. In helping a society to achieve self-knowledge, the historian serves the cause of renewal. But in the

renewing society the historian consults the past in the service of the present and the future'.[3]

True reform, and the prophet is often a reformer, does not mean a return to the past. It means a renewal of the community that is living now and sees true fidelity to the past (to the self) best manifested in fidelity to the present. Nostalgia may numb the pain of change; it will not cure it or take it away. The call to change and innovation, and the prophet is often an innovator, is not a betrayal of the past. It is rather a recognition that, although we may owe much to the past, it is not providing the answers to the present dilemmas. Reform, renewal, innovation: these are the tentative steps by which any human society moves into the future. There is no other way, no turning back. One either moves meaningfully into the future or one dies.

Perhaps this characteristic future-orientation of christianity, of a pilgrimage people moving towards God, is the principal reason why the Church is most able to tolerate and profit by the tension between institutional and charismatic leaders. No nation on earth has ever had its future divinely guaranteed. Somewhere between the extremes of an arrogant sense of manifest destiny and a pusillanimous sense of sheer survival, each nation has had to work itself piecemeal and tentatively into the future. The history of mankind is the history of fallen empires and nations.

The Church, however, has a guaranteed future. It will last until the end of time, not as a triumphalistic society but as minister to the conscience of its people. God is our future and the Church is the people of God moving towards that future. Of that vision is born hope, and hope is the basis of all change. In a world shaken by war, revolutionary change and despair, the greatest single gift christianity has to offer is hope. Our God is not a God pushing us from behind, speaking to us through our memory. He is a God out in front of us, calling us into the future through our imagination. The way to the future lies through imaginative and creative planning, and also through the hope that a renewal can truly be effected.

Hope, as we said, is the very stuff of human beings. When a nation or people lose hope in their future, decay is imminent. Just as loyalty and commitment to the past are part of social and individual self-identity, so too, and perhaps more importantly, is a

[3] *Self-Renewal: The Individual and the Innovative Society* (New York, 1963), p 11.

will fixed on the future. To know a person in terms of what he remembers and what he is now, is to know him only on the surface. To know him in terms of what his will is set to, is to know the heart of a man. A man without hope is a man without heart. The same is true of any society or community. Prophets have meaning only in terms of hope. They look to the future. In a society without will, prophecy is merely troublesome and annoying.

Anyone whose vision cannot range beyond the present, who cannot be tortured by the possibilities of the future and the inadequacies of the present order, is on the verge of spiritual death. Biblical prophets 'predicted' only in the sense that they said, in effect, 'keep on acting this way and such and such will come about'. They did not see into the future as if it really existed, but rather saw the seeds of future inevitability in present behaviour. This is true even in secular society. Anyone unconvinced of the very concrete fulfilment of the prophecies made in *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* must simply be blind to what is going on in the world around him today.

Whether divinely inspired or humanly gifted, there are men in every society who can make that 'proleptic' leap into the future. Society may brand them as mavericks or eccentrics, but most of them usually have their hour. The society that suppresses them is, in effect, stilling the voice of its own conscience. But even were we to honour them, we could not live by prophecy alone. These imaginative visions and prophetic utterances are partial, temporary, tentative – sometimes even false. After the revolution, life must go on. Someone must pick up the pieces, capitalize on the reform of heart, the newness of vision. Paradoxically, even the prophet's message must eventually be institutionalized if it is to have a lasting effect on people.[4]

Every society, then, needs vision and hope; and this is precisely what good leadership must provide for the community of citizens or believers. 'Leaders', writes John Gardner, 'have a significant role in creating the state of mind that is society. They can serve as symbols of the moral unity of the society. They can express the values that hold the society together. Most important, they can conceive and articulate goals that lift people out of their petty preoccupations, carry them above the conflicts that tear a society

[4] Rahner, Karl: 'Prophetism', in *Sacramentum Mundi*, *V* (New York, 1970), pp 110–113.

apart, and unite them in the pursuit of objectives worthy of their best efforts'.[5]

Granting that such moral leadership has often been realized in pope, bishops, and priests, that the prophet is not always excluded from 'high office', more often than not the prophetic voice has risen to contradict existing institutional goals and behaviour. One thing is clear in the Church today: people are not taking this kind of leadership for granted. Because so many bishops have, perhaps unwittingly, assumed the role of political leaders and administrators, dissident voices often rise up in protest. In spite of its general but persistent concern with current social problems and war, the Church has come late to full-scale involvement in the social scene. More often than not this has been due to the urgent voices of prophets – a Cesar Chavez, a Daniel Berrigan, a Mother Teresa Boajaxhiu, a Martin Luther King – voices crying in the wilderness. Such voices are not absent in the episcopal ranks, and it is encouraging to find a high churchman like Richard Cardinal Cushing remind his people that service is more important than system:

> When the world sends its representatives to inquire of us, as of John the Baptist, 'Are you the Body of the Lord, or shall we look for another?', our response must be the same as the Lord's. We cannot at that moment point to our large numbers, our impressive ceremonies, our finely articulated doctrinal formulations and creeds, or our impressive ecumenical councils. These are not the primary signs of the gospel of Christ. The Church must respond in the manner of Jesus, the suffering servant of God: 'Go and tell the others what you have seen: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them'. It is by these signs that all men shall come to know that the kingdom of God is in their midst.[6]

It is indeed gratifying to find a bishop assuming the role and words of the suffering Servant. It is also encouraging to see bishops joining peace protests, slipping into picket lines, stripping away antiquated and often expensive accoutrements. And yet one wonders whether it is not another case of 'too little and too late'. Andrew M. Greeley, priest-scholar and acknowledged moderate, after surveying the current ecclesiastical scene, confessed: 'Honesty compels me to say that I believe the present leadership of the

[5] 'The Anti-leadership Vaccine', in *Business, Society, and the Individual* (ed. G. A. Smith and J. B. Matthews, New York, 1967), p 52.

[6] *The Servant Church* (Boston, 1966), p 9.

Church to be morally, intellectually and religiously bankrupt'.[7] A top priority in the Church today, Greeley insists, is the democratic election of bishops. This may be the case, but it will never solve all our problems as a community of believers, nor will it guarantee a successful institutional life. Perhaps such a method will assure us that more men of a 'prophetic' nature will lead the Church, but that seems unlikely. It has not worked in secular democracies. What it will probably guarantee is that there will be more men of greater openness, greater understanding and humility – men who will allow and listen to the Spirit speaking in and through others in the Church.

What the Church can and must realistically expect from its hierarchy in the near future are men who encourage, promote and make room for prophets, be their role one of dissent, creativeness, or simple witness to the presence of a transcendent God who confounds our complacency in space and time events.[8] If the hierarchy has the job of conserving the best and essential elements of our heritage, the prophet has the job of moving us to change.

First of all, the prophet serves as the conscience of the christian community. Because of his heightened sensitivity (hopefully because of his prayerfulness) he is more responsive to what is wrong within the Church, to those areas where the institutional Church has become so entangled in the mechanics of preserving a legitimate self-identity that it exaggerates the value of the ephemeral and trivial, and neglects the Church's essential mission of bringing Christ to all men.

Secondly, the prophet constantly reminds us that we are *continually* being called into the future by a transcendent God. Here surfaces not only the focal point of christian hope, but the essential source of balance and sanity in a world constantly torn between the extremes of rigid changelessness and anarchistic revolution. This transcendence means that 'the christian must assume a prophetic stance against both the arrogance of the present social system and the arrogance of the revolutionary movements'.[9] In the Church, as in Christ himself who is 'the still point, is found the reconciliation

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[7] 'The State of the Priesthood', in *National Catholic Reporter* (Feb 18, 1972), p 7.

[8] See Bracken, S.J. Joseph A.: 'Toward a Grammar of Dissent', in *Theological Studies*, 30 (1970), pp 437–59; and Smith, Roland E.: 'A Theology of Rebellion', in *Theology Today* 25 (1968), pp 10–22.

[9] Smith, Rolland F. 'The Ideological Aspects of Social Movement, Conflict, Revolution: An Essay Towards a Theology of Change'; unpublished manuscript.

of opposites, the coming together of past, present, and future. Here perhaps can be found the longed-for change within permanence the world longs for: '*Continual transcendence* means that the christian is in process of *passing beyond* the forms of the present and the past without losing continuity with these expressions.

Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly in our age, the prophet serves, like the artist, a genuinely predictive function within the Church. Like the artist, whom Ezra Pound dubbed 'the antennae of the race', the prophet lives out in his consciousness, in his dreams, in his intellectual probings, many of the problems and issues that his own contemporaries will not experience for several generations. Like the artist, he is often enough considered to be 'avant-garde', a nuisance whose ideas elude comprehension precisely because he is working and thinking in new forms and categories. Much of what the modernists grappled with has come back a hundred years later, with a vengeance, to haunt us because we refused for almost a century to deal with these issues openly and on an institutional level.

Here the speculative theologian often serves a profoundly prophetic function. What today appears as heresy may be a premature insight into tomorrow's understanding and development of christian doctrine.

The Church, as any society must, should create plenty of room for such prophets. To flatter and praise prophets would be to destroy them. But to hear them out, to reflect on what they say, to sympathize with them in their necessary loneliness: this is to honour them. Need our Lord's reflection that the prophet is not without honour except in his own town be endlessly verified in his Church? A community of prayer and discernment, open, flexible, faithful to the Lord's call into the future, ever on the move, needs this dual form of leadership: hierarchy to concern itself with what has been thus far *realized* of God's Word in space and time, prophecy to explore and bring to life the untold and unrealized *possibilities* of God's people.