Since the day Martin Luther refused to recant his beliefs, declaring “Here I stand. I can do no other,” the unyielding integrity of the solitary hero of conscience has been an icon of the Western imagination. But conscience is a subtle power, and it sometimes also ties people of principle to the very communities against whom they protest. Socrates followed his daimon but also submitted to the verdict of Athens, the city that had given birth to his quest for virtue. The Second Vatican Council was made possible by the research of men like Yves Congar, O.P., Henri de Lubac, S.J., and John Courtney Murray, S.J., who had endured silencing by church authorities. The council was their vindication.

Conscience can adhere to just one goal, or it can sustain a vivifying tension between two or more commitments. It can stand defiantly alone, or it can show care for the humanity even of those in authority. For Mohandas Gandhi, for example, moral truth does not stand on one side of a contest but emerges from the encounter between protesters and those who oppose them. St. Thomas More teaches us that people of conscience can even strategize and scheme to meet the tensile demands of conscience.

In recent weeks the U.S. church has witnessed two controversies in which the conscience or professional integrity of an individual came into conflict with church authorities. In August 2008 the Maryknoll priest Roy Bourgeois concelebrated an ordination ceremony sponsored by Womenpriests, lending legitimacy to an event forbidden by the Vatican; and last February, without permission, he took part in a panel discussion on women’s ordination. This past month the superior general of Maryknoll instructed him to “publicly recant” his support for women’s ordination or be dismissed from Maryknoll and the priesthood.

In a letter to his superior, Father Bourgeois quoted from a commentary in 1968 by then Father Joseph Ratzinger on Vatican II’s statement on conscience: Even against ecclesiastical authority, conscience must be obeyed before all else. To force Father Bourgeois to recant would be to ask him to lie about his beliefs. He has chosen a path of authenticity.

Conscience, however, is not a machine that gives a robot orders. Conscience does not need to be unyielding. It can also be exercised with humility and flexibility. One wonders what Gandhi or St. Francis of Assisi or Dorothy Day might have advised Father Bourgeois. Might they have urged him to continue his work against war and torture and leave women’s ordination to the Holy Spirit? Silencing a spokesman does not kill an idea. Church authorities, if they call for
religious assent of the mind to the prohibition against ordaining women, must do a far better job of convincing the faithful that the exclusion of women from orders rests firmly on the church’s faith.

The second case concerns the accusation by the Committee on Doctrine of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops that in elaborating a contemporary doctrine of God in the book The Quest for the Living God, Elizabeth A. Johnson, C.S.J., of Fordham University put forward “misrepresentations, ambiguities and errors.” According to the bishops, Sister Johnson employs “standards from outside the faith to criticize in a radical fashion the conception of God revealed in Scripture and taught by the Magisterium.” But in Sister Johnson’s words, the book presents “new insights about God arising from people living out their faith in different cultures around the world.”

The Catholic Theological Society of America has defended Sister Johnson. It contends that the bishops ignored procedures they had adopted in 1989 that require a conversation with the author as the first step in a doctrinal inquiry. In a world where bishops are needed more as teachers than as prosecutors, it would have been far wiser for those who first objected to the book to invite Sister Johnson to an afternoon dialogue before referring the book to the Committee on Doctrine and for the committee to have engaged the author before moving to a public critique of her book. For her part, Sister Johnson has sought to meet with the committee, issued just one brief press release and has otherwise kept a discreet silence. Uncompromising witness is not the only option for this woman of conscience.

Church and society would benefit from other witnesses of conscience appreciating the many ways by which they can testify to moral and intellectual truth. For its part, the church would profit from interiorizing the lesson of the council’s “Declaration on Religious Liberty” that “it is by personal assent that people must adhere to the truth they have discovered,” recalling that “Christ, who is our master and Lord, and at the same time is meek and humble of heart, acted patiently in attracting and inviting his disciples.”