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A call to prophetic witness

Robert P. Maloney, C.M

Union of Superiors General Assembly

Have you met any prophets lately? I met one recently. Let me tell you my story.

I rose at four o'clock in the morning and walked through the dark streets of a Chinese city. I stayed about 50 yards behind my guide, since we did not want to be seen together. After about a mile, I saw a door open suddenly. The guide entered quickly. When I arrived at the same door, it opened and I entered too. Inside, the curtains were drawn so that no one would see us, and we spoke in whispers so that no one would hear. There, we met an elderly woman about 85 years of age. She was delighted to see me, the Superior General of her Vincentian Family. She had remained behind in China when all the foreign sisters were expelled 46 years ago. In that period she had surely felt abandoned many times, but she had remained faithful, filled with trust in the Lord while spending 20 years in prison and in a forced labor camp. Five young women arrived in the same apartment a few minutes after me. They want to be Daughters of Charity like her. They come secretly to receive formation from her.

I ask myself: what did this sister, who is nearly blind and deaf, do to attract them? The answer I come up with is this: really, she did almost nothing, but she lived with enormous fidelity, joy, and peace, filled with faith in the presence of the Lord. She was, and continues to be, a prophetic witness to the gospels.

The vowed life as prophecy

The leitmotif of *Vita Consecrata* is that the vows are prophetic witness.

Prophets speak for God. They interpret history. They bring God's word to bear on present-day reality and often judge it lacking in light of the Kingdom of God. Jesus is the culmination of the prophets. In him the reign of God dawns. He proclaims incessantly: The Kingdom of God is at hand. He calls his followers to announce the same good news.

The vowed life too is prophecy. It says to the world that the Kingdom of God is here. It is in the service of the Kingdom that we vow chastity, poverty, and obedience. It is only because of our faith and hope in the Kingdom that we believe that our vows are worthwhile.

To speak more concretely, the vows proclaim that the Kingdom of God sets us free. Believe in the power of the Kingdom, the vows say.

- Be free to go wherever in the world the needs of the poor call you, rather than to hold on tightly to the security of your own home or a job you like.

- Be free to share your own material possessions with the poor, rather than to store them up for your own comfort.
- Be free to stand with the poor in their struggle for justice, rather than to stand with the "powers that be" who often insulate themselves from the problems of the poor.
- Be free to speak the truth in the face of the social problems of our times, rather than to be concerned about your own image or tranquility.
- Be free to live together in community as friends who love one another, rather than to isolate those who are different because of nationality, race, class, sex, or other factors that create prejudices.
- Be free to spend time in prayer, rather than to feel that you must always be "doing something."
- Be free to discern the will of God with others, to listen well, rather than to dominate or claim a personal monopoly on knowing God's will.
- Be free to renounce immediate gratification for the sake of more important goals, rather than to seek solely what pleases you in the here and now.
- Be free to witness to forms of love that are more lasting than sexual union, rather than to focus on sexual relations as if they were the only way of loving.

If we live the vowed life genuinely, it is a prophetic word in the world. It challenges tendencies that continually reassert themselves in human history:¹

- the imperative that I *must* have more.

- the drive toward uncommitted or abusive sexual relations.

- the hunger to do whatever I want, even when my own will works harm in the lives of others.

A striking thing about the vowed life as prophecy is that it need not even use words. Almost nothing has to be said. The prophecy is proclaimed by our lives. The message is strikingly clear, even if mysterious - the reign of God is at hand. The vowed life says to others: surely these women and men who live chastity, poverty, obedience, and give their lives in the service of the poor believe in the Kingdom of God deeply!

The truth of the prophecy

¹Cf. 1 Jn 2:16.

The power of prophecies lies in the truth they teach. They catch the listener's attention because they jar him. The truth they proclaim on the one hand does not seem immediately evident ("The Kingdom of God is at hand!"), but on the other hand it cries out to be believed ("Look at the signs! Look at the deep faith, hope, and love of those who vow their whole lives to God in the service of the Kingdom").

Our vows will be a credible prophecy only if we live them truthfully. Fidelity is the key to the prophecy. The vows are prophetic signs if lived out genuinely to the end. Otherwise they become a scandal, a lie, the story of one who gave but then took back.

A new context

The mission of every group must be "actualized" in every place and every era; otherwise, the group remains static, and eventually it withers and dies.²

Changing circumstances in society make it necessary for communities to adjust their life and mission continually. Recent popes, particularly Paul VI in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* and John Paul II in *Redemptoris Missio*, and now in *Vita Consecrata*, have reminded us of the new challenges that face those engaged in an evangelizing mission. They speak of:

- the "new areopagi";³ that is, new sectors in which the gospel must be proclaimed - such as the world of communication, science, and international relations - particularly as the Church seeks to promote peace, human development, and the liberation of peoples.⁴
- new forms of poverty, different from those of other eras, which challenge missionaries as they attempt to give flesh to the Church's preferential option for the poor.⁵
- a new evangelization: new in its ardor, its methods, and its expression.⁶
- new means of communication which are available to the evangelizer in catechizing, preaching, and teaching, but which also form part of a new "information culture" which is itself badly in need of evangelization.⁷

²A number of business corporations are learning this lesson the hard way. Even some which were once thriving concerns are now experiencing death pangs because they did not adjust to rapidly changing economic circumstances.

³*Vita Consecrata*, 96f; *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 57.

⁴*Redemptoris Missio*, 37.

⁵*Vita Consecrata*, 73, 82, 89; *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 51; *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 42.

⁶John Paul II, Discourse at the 19th ordinary assembly of CELAM, Haiti, March 9, 1983: discourse given in Santo Domingo, October 12, 1984; cf. *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 63; *Centesimus Annus*, 5; *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 45; *Vita Consecrata*, 81.

⁷*Vita Consecrata*, 99; *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 45; *Redemptoris Missio*, 47.

Living the vows in north america

In light of these new challenges which are emphasized repeatedly in a whole series of Church documents, allow me to suggest five priorities for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life in North America.

1. *A clear preferential option for the poorest of the poor* - These are in large proportion women and small children. They are more likely to be black, native American, or Hispanic. The future of religious life depends on its ministering to the deepest human needs, not only those of the USA but also global needs.⁸

2. *Contact with youth. Organizing groups, especially the young, to join in your experience of God and your service of the poor.* - Ministry to young people is extremely important today. The young are the Church of the future. Yet, like the rest of us, they too breathe the air of individualism that pervades North American society. But several recent studies point out that young people in North America seek:⁹

- an experience of God
- intense community and solidarity with others
- explicit and worldwide service to the most needy.

I want to encourage North American religious to gather young people together to pray, to support one another in living the gospels, and to share in the Church's preferential option for the poor. Youth groups can take many forms, depending on the local culture and its possibilities, but I urge all to make this one of the priorities in mission.

3. *Solidarity with women in their struggle for justice* - Women are discriminated against in almost all parts of the world. In North America the struggle for their rights is strong, articulate, and sometimes even bitter. As in all struggles, there can be extreme reactions on all sides. The real issues are at times confused with false ones. Sometimes we lack the proper categories, the correct distinctions, even the right vocabulary to deal with the problem (as is the case with English possessive pronouns!). The document urges us to take "concrete steps, beginning by *providing room for women to participate* in different fields and at all levels, including decision-making processes, above all in matters which concern women themselves."¹⁰ Implementing this recommendation concretely will be no small task.

4. *Promotion of vocations to Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life* - The lack of vocations to communities in the United States and Canada is critical. And like any critical malady it can develop into a life and death issue for the Church in those countries.

⁸D. Nygren and M. Ukeritis, *The Future of Religious Orders in the United States* (Connecticut: Praeger Press, 1993) 235, 244, 251.

⁹Cf. Albert di Ianni, "Religious Vocations: New Signs of the Times," *Review for Religious* 52 (# 5; September-October 1993) 745-763. Also, Nygren and Ukeritis, *op. cit.*, 251.

¹⁰*Vita Consecrata*, 58.

One of the signs of our love for and our happiness in our vocation is the encouragement of others to join in our common life and mission.

The world has seen dramatic changes in the last 40 years. Formerly a Catholic culture and closely-knit stable Catholic families strongly supported vocations to the vowed life. Today, on the contrary, many of the structures that were formerly supportive of vocations have disappeared. Families are very small and are often broken. A "Catholic" culture has given way to an "information" culture in which the media often flood young people with a proclamation of values that have little to do with the gospel. We cannot remain passive in such a context. Vocations will not just come along by themselves.

5. *Penetrating the world of the media* - Have you seen "Dead Man Walking"? The film is, by and large, the conversation between a prisoner and a sister. Both Susan Sarandon, who won the Academy Award, and Sean Penn, who was nominated for one, speak in glowing terms of their contact with Sr. Helen Prejean, C.S.I., who was the actual sister who visited the prisoner on death row in Louisiana. Both the actress and the actor confess that she had a powerful impact on their lives. The media can be a powerful force for good, but unfortunately they sometimes promote values that are hostile to the gospels: unrestrained violence, irresponsible or "dream-like" sex, the need always to have more and to have it immediately, the right to do what I want to do even if my own desires conflict with the rights, or at times the lives, of others.

Vita Consecrata suggests, as have many other recent Church documents, that we must learn the language of the media, that we must know how to influence it and change it, that we must be capable of channeling the power of the media toward genuine human values. The United States is, in a sense, the media capital of the world. Nowhere is this challenge more imperative than there.

The signs of the prophet

How will we recognize the prophets? What are the signs that they are fully alive among us? Let me list five briefly.

1. *The prophets radiate transcendence* - If the prophet is one who speaks for God, then surely the clearest sign of prophetic authenticity is that we see God in him or her.
2. *They have vital contact with dire human need* - "The blind see, the lame walk, the poor have the good news preached to them." Prophets not only cry out for justice, they walk alongside the poor in the journey toward liberation.
3. *They live in solidarity with others* - In a world where there is so much individualism, the prophet proclaims co-responsibility, family, integration, the unity of humankind.

4. *They witness to simplicity of life* - Prophets know what is important in life. Their values are clear. They seek the "one thing necessary." Everything else is secondary. For that reason there is a beautiful simplicity in their lives.

5. *They communicate joy* - The joy, the peace of the Lord shines out through the prophets. They sing a new song. The Risen Lord rings in their words and in their actions. They are resurrection people with alleluia as their song.

My brothers and sisters, the center of consecrated life is prophetic witness to the Kingdom. "Jesus is alive," the prophet says, "he is here." The prophet's life challenges the world to see the Risen Lord.

Ariccia, Italy, 22-25 May 1996