


# THE EXPERIENCE OF DISSENT

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 ON MAY 24, 1983, I stood before a judge in a Washington, DC court and was sentenced to five days in jail or a fifty dollar fine. It was the penalty for an act of public dissent expressed in civil disobedience. It was also the consequence of a journey that is far from over.

I can still vividly recall the feeling of that day in court, my first. I felt very humiliated and very guilty, despite the fact that I had acted according to my conscience. An hour later, after paying the fine, as I was walking to the bus, I suddenly realized that I was still wearing the identification bracelet with my prisoner's number. I felt that the whole world was looking at me. I pulled my sleeve over the plastic bracelet until I could get to a place where I could remove it.

It is good and useful to be able to recall these feelings, and in the second section of this essay I will explore some of the emotions involved in dissent in an effort to understand something of its spiritual and social significance and ramifications. But first I mean to describe it in the concrete, and for that purpose will use the case I know best, my own.

Two hundred and forty-two of us were arrested in the rotunda of our nation's Capitol because we refused to leave when ordered to do so. Instead of obeying we prayed, sang and read statements of our church leaders condemning the arms race. After our arrest, we spent the night and the following morning in crowded jail cells. The cell in which I was placed held forty-two women. We were so crowded together that there was not enough room to lie down on the floor. The cell was fitted with only a toilet and a bench that ran around three walls.

We more than made up for what we lacked in physical comfort by the quality of our sharing during the day and night we spent together, introducing ourselves, telling why we were there, singing, praying, reading Scripture. I taught *Dona nobis pacem* in three parts, and our singing brought a group of guards from other areas of

the jail to listen. The chief jail warden who went off duty at midnight came back at five the next morning to say good-bye before we were moved to holding cells underneath the courtroom where we were to be tried.

Dissent is clearly a personal act, and in a very real sense a solitary one, yet on another level dissent is of its nature a social act, and in my experience has been a very communitarian religious experience as well. The Monday morning of our act of civil disobedience, we had met for preparatory prayer in a church near the Capitol. The night before, we had joined with thousands in an ecumenical prayer service in Washington's national cathedral. After that service, those of us who had decided to act out our dissent in civil disobedience arranged ourselves in affinity groups of eight to twelve persons. We had already been briefed about the possible legal consequences of what we were about to do. Now we introduced ourselves, since in many cases we were strangers meeting for the first time. We shared our feelings and convictions and promised to look out for each other in whatever lay ahead. We jointly committed ourselves to a set of rules we had received. These were adapted from a pledge used in the civil rights marches during the time of Martin Luther King. The pledge read:

We covenant together to abide by the following disciplines of nonviolence which were followed by Martin Luther King, Jr. and others in the Birmingham nonviolent campaign of April, 1963:

1. Meditate on the teachings and life of Jesus, the Prince of Peace.
2. Pray that we might be used by God so that all peoples might be free and live in peace.
3. Remember that through our actions we seek justice and peace for all peoples.
4. Observe with both friend and foe the ordinary rules of courtesy.
5. Refrain from violence of fist, tongue or heart.
6. Seek to serve and love others.

I had arrived in Washington only that afternoon, from a Pax Christi retreat I had been directing in Florida. During that retreat I had listened to several people describe their experiences in jail. As the time for our Washington action drew closer, I was suddenly attacked by fear that was almost overwhelming. Because I had decided not to talk during the retreat about what I intended to do in Washington, I had to deal alone with the spasm of fear and its

accompanying sense of self-doubt. It was, in many ways, the most painful though not the most difficult aspect of my dissent.

The most difficult aspect was the discernment process, which took many weeks and considerable investment of energy and also help from a few friends, community members and my spiritual director. I had to take into account such questions as the following:<sup>1</sup>

What information sources have I used in coming to my position? Are they adequate?

Have I shared my position and the reasons for it? Have I consulted others?

Is my decision based on personal conviction? Is my conviction able to withstand criticism and lack of support, even from those I trust and rely on?

Does my past experience and background prepare me for this action?

Have I faced the possibility of hidden motives? Some need or lack I am trying to fill?

Is this the best means to effect change and to act according to my conscience? What are alternative actions? Is this an isolated action or will it entail other actions?

Do I have a support group? Who? Can I act without one?

How far can I anticipate the effect of the action on my health and future ministry?

Once I had reached a decision, I wrote a letter of explanation to those to whom I was accountable as a religious, and also professionally.

This brief outline of a single act of public dissent is enough to make clear that dissent as a responsible human act may look like a spontaneous gesture motivated only by some deep feeling or passionately held but unexamined idea. On occasion it may be that, but often it is a carefully considered, deliberate act expressing reasoned convictions and, at the deepest level, grounded in love. In my case, the way to dissent was developed in association with friends.

When I was arrested for civil disobedience, I belonged to both Pax Christi and the Fellowship of Reconciliation, two religious peace movements. Without these peace movements, many of us who found ourselves sharing a jail cell might never have met. Yet it was only because of the powerful example of a single person that public dissent became a possibility in my life.

That person was Dorothy Day. For me, she legitimated the creative tension between assent and dissent that I now see as a constitutive dimension of Christian spirituality. During long years of struggle to define my own position regarding the use of violence, Dorothy Day's example made abundantly clear to me that one could love the Church, could indeed be a loyal Catholic and at the same time be a loving, creative dissenter. This remarkable woman remains for me a most powerful inspiration and a reminder of the importance of models as I now turn from a description of dissent to some exploration of its inner structure and dynamics.

## II

What brings a person to dissent? What happens interiorly as a result? Is there a spirituality of dissent, and, if so, what are its characteristics?

Those of us who grow up in free democratic societies have dissent in our bones. We are so accustomed to it that it is hard for us to grasp its social significance. To appreciate dissent as positive, as a value, there may be no better way than to live in a society, or even visit one, in which dissent is not tolerated. I have had the experience of participating in seminars with Soviet citizens in Western Europe, in the United States and recently in the USSR. In each case, it was clear that the participants from the Soviet Union drew a firm line between the area in which freedom of inquiry was normative and where it was categorically forbidden. From the Soviet members of our seminars there was absolutely no substantial criticism of the Soviet government or its totalitarian ideology. Nothing comes up to that experience for helping me realize that dissent has a valuable, even a necessary function in the pursuit of truth and freedom and, ultimately, of human dignity.

Ideological totalitarianism is not the only enemy of dissent, however, as I experienced in Haiti less than a year after the flight of dictator Jean-Claude Duvalier in 1986. There, dissent which had brought Duvalier down was now clamouring for genuine democratic reforms. It was being ruthlessly suppressed by terrorist methods, if not initiated, at least tolerated by the government of Haiti, with support from the government of the United States. This fact has made me realize that refusal to make room for dissent is not limited to certain political and social systems. To find the

causes of dissent and also of opposition to it, it is necessary to go deeper than ideology.

Dissent is more than disagreement. What distinguishes dissent is that it carries the thrust of the entire person. Dissenters expect consequences both for themselves and for the society they are trying to change. A disagreement may remain in the mind as an opinion or a conviction; dissent, on the other hand, is found at the beginning of every revolution and also of every conversion. Its action is dramatic.

We come closer to understanding dissent by examining the emotions it stirs, beginning with fear. The dissenter's fears are not unfounded. Dissent provokes forceful and sometimes violent reactions almost as a matter of course. One need not be ashamed of fear and dread at the prospect of being handcuffed and locked up in jail or prison. In a place like Haiti, even the most nonviolent dissenter is not unreasonable in fearing disabling injury or death from rocks, knives or gunfire.

Dealing with fear is not easy, and in many instances in our lives we may find a way out by suppressing the fear or removing ourselves from the cause or occasion of it. Dissent, in requiring that we face our fears, presents us with the possibility of growth in key areas of our human development. Fear can be paralyzing. To be liberated from the experience of being frozen by fear, a person must surrender to someone or some power that can provide both security and the ability to act. In other words, the fearful dissenter needs trust and courage, two noble powers that become absolute necessities for the dissenter. Gandhi, who has taught us so much about creative dissent, knew fear, owned it and learned to handle it. He took a vow of fearlessness. This did not mean that he aspired to stoic endurance, to passivity, but that he would not allow fear to be the control centre of his actions. His vow of fearlessness meant that he would live and act out of a deeper centre, and often in the face of his fears.

Reflecting on my own fear in quiet times before or after acts of dissent, I have pondered the question, 'Why am I, or was I, afraid?' I have come to recognize the fear of disapproval, of being irresponsible towards community and professional obligations and commitments, the fear of delusion and especially the fear of alienation from those who are engaged in positive actions of many kinds for a more peaceful world. Behind all these fears is the nagging question about the possibility of subconscious drives and

motives that are less than noble: the compulsion to do something heroic, to get attention, to escape from the difficulties of less spectacular ways of serving God and neighbour. These are the deeper fears that put other more easily recognized and physically felt fears in perspective.

I have also had to deal with anger. Anger is deeply disturbing because it is closely associated with violence, that is, with force used to injure another, even to kill another. While we talk about being frozen with fear, we say a person is blinded by rage. We may keep a lasting and healthy sorrow for acts of anger. Anger is behind words that deeply wound another when we are caught off guard and are for the moment blind to our own best principles and ideals.

Fear accompanies a posture of dissent; anger, often experienced as intense outrage, precedes it. Without anger, potential dissent may remain mere disagreement safely kept as an opinion. Dissent requires that we deal with anger as carefully as with fear. Anger is unnerving because it releases power without built-in guidance or control. All too often anger is followed by regret or depression, whether we have been the agent or victim of this strong emotion.

Yet anger is closely related to love, and when it is well integrated it gives enormous energy and vibrancy to love. In the first place, anger gives unmistakable evidence of the object of our love. If outrage at a government policy leads me on the path of dissent, it may reveal a passion for human dignity which I see violated. This love for what is right and just is aroused by violation of human dignity in concrete actions. Dissent, which is triggered by anger, can in turn help us come to terms creatively with anger, transforming it into ardent love. When this happens, we become much less conscious of what we are against and more conscious of what we are for. We begin to experiment with what Gandhi called *satyagraha*.

*Satyagraha* is a word Gandhi coined for a way of life and method of resistance he developed in South Africa and later brought to his native India. *Satyagraha* is a compound of two Sanskrit words which can be translated as 'firmly holding to the truth'. Our term nonviolence, while not an accurate translation, is the most useful term available in English for expressing the meaning of *satyagraha*.

Nonviolence is much more than a refusal to perform acts of violence, though this refusal is a constitutive dimension of nonviolence. Nonviolence is a way of relating that has its source in a set of deeply held convictions and even some intuitions that are not

capable of adequate verbal expression. Nonviolence begins with an affirmation of the goodness of God, experienced in God's unconditional love. It is in the experience of that love that the nonviolent person recognizes and responds to the vocation described in Mt 5, 43-48:

You have learnt how it was said: You must love your neighbour and hate your enemy. But I say this to you: love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you; in this way you will be sons of your Father in heaven, for he causes his sun to rise on bad men as well as good, and his rain to fall on honest and dishonest men alike. For if you love those who love you, what right have you to claim any credit? Even the tax collectors do as much, do they not? And if you save your greetings for your brothers, are you doing anything exceptional? Even the pagans do as much, do they not? You must therefore be perfect just as your heavenly Father is perfect.

A serious attempt to live this vocation places one in a posture of fundamental dissent from the conventional attitude towards those perceived as enemies. From prehistoric times, the human race has developed ways of fending off those we perceive as *in-amicus*, the non-friend, or enemy. Even within the Churches, moral theology has developed elaborate teaching about the conditions for legitimate defense and little beyond general exhortations to love our enemies.

The greatest exemplar of the vocation to unconditional love is, of course, Jesus. The pity (perhaps tragedy would be a more accurate term) is that for more than fifteen hundred years, until fairly recently, there has been little theological reflection on the meaning of the Christian vocation to unconditional love on the societal level, largely because there has been little practice on that level that could serve as the experiential base for such a theology.

A significant exception is Gandhi. Though not a Christian, and certainly not a systematic theologian, he has left us, embedded in a large body of writings, a wealth of insight into nonviolence, including the element of dissent that is integral to it. Monika Hellwig has put her finger on the secret of Gandhi's enormous and growing appeal. It is precisely in his grasp of the central meaning and experience of the gospel. She writes:

It is possible that Gandhi understood Jesus better than most Christians will ever do, because he followed his example in those

two aspects which seem to have been most central and characteristic of the experience of Jesus and his purpose in life. Those two aspects for both men were intimacy with God and inexhaustible, non-exclusive compassion for people. And those two relationships, with God and with people, were closely connected in the attitude of radical nonviolence . . . and in the attitude of ultimate vulnerability.<sup>2</sup>

Dissent is the other side of assent; the one depends on the other. The dissenter is attempting to act out of a desire to affirm a good. An adversarial situation provides the acid test of the sincerity of the dissenter's claim to unconditional love, which is not to be confused with unlimited love. The love of Jesus for us, a love which is both unconditional and unlimited, led him 'to open his arms on the Cross', as we pray in the eucharistic Canon. Christians who are nonviolent dissenters will keep their eyes fixed on Jesus and will thank God for their being among the community of disciples, even though their performance is halting and sometimes simply fails.

Precisely because on the exterior level dissent follows a course that leads to resistance with its considerable consequences, hazards, and also its challenges that are spiritual, physical and social, all the more important is it to cultivate the interior disposition of assent, that is, love as benevolence. Love leads the dissenter through resistance to dialogue. When love is not the controlling factor in resistance, there are bound to occur actions that will make dialogue with the opposite party immeasurably more difficult if not impossible, at least temporarily.

Resistance, even in the form of civil disobedience, should lead to dialogue because ultimately what the resister is seeking is a more constructive life-giving relationship and a better social framework for pursuing the good of all. Nonviolent resistance of this kind, and the dissent that leads to it, does not lose sight of the essentially relational nature of human life.

The move from dissent to resistance to dialogue is possible only when the journey is supported by a worldview that is countercultural. We live in a world in which win-lose contests are a matter of course, ranging from early classroom competitions to international wars. Our own century will be remembered for two world wars ending in unconditional surrender on one side and a claim to total victory on the other. As we near the end of this century which has seen almost 100 million persons killed in the win-lose contest

we call war, the worldview that sustains this carnage as a tragic necessity is being called into question. What is to take its place?

It is in answering this question that experiments in nonviolent conflict resolution may play an important historical role, if they contribute to the formation or recovery of symbols and stories of ways of dealing with conflict that are mutually beneficial. For this to happen, we may have to unlearn much of our win-lose way of thinking and behaving.<sup>3</sup>

### III

Is civil disobedience an effective strategy for social change? This is a fair question often asked of those who are popularly known as anti-nuclear activists. For more than forty years, first thousands, and now hundreds of thousands have expressed their dissent to nuclear weapons through all the arts of persuasion, and they have not stopped the arms race. Even the current prospect of the removal of intermediate range nuclear weapons from Europe leaves the major weapons in place and does not substantially alter the underlying belief system that sustains their use.

The deepest reasons for public dissent do not depend ultimately on considerations of effectiveness; nevertheless, the question of effectiveness should not be ignored. Historically, in the United States at least, dissent in the form of civil disobedience is an important tradition stretching back more than three hundred years. It is a tradition that has had a far-reaching influence on the more general history of dissent.

Populated from the beginning by English religious-political dissenters, the United States was born in a revolution, an organized movement of fundamental opposition to the *status quo*. What gives the American revolution its greatest historical significance is that it succeeded, and precisely for this reason has inspired many subsequent revolutions in other parts of the world. In the United States, dissent did not end with the establishment of relative stability marked by the drafting and acceptance of a written constitution. On the contrary, the new nation, which claimed to be a government of laws rather than of men, integrated into its laws and customs provision for a high level of dissent, expressed structurally in its system of separation of powers, legislative, executive and judicial.

The evolution of the United States has not only been characterized by periods and movements of dissent; it has depended on them for the development of freedom, which is the most prized value of Americans. The abolition of slavery, labour rights, women's rights, civil rights for the Black population, the end of the war in Vietnam, none of these events was brought about without vigorous, sustained, popular dissent. Historians will continue to argue over the degree of causality popular dissent had in the changes in the areas just listed, but no one can deny at the very least some linkage between dissent and social change in the very fabric of American social life.

In the civil rights movement under the leadership of Martin Luther King, dissent was explicitly linked to Christian inspiration and found in some Churches support both theological and pastoral. At this time the movement was also explicitly influenced by Gandhian theory and practice, including civil disobedience.

In keeping with this tradition, those who are prosecuted for acts of civil disobedience will often plead innocent when they are brought to court, even though they admit to violating a particular statute. They take the position that their refusal to obey a particular statute has been their way of affirming a higher law. In the case described at the beginning of this essay, defendants who pleaded innocent argued that they saw themselves as upholding a law in face of the government's violation of that law in authorizing the production of weapons of indiscriminate mass destruction. In this case, the judge did not accept the argument. In other cases, judges and other public officials have been stimulated to re-examine their positions.

The point here is that public dissent has a constructive function, and probably a necessary one in the development of positive, that is, written, law. Such law is at best an inadequate expression of values which foster human justice. In some cases prolonged dissent may be necessary in the process of constructing law that genuinely serves the common good. Those who appear to be threatening or undermining law and order may actually be promoting it. We can recognize this as true in historical cases, and we need to develop the capacity to tolerate this possibility in contemporary struggles.

With this insight in mind, it is easier to understand why at least some dissenters will refuse to pay a fine when they are judged guilty. They will go to jail instead. They agree with Gandhi that the nonviolent dissenter who violates a law must be willing to

accept the punishment for doing so. According to Gandhi, one who commits civil disobedience should not resist arrest and its consequences. Only in this way can the defendants make clear their own adherence to the principle of law, their own recognition of its necessity in keeping society from falling into chaos. They recognize that to violate law is a very serious matter, not to be done cavalierly. Civil disobedience can challenge the very foundation of society, unless it includes a strong statement of respect for the principle of law. The statement must be made in the same language as the statement of dissent; in both cases, this is language that requires more than words.

Serving time in jail instead of paying a fine, where the choice is offered, should not be chosen out of a misguided desire to suffer. Rather, the purpose should be to make clear one's view that the conviction is objectively unjust in view of the higher law the defendant claims to uphold. This being the case, to pay a fine could more easily be interpreted as an acknowledgement of guilt, thus promoting the position of the prosecution. To serve time in jail or prison, however, in lieu of paying a fine where the choice is offered, is less open to the interpretation of acknowledged wrongdoing by the defendant.

#### IV

Dissent raises questions of responsibility and accountability. There is first responsibility for all those with whom we are directly involved in an act of dissent, both our associates and whose we oppose. Courtesy towards police, jail and court personnel is the surest safeguard of the important attitudes of respect for all those on the other side of the issue. Courtesy also helps maintain an atmosphere in which the dissenter can keep mindful of personal shortcomings.

Belonging to an affinity group, as described above, is one way of assuring responsibility within a larger group of those who engage in public dissent. It is customary for an affinity group to include both those who intend to perform some act of civil disobedience and others known as the support group. These latter assume responsibility for notifying appropriate persons, for example, a spouse or religious community, and of carrying messages as far as possible to the person who is detained as a consequence of an act of civil disobedience.

Responsibility does not end here. There are also professional colleagues to whom one may be accountable. Beyond these, there are those who will be affected by an action, and these may include students, clients and others who may feel the consequences of another person's going to jail. It is questions of responsibility towards all these people that must give the prospective dissenter pause. There is clearly no categorical answer that applies to all cases.

Finally, from acts of dissent there are responsibilities that extend far beyond the time and place of the act itself. Public dissent aims to influence public opinion and to bring about change in public policy. Dissent has a pedagogical aim, and the need for education around the issues at stake lasts well beyond any particular act of dissent.

Journalists jump at the opportunity to record the dramatic newsworthy event. However, it is in the consistent day by day effort that newspapers rarely report that the indispensable work of social transformation is carried on. Gandhi wrote his autobiography in prison; Martin Luther King wrote a famous apologia from a Birmingham jail. Had not both men continued their work both during and after their imprisonment, there would be little interest in them today.

Those who dissent will be asked many questions related to their action. The challenge for the dissenter is to direct the attention and interest of the questioner to the issues that gave rise to the dissent. This is not an easy task and is especially difficult immediately after the rigours of trial and time spent in jail. Here again is where a support group plays an important role in assuming leadership for educating on the issues at stake.

The road that leads from dissent is longer than the road that leads to it, but it is the same road. This recognition leads to our final questions. Earlier in this essay I raised the question about a spirituality of dissent. In a final reflection I now return to my own experience, well aware of the limitations of this method, which cannot provide anything approaching a systematic treatment, or even an objective one. On the other hand, an account of a particular experience can serve as one kind of testing device for general, abstract ideas.

## V

My experience is vocational. I spoke and wrote of a 'call within a call' when I decided to become a pacifist in 1974 at the end of

an eight-day private retreat. That decision ended a seven-year search and discernment, set in motion by students of mine who had come to me for help in their own discernment about possible conscientious objection to military service in Vietnam.

From 1974 until 1979, the theology of vocation as I understood it sustained me in the difficulties of maintaining my minority position. In 1979, again during a retreat, my horizon shifted dramatically, this time without any warning. During this retreat I was forcibly struck by an indelible impression that the call to refuse to kill other human beings is a universal call, though not universally recognized. This indelible impression has remained for the past nine years, like a deep, sustaining chord in an orchestral composition. Trying to deal faithfully with this experience has been a major effort ever since, an effort of reason, and also an effort of the heart, because the imperative, 'You shall not kill', is the reverse of another command, to choose life (Deut 30, 19). It has far-reaching implications.

What sustains this experience is very simply love, and specifically love as a distinctive way of power, or the ability to make things happen. The love I am talking about here is love as gift, as described in the New Testament, 'the love of God [which] has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit which has been given us' (Rom 5, 5. See also 1 Jn 4, 7-13). I see this love of God revealed day by day in beauty of all kinds, for beauty is love made visible. This beauty may be, and sometimes is, the glint of sunlight on a leaf; it is also the beauty of peace, of the reign or kingdom that Jesus laboured to express in so many ways. For me, love in dissent springs from outrage in seeing the glory or beauty of God blocked, thwarted by violence, a violence that is so cunning, so obdurate against such an ardent longing of God to give peace to us and to our world through us.

Paradoxically, dissent and acts of dissent have come to be ways of saying yes to the mystery of the redemption, to God's winning the prize of a rescued human family through a nonviolent struggle, even a battle. For a long time the military imagery of the New Testament, particularly in the Pauline writings, were for me an obstacle. Now these make perfect sense when seen in the context of love as power, for they represent the modes love needs when dealing with conflict and with violence. They are the perfect equipment of the nonviolent dissenter: as a belt, truth; as a breastplate, integrity; as shoes, eagerness to spread the gospel of

peace; as a helmet, salvation; and as sword of the Spirit, God's word (Eph 6, 14-17).

In reflecting over and over on the vocation to refuse to kill and to choose life, I have come to the conclusion that what makes killing so morally repugnant is that it is an act of arrogance. Not for a moment do I think that it is arrogance that lies behind all individual acts of violence; indeed, arrogance may have little or nothing to do with these. Socially legitimated violence, however, particularly in the form of war, is another matter. It seems to me that it is extremely arrogant to organize a profession and strategies to kill other persons, be they combatants or not, for some cause we, or anyone, has decided warrants killing even a single person. God gives us the power to choose life, but not to create it; God has also given us the power to kill, but only so that we can discover a deeper power in refraining from using the ability to kill.

There is a danger in this view, the danger of self-righteousness. This danger is very real, and for me the only way to deal with it is to own it, to bring it to prayer and to spiritual direction. On the theoretical level there are simple solutions to the problem, but on the level of lived experience, liberation from error and healing of the wounds of pride need to be sought and experienced day after day, for a lifetime.

Contemporary dissenters who act out of faith have their modern heroes, including Archbishop Romero, Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King, Gandhi and others. Model of model is, of course, Jesus. I see his public life as characterized by dissent as well as by many other winning qualities. It was his consistent dissent that provoked his enemies to destroy him. It is not the fact of his dissent, however, but the manner of it and the way that he sustained the consequences that call for prayerful reflection as we try to find our own posture towards dissent. In their 1983 pastoral letter, 'The Challenge of Peace', the bishops of the United States write (par 48-49):

Jesus pointed out the injustices of his time and opposed those who laid burdens upon the people or defiled true worship. He acted aggressively and dramatically at times, as when he cleansed the temple of those who had made God's house into a 'den of robbers'.

Jesus' message and his actions were dangerous ones in his time, and they led to his death—a cruel and viciously inflicted death, a criminal's death (Gal 3, 13). In all of his suffering, as in all of his life and ministry, Jesus refused to defend himself with force or

with violence. He endured violence and cruelty so that God's love might be fully manifest and the world might be reconciled to the One from whom it had become estranged.

Praying with Jesus in the mysteries of his conflict with evil, and with the authorities of temple and state, keeps me mindful that the need to act out a no to evil is a dimension of a yes to God's will. I am also kept mindful of the difference in degree, in quality and in consequence between Jesus's path of dissent and my own small experience.

Jesus is more than model. He is life and food of life in word, in sacrament and in community. As a dissenter, I find the notion of Church as the community of disciples the most life-giving of all ideas or symbols of the Church. The fact that his idea of Church is favoured by Pope John Paul II in *Redemptor hominis*, and by the U.S. bishops in their pastoral letters on the economy, and on peace and war, makes me aware that in this attraction I am in good company. It also helps link the experience of Church on the very local level with the wider community of disciples. Whether judge or defendant, whether jailer or jailed, we are all Church on the way to becoming, please God, more like the Church corresponding to the hints we have in the New Testament and even to the clues that we have in the Old Testament.

Church as community of disciples puts the accent on Christian as learner, not through impersonal instruction, but through participation in the life and experience of the guru, the kind of master-disciple relationship familiar in some cultures. Church as community of disciplines also acts as a reminder that community is the essential context of the Christian life, including public dissent as one kind of action to which some Christians are specially called. Perhaps more are called than are aware of their vocation. Who knows? In the past we seem to have known mainly by hindsight, as in the case of Germany in the Nazi era. Today we are growing as a Church in the capacity to discern not after the fact, but in the midst of social and institutional evil.

Fifteen years ago I knew no one who had been in jail. Now I have been there myself and so have many of my friends, quite a few of them for a much longer time than I have spent there. In no way has this experience of civil disobedience diminished my appreciation for other ways of serving the human family: teaching, pastoral work of various kinds and the multitude of services

provided by good people all over the world, day after day. If anything, dissent has sharpened my awareness and clarified my understanding of the goodness of creation and the beauty of life. In the last analysis, perhaps a spirituality of dissent is a spirituality of paradox. Dissent flows from assent; disobedience to a civil law is a consequence of obedience to a higher law; resistance sets one on a path of dialogue. It is in these lived paradoxes that the community of disciples lives out its mission in joyful hope.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Based on questions in *Civil disobedience: an old voice in a new age*. Leadership Conference of Women Religious reprint. 1985.

<sup>2</sup> Hellwig, Monika K.: *Jesus the compassion of God* (Wilmington, 1983), p 151.

<sup>3</sup> I suggest that hospitality may become a root metaphor for the post-war world. In this world we will see ourselves and others as guests and hosts, and the world as an inn, rather than as a conglomerate of sovereign states.