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The Catholic Church as Prophetic Institution

© Dr. Marcellino D'Ambrosio



Cold, impersonal, static, reactionary, oppressive—these are the impressions that the word ‘institution’ often gives, especially when applied to the Church. Countless multitudes declare that they believe in God but despise “organized religion.” Faith, they say, is about personal relationship, not institutions.

Let’s use an analogy to examine this idea. Marriage is undoubtedly about personal relationship. First bride and bridegroom. Then often parent-child. But it is also called “the institution of marriage.” Why?

Because these wonderful relationships, to survive and grow, need to be supported by very unromantic realities like dwellings, food, clothing, transportation, and education. This require jobs, businesses, mortgages, laws, municipal, governments, etc. So marriage officially has legal and economic status and is therefore an “institution.”

When people refer to the Church as “institution,” they often think papacy, Roman curia, and the Bishops’ Conference. But really, the Church as institution means much more than pastoral government. It covers all those activities and possessions that support a living relationship with God and one another—universities, parishes, hospitals, all the property on a balance sheet, all the employees on the payroll, and all the catechetical programs and liturgical events in the parish bulletin.

In the best of all possible worlds, institutions would humbly support relationships. But thanks to original sin, there a tendency not only for individuals to go awry, but institutions as well. Institutions at their worst can turn into impersonal bureaucracies that choke out life, resist change, and dehumanize people. Short of this, they often perpetuate themselves without noticing that the relationships they are meant to support are in trouble. This can happen in marriages as well as in chanceries.



When the kings of Israel began to drift from their vocation as shepherds and saviors of their people, God raised up prophets to rebuke the kings and comfort the people. Prophet means spokesperson, someone who delivers God’s latest message to people here and now, based on their precise need. General George Patton once said that all people need a pat on the back from

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time to time—sometimes high, and sometimes low. So a prophet sometimes rebukes and other times consoles. But in all cases, the prophetic word is a word of life, designed by God to divert people from the road to death and to direct them along the path that leads to a deeper, more abundant life (Jn 10:10).

So the institutional and prophetic dimensions of the church have the same goal—personal and communal life flowing from an intimate relationship with God. They are not opposed, but are meant to exist in dynamic tension. There are plenty of examples in Scripture and Church history of how they can dove-tail: Pope John XXIII, prompted by the Holy Spirit, calling the prophetic Second Vatican Council (much to the chagrin of his cardinals), the prophetic Franciscan movement of the 13th century flourishing under the protection of Popes and bishops, the liturgical and catechetical programs of the church bringing millions into regular contact with God's prophetic word and Spirit.



But of course, there are also plenty of examples of institution and prophecy not working so well together—the Lord Jesus' trial before the Sanhedrin and St. Joan of Arc's condemnation by prelates to name just two.

To work towards the perfect balance in the relationship between institution and prophecy is holy; to expect perfect balance in this life is naive.

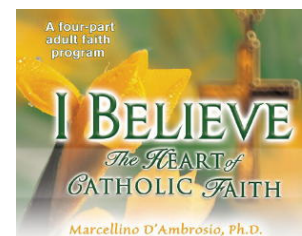
But perfection is coming. Marriage is a prophetic institution—it points beyond itself to the unbreakable, eternal bond between Christ and His Church. The visible, hierarchical Church too is a prophetic institution—as the sacrament of universal salvation, it points beyond itself to the vast multitude before the throne of the Lamb from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation (Rev. 7:9). When God is all in all, we'll need neither institution nor prophecy. But in the meantime, we need them both, and we need them working in tandem to the greatest degree possible.

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by: Marcellino D'Ambrosio, Ph.D.

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