

*“WELL I KNOW THE FOUNTAIN ...”*

**UISG BULLETIN**

**NUMBER 143, 2010**

|  |           |
|--|-----------|
| <b>FOREWORD</b>  | <b>2</b>  |
| <i>Sr. Josune Arregui, CCV</i>   |           |
| <b>OPENING ADDRESS UISG PLENARY ASSEMBLY 2010</b>  | <b>4</b>  |
| <i>Sr. Maureen Cusick, NDS</i>   |           |
| <b>OPENING EUCHARIST</b>   | <b>8</b>  |
| <i>Fr. Eusebio Hernández Sola, OAR</i>   |           |
| <b>MYSTICISM AND PROPHECY A STYLE<br/>OF LIFE AND NEW AREOPAGUS</b>  | <b>11</b> |
| <i>Fr. Ciro García, OCD</i>  |           |
| <b>OPENING THE HEART TO LISTEN.<br/>BECOMING MYSTICS AND PROPHETS TODAY</b>  | <b>29</b> |
| <i>Sr. Judette Gallares, RC</i>  |           |
| <b>CALLED TO ILLUMINATE WITH PROPHETIC LIGHT T<br/>HE WORLD OF DARKNESS</b>  | <b>46</b> |
| <i>Sr. Liliane Sweko, SNDdeN</i>   |           |
| <b>A THEOLOGY OF EMPATHY</b>   | <b>61</b> |
| <i>Rabbi Arthur Green</i>  |           |
| <b>“THE ALMOND BRANCH AND THE BOILING POT” (JER. 1, 11-13)<br/>WHAT IS THE FUTURE FOR OUR MYSTICAL-PROPHETIC HERITAGE?</b> | <b>73</b> |
| <i>Fr. Bruno Secondin, O.Carm.</i>   |           |
| <b>CONCLUDING EUCHARIST</b>  | <b>91</b> |
| <i>Fr. Antonio M. Pernia, SVD</i>  |           |
| <b>DECLARATION</b>   | <b>94</b> |

## FOREWORD

Sr. Josune Arregui, CCV

*Original in Spanish*

**I**n this issue of the Bulletin we publish the texts of the five sessions of the Plenary Assembly 2010, to make them available to the greatest number of people and communities. But the Assembly has been much more than conferences and, before reading the texts, it would be well to consider them within the context in which they were delivered.

The main theme of the Assembly, *Mysticism and Prophecy*, was very stimulating and the expression of St. John of the Cross which accompanied it, “*Well I know the fountain that runs and flows...though it is night*”, proved to be an important reminder for the 800 women, leaders of apostolic religious congregations, from 87 countries. They travelled to meet in Rome to share their leadership experience and the questions which emerged from these evening sessions.

To behold the assembly in session was a veritable pageant because of the large number of participants and the great variety of races, colors of clothing, of languages spoken, yet all in perfect harmony. The assembly took place in the main hall of the Hotel Ergife, around 83 numbered, circular tables, in which each participant could easily find her place and meet a group of Sisters to communicate with in one’s own language, as well as having simultaneous translation from 11 languages at their disposal.

According to a plan developed in advance each Sister brought with her a symbol to place on the table in front of her to introduce herself and express her expectations for the outcome of the assembly. The tables were covered by a great variety of objects, which added a touch of beauty and color.

The five meetings unfolded, developing and articulating the theme of the Plenary: beginning with mysticism and prophecy viewed as an inseparable pair, (1), we allowed ourselves to be guided by Lydia, lady of Philippi, to travel with her along a path of conversion (2), the presence of witnesses from past and present challenged us to continue to be the salt and the light (3), we assumed an “empathic” stance of union with God, with the brothers and sisters and with all creation (4), we drew continually on our founding charisms as mystico-prophetic sources (5). Following each presentation there was a period of silence, of reflection within the little communities formed around the tables and of dialogue with the speakers.

But, the central thread of the Plenary Assembly was a more profound question: *what is the Lord saying today to religious life?* This is why, at the end of each day, we stopped to reflect on the significance of all we had heard and experienced and on what we did not wish to lose sight of. This sharing of reactions was summarized into a single sentence. Several volunteers offered to collect the sentences from each table and to work them up into a single text to offer a broader participation during the prayer the following day. Thus, little by little, what the “Fountain” was murmuring within the hearts of many Sisters was collected to become melded into an expression common to all.

Declaration, commitments, tendencies ... these are words which in the different languages, seek to express the intuitions, the insights that Assembly 2010 stimulated in each participant, for her own congregation, for the national conferences and for each of the Constellations which the Union is composed of across the entire world. The Orientations 2010 wish to be a meeting point, a word uttered by the force of communion, a light which guides us in shadowy situations, the commitment of the Union for the years to come.

The celebrations of the Eucharist, prepared by different linguistic groups and enlivened by various choruses, soloists and musical ensembles, represented a key moment in this great ecclesiastical assembly. The first day the Eucharist was celebrated by Fr. Eusebio Hernandez, the representative of CIVCSVA, substituting for Cardinal Rodè, unable to attend. The second day the Eucharist was presided over by the Superior General of the Jesuits, Fr. Adolfo Nicolas, who invited us not to allow ourselves to be conquered by distractions, but to remain focused on what was essential. And, for the closing of the Assembly, the Eucharist was celebrated by Fr. Antonio Pernia, Superior General of the Society of the Divine Word, with the musical performance of the ensemble of the Superior Generals of the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

The calendar of the Assembly had planned the conclusion for Tuesday, 11 May, to make it possible for those present to participate in the general audience with the Pope the following Wednesday. But the Pontiff’s visit to Portugal, which we learned about after our program had already been planned and organized, caused the cancellation of this event. This was lamented by all, especially by those who had arrived in Rome for the first time from distant places. A telegram from Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone presented best wishes to the participants on behalf of His Holiness Benedict XVI.

The Plenary Assembly 2010 has already ended, but the experience lived, the joy of meeting and a light to continue on our path remain with us, because it is no longer night when we discover the Fountain and the faith that illuminates us.

# OPENING ADDRESS

UISG PLENARY ASSEMBLY 2010

Sr. Maureen Cusick, NDS

*President of UISG*

*Original in English*

**W**elcome to each one of you, all of you, to those who have been here before and especially to those of you who are here for the first time and feel a bit overwhelmed. You are at a table with nine other people, so that you don't feel too overwhelmed. During these next four days you can make these nine sisters your home faith community.

As you know, our theme is set around the mystical and prophetic aspects of our lives. This is a theme that did not come out of the blue – but came from yourselves and the ones of you who entered a reflection with us for this plenary session. There was such a strong sense of this as a theme, that we were astonished at the unanimity and of course the movement of the Spirit, who continues to surprise us.

So here we are to explore this theme together, surely called by the Spirit. We have prepared for you five speakers from different cultures and backgrounds, including a rabbi, to address us and help us in our reflections on this theme. What they say is going to be interesting, but the most interesting part will be what you yourselves make of this theme and how you are inspired by God's word in your ear, through all that is being said and discussed in this big assembly.

In this short opening address I would like to explore with you my understanding of the theme the Spirit has helped us choose – not to give another talk on it, but to open it up and to look at the importance of your participation in it.

So first of all I want to look with you at your presence in this great assembly. You are the general leader of your congregation, – you might also be here as an invited guest to the gathering – you may be serving in various helping roles - journalists - translators - secretaries from UISG itself or one of the many generous volunteers here to help things to run smoothly - you are all welcome.

As you are here in this great assembly hall, we will be expecting you to enter with us into the listening mode of obedience and discernment during

these four days... in order that that we may speak the Word to our congregations and to the church. We are not here to write a statement, but if we are really listening, in a mystical and contemplative mode, then we must speak out as prophets to the church and to the world.... This might take the form of a final statement.

I see this plenary gathering as an adventure in obedience. What do I mean by that? What do we have in common? Whether we are consecrated women/men in the church, consecrated married or single lay people – we are all called to ‘hear’ God’s word and to act on this word. How are we going to do this during our time together?

The Word of God, as we know, comes to us in many forms, not just from the Biblical text, though for us as one of the people of the Book, the Biblical text is highly significant. We hear God’s Word spoken to us through the events of our day and through many situations, books, lectures etc....you know all of these.

Our consecrated Obedience calls us to be open to this word, from wherever it comes, to interpret and speak this word to others. We are here at this big event to listen together to God’s Word. 800 pairs of ears and hearts!

The strength of your voices with regard to this as a theme, leads us to believe that we are being called again to seriously renew our commitment to the mystical aspect of our lives in order to renew also the prophetic dimension of our lives. We cannot speak a prophetic Word if we are not mystics in our relationship with God!

I have chosen a biblical text which I hope will help to sustain and consolidate this introductory reflection on the obedience of the mystic and the prophet.

The text I have chosen is from The Book of Exodus Chapter 24 vs 7. It is the story of the return of Moses from Mount Sinai. You will remember the story – after the giving of the law and the discussions that went on - the ups and the downs – they did not like the food, the water was not nice, there were snakes and scorpions etc. Finally Moses has another discussion with God and in the verses just before our text at the beginning of chapter 24 - whatever discussion Moses had with God – we are not told what went on – but Moses comes down and enacts the ritual to make the covenant. And now we come to our text in Verse 7 - then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it aloud for all the people to hear. They said - “We will do and we will hear”. Can you hear the order that comes in - we will do first and then we will hear? This is a bit strange - your translation probably says we will obey

and do all that the Lord says. ....but the literal translation of the Hebrew text is - we will **do and we will hear (obey)**. In Jewish commentaries, we are told that this expresses the relation between doing and hearing. On the importance of doing - Judaism was first of all an ethical religion – **a doing** - the mitzvot – good deeds – is a way to express love of God. So when we read, we will do and we will hear after having received the Torah, but not having explored its content, it meant that they made an act of faith, that committed them to the Lord, knowing that in the doing, they will be able to hear better in depth the Word of God and so will do God's will more consciously.

Hearing - obedience is about listening not just with the ear but with the heart. In biblical anthropology the organ of the will is the heart.

(Jewish commentary)

“ Those who hear the Word and does not do it is better for him ( her) not to be born.”

A beautiful commentary on psalm 40 vs 7

“You did not ask for sacrifice and offerings, but you opened my ear. You did not ask for holocaust and victim, instead here I am. In the scroll of the book it is written on me My God I have desired to do your will, your law is in my guts

It means that the Lord has opened my ear. But it is not enough. I shall do your will. And then I will realize how deep is your Tora in my being. Today we would say it is in our DNA

In the New Testament, we have the wonderful example of Mary:

“ **May it be *done* to me according to your word**”.

She “does” before understanding fully the meaning of the words of the angel.

She keeps in the living memory in her heart. And she knows that little by little those words of God through the angel will reveal their meaning and allow her to enter more and more fully into the loving will of the Lord.

Also at Cana: she says ‘Do what he will tell you’.

And the relation between hearing and doing is expressed in many passages of the Gospel: for example Mt 7, 24-27

What then of the person who hears these words of mine and acts upon them? He/she is like the one who builds his house on a rock, the rain came and the floods rose and the wind blew and beat upon that house, but it did

not fall down because its foundations were on a rock.....meaning the word of God.

There are many more examples in the Gospels /- Jesus says in text: “The one who does the will of my father.....she/he is my sister and brother.” Mathew 12: 46 - 50

And so to our theme of reflecting on the mystical aspects of our lives in order to act on these words and to speak courageously. We can never say about ourselves, that we are prophets . – others may say that of someone – but nevertheless, each one of us is called to speak a prophetic word.

I want to say something about someone who wrote extensively on the Hebrew prophets and on prophecy today. He is Rabbi Abraham Heschel - he was a scholar, a philosopher, a teacher a wonderful rabbi from the mystical tradition in Judaism. He said that he could not pray, if he did not speak out and act against all the injustices in the world about which he was at prayer. He joined Martin Luther King in the civil rights marches in Alabama United States – he joined the protest marches against the Vietnam war- he came to Rome during the Vatican Council to be alongside Cardinal Bea who was working on the document *Nostra Aetate* and the Churches relationship with Judaism.

We all have many examples whom we can quote, amongst our own sisters and brothers – women and men who have truly heard God’s word and have acted courageously, with justice and who have walked humbly with their God.

We all have many examples too from our own lives, when we instinctively rose to defend someone or some situation without really knowing all the details....only afterwards on reflection did we come to understand the full meaning of our actions. Sometimes we truly enter into a discernment and act with clarity on the Word we have heard in our ear-/heart. Obedience tolerates a variety of expressions!!

During these days we will take the opportunity to renew our deep commitment to the mystical call within us that enables us to continue to reach out – to speak the truth – to act justly because we have walked tenderly with our God.

And now I want to say to each one of you - enjoy this adventure with our God and with one another during these days in this lovely charming eternal city of Rome.

Thank you. And thank you Translators.

## OPENING EUCHARIST

Fr. Eusebio Hernández Sola, OAR

*Congregation of the Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (CICSAL)*

*Original in Italian*

*Dearest Sisters,*

**T**he current liturgy and the Word of God are particularly rich with suggestions and themes for reflection and prayer.

In the first reading, drawn from the Acts of the Apostles, a brief moment of the frenetic apostolic activity of Saint Paul is described. Along with Silas and Timothy, his most faithful and dearest disciple, he crosses Phrygia and Galatia, reaching Mysia, as far as Troas. Called in a dream, the apostle set out with his collaborators for Macedonia to bring the Gospel of Jesus there.

One cannot but remain deeply awed by the apostolic zeal and missionary eagerness of Paul, who, driven by love of Christ, cannot stop at simply announcing His word and His message of salvation; “*Indeed it is not a boast for me to preach the Gospel; it is a duty: woe be unto me if I should not preach the Gospel!*”, declares the apostle with passion. Within the Church Paul remains an incomparable model of the apostolic missionary who, “*seized by Jesus Christ*” (Phil 3, 12), burns with the desire to make Him known and loved by all men. Thunderstruck on the road to Damascus, Paul feels all the urgency of the Christian prophecy: his entire life shall be none other than the presage of Christ dead and risen for the salvation of mankind. Journeys, fasts, persecutions, beatings, shipwrecks, rejections and lack of understanding will not suffice to restrain the ardor of He who, “*seized by Jesus Christ*” (Phil 3, 12), wishes that all be *seized* and loved by Him.

I was personally able to observe a similar evangelical, missionary fervor during my trips to attend the various Conferences of the Superiors General of friars and nuns in every part of the world. I have seen with my own eyes the ever *new fantasy of charity, the apostolic creativity, the loving testimony* of a life devoted towards Him who suffers, to the world wounded by and slave to hate. There is no poverty, there is no misery, there is no need

within this poor humanity, lacerated, divided, suffering, humiliated, to which the consecrated life, especially feminine, has not brought and still brings, with affection, delicateness, charity, the necessary comfort and help. You drew close to the poor, the elderly, the drug addicts, those sick with AIDS, to the exiles, to the women and minors bought and sold, to the persons subjected to every sort of suffering for their particular situation. Your apostolic creativity found a way to find new answers to the new needs from which rise cries for help from the men and women who suffer. The world today needs this Gospel, narrated by deeds of life, and for this the Church thanks you for your generosity and testimony.

The theme “*Well I know the fountain that runs and flows... though it is night*”, inspired by Saint John of the Cross, refers to a very profound meditation on the present and the future of the consecrated life to begin right from the mysticism-prophecy binomium. You well know a famous passage of Consecrated Life: “*True prophecy begins with God, from friendship with Him, from listening attentively to His Word in the various circumstances of history. The prophet feels passion for the holiness of God burning in his heart and, after having received the word from the dialogue of prayer, he proclaims it with his life, with his lips and with his gestures, becoming the spokesman of God against evil and sin*” (no. 84) The first prophecy is the “*prophetic testimony of the primacy that God and the values of the Gospel have in Christian life.*” There is no need for anything else: the consecrated life is everything. If we really understand this teaching, we shall have a new vision of our life and our mission.

For example, today all the Institutions, more or less, suffer the sad phenomenon of a decrease in numbers. All, or almost all, experience it as a “misfortune”, while it must be considered a “*kairos*”, “*the small flock due to a decrease in its numbers can be read as a heaven-sent sign which invites us to retrieve our own fundamental duty as yeast, as ferment, as a sign and as a prophecy. The larger the amount of dough to be leavened, the greater quality must be the evangelical ferment, and the more exquisite is the testimony of life and the charismatic service of consecrated persons.*” (*Starting Afresh from Christ*, 13).

The Gospel according to Saint John offered us then a short passage of the long speech of the Master during the last supper centered on the phrase: *if the world hates you, know that before you it hated me*. Today we are in the middle of one of these persecutions that the Lord suffered and that today His Church is suffering.

In such a situation, because of several scandals, it is not impossible that someone - God forbid! - should feel ashamed of his belonging to the Church

or to a religious Institution, even one dedicated to the education of youth. To all of you I would like to quote emphatically, from none other than the apostle Paul: *“I am not ashamed of the Gospel, since it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes”* (Romans 1, 16). The only shame that a Christian must feel, and for greater reason a consecrated person, man or woman, is for not being saintly!

The situation today requires much holiness, the capacity, that is, of silencing adversaries and enemies with the full and joyous testimony of one’s own adhesion to Christ’s Gospel, experienced in its fundamental essence through the profession of the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity, obedience, witnessed personally and communally. It requires, in other words, individuals and communities who are full of joy and enthusiasm despite all! God does not abandon His Church, but guides and protects it above all in its difficult moments.

The apostles awoke the sleeping Jesus in the boat on the lake during the storm (Matthew 8,23-25). The life of man at times is that boat in the storm; it can be the Church, it can be the consecrated life, the existence of each of us. The challenges and difficulties of our personal fragility, the calumny and the persecution, like raging, evil waves, assault us and attempt to sink us; the weather is dark and stormy, the shore and the harbor appear distant and unsafe, our efforts at rowing seem to fail and all seems lost to us. Dear Sisters, we must not forget the most important thing: in the boat with us there is Jesus, even if He seems to be asleep. The boat cannot sink, because there is Christ on board with us. We, frightened by the storm, forget about Him. But if we implore Him, if we pray to Him, if we wake Him, He will rise yet again to shout down the difficulties, the obstacles, the persecutions and there will be once again *“a great calm.”*

To Mary, Mother of the consecrated life, Lady of the Resurrection, we entrust this meeting and all our dear Institutions.

# MYSTICISM AND PROPHECY: A STYLE OF LIFE AND NEW AREOPAGUS

Fr. Ciro García, OCD

*Ciro García Fernández, Discalced Carmelite, was born in León (Spain). Since 1968 he has been teaching Dogmatic Theology and is a professor of Theological Anthropology at the Faculty of Theology in Northern Spain, Burgos. Since 2003 he has also been teaching History of Religions. He has given courses in Spirituality in Rome, Madrid, Mexico City, Haifa and the Catholic University of Honduras. He is the author of about twenty books on Theology, Anthropology, Spirituality and Carmelite Spirituality.*

*Original in Spanish*

## Introduction

- \* “I know full well the fountain that springs forth and flows...”
- \* Called to be mystics and prophets
  1. Two fundamental dynamic identities of the Christian experience
    - 1.1. The mystical experience
    - 1.2. The prophetic experience
    - 1.3. The bursting forth of the “Other”
  2. The mystical and prophetic awakening of our contemporary time
  3. The mystical and prophetic vocation of consecrated life
    - 3.1. The mysticism of consecration
    - 3.2. The prophecy of mission
    - 3.3. Mysticism and Prophecy in “Passion for Christ and passion for humanity”
  4. The new Areopagus (fields of witnessing) of mysticism and prophecy
    - 4.1. The Areopagus of mysticism
      - a) A personal life of faith
      - b) Listening to the Word
      - c) The experience of God “in daily life”
      - d) The ecclesial urgency of witnessing
    - 4.2. The Areopagus of prophecy
      - a) In a situation of exile
      - b) Creating a family (home – hearth), Communion
      - c) Humanize
      - d) The wisdom of small signs
      - e) The service of charity - a “heart that sees”- \* Conclusion: A Song of praise

· ***“I know full well the fountain that springs forth and flows...”***

The greatest gift, the most precious gift which the Lord can give to consecrated life and to every religious is to reveal (and make us enjoy) this secret spring of living water – “such a beautiful thing that heaven and earth drink from it” – to drink and sing of its overflowing richness - “its overflowing currents irrigate heaven and hell, and the people - and quench the thirst of all creation – “it is here, calling all creatures, that are quenched from this water, though it is night”. This is what happened in the life of John of the Cross, mystic, poet and prophet who had the joy of knowing the mysteries of faith (the fountain) that burst into history like a torrent (Christ) and flood the entire life (heaven and earth). It is like the river announced by the prophet that runs through the desert (cfr. Is 43,19), and makes all the earth verdant bringing forth abundant fruits. (cf. Ez 47,8-9).

John of the Cross experienced and sang his faith in God in this way while he was persecuted, marginalized, locked in the most dismal cell of the Toledo jail (November 1577 – August 1578). Here, in this dark and fearful place, the poem of the Fountain was born, full of life, light, and colors, that sings of the experience of his knowledge of God in faith that overcomes hostility, darkness and death itself. I believe it is like a parable for consecrated life, rooted in the fountains of salvation, like the hidden fountain, like the secret spring whose abundant waters are called to fructify our dry earth and sterile deserts. And this, even though it is night and darkness thickens and difficulties increase.

This is the meaning enclosed in the mystical and prophetic experience of consecrated life. It is the joyous discovery of the fountains of salvation, the finding of the hidden treasure, the encounter with Christ and the prophetic announcement of his reign. Mysticism and prophecy are, above all, an experience that tries to describe not so much theologically but essentially.

In this sense, we approach the new fields of witness (Areopagus) of mysticism and prophecy:

- a) It deals with an experience based on faith, nourished by the Word that discovers God in life and feels the need to witness to God (field of witness of mysticism)
- b) It is also the announcement born in a situation of exile that creates communion, that humanizes through small signs and the service of charity (field of witness of prophecy).

All these break forth in a song of praise that makes its own “the joys and the hopes” of the human family and prophetically recreates consecrated life.

• ***Called to be mystics and prophets***

Mysticism and prophecy are two essential, closely connected dimensions of every religious identity, of Christian life and of consecrated life. The first is more directly projected towards union with God, the second is more immediately oriented to the fulfillment of his will here and now. Only a wise combination of both of them will forge an authentic religious identity of God and of the human person. There is no authentic mysticism if it does not flow out of an ethical and prophetic commitment, nor is it possible to think of a prophecy which is not nourished by a deep union with the divine<sup>1</sup>.

All people and all consecrated men and women are called to be mystics and prophets, which means to experience God and his Word that they must transmit. Everyone is also called to commit oneself to the history of the Church and one's time. The true path then, is found in the union of these two identities. It is not so much a matter of being a mystic "OR" of being a prophet, but of being both a mystic "AND" a prophet.

From this perspective, and from our personal experience:

- 1) we shall develop each of these two religious identities as two fundamental identities of the Christian experience, indicating at the same time, the dynamic relationship between them;
- 2) we shall briefly describe the mystical and prophetic rebirth of contemporary spirituality;
- 3) we shall point out their impact on religious life in its dual mystical and prophetic dimension, recalling the urgency of mystical and prophetic witnessing in the Church today; and
- 4) finally, we shall indicate some new fields of mysticism and prophecy that are currently appearing in the scenario of consecrated life.

## **1. Two fundamental dynamic identities of the Christian experience**

Mysticism and prophecy are not static religious identities. They are dynamic. This means that they exist within a religious process of maturation and purification of the person (the nights of St. John of the Cross); they are results of the transforming action of divine grace and a complex history of identifications characterized by the personal commitment to bring to fullness the meaning of one's existence. The mystical horizon of this fullness is reached in the encounter with God (mystical union), which is the deepest yearning of every human being (cfr. GS 19). If the soul is searching for God, how much more her beloved is searching for her (cfr. *Living Flame of*

*Love 3,28).*

It is said that we all have within us a mystic (and a prophet), just as there is a “little Buddha”, who incarnates our deepest needs and desires, searching for the meaning of life, aspiring for a future of change and newness and for the realization of the final utopia. If this is true, anthropologically and religiously, it is even more so from the point of view of Christian faith and consecrated life. In effect, Christianity is originally a mysticism, not ethics or a moral code; it is the mysticism of following Christ and baptismal conformation to Him. In the same way, consecrated life is mysticism and prophecy; it is essentially consecration to Christ (mysticism) and proclamation of the Good News (prophecy)

### ***1.1. The mystical experience***

The mystical experience, whatever its expression may be, seems to have for its main objective the search for a union that breaks through the confines of the “ego”. In this way, it immerses itself in a lived reality, which is mystical union. The mystical experience is essentially a divine pathos (divine passion) which means “experiri” (to experience) the presence of God and to suffer, to feel, to accept His transforming action in us, and thus, it is a bond, a relationship, “a loving glance”, a loving contact with a reality which is immensely appreciated and conceived as the secret, most intimate center of one’s existence and as its permanent source which causes the mystic to exclaim: “O living flame of love that tenderly wounds my soul in its deepest center!” (St. John of the Cross, “Living Flame of Love”)

It is manifested in a particular state of awareness, of trust and of surrender to God’s reality in which not only grace, but also the personal psychology of each person and his/her condition as woman or man play a fundamental role. It is said that women have a greater predisposition for mysticism while men have for prophecy. “The mother brings forth life, the father, history” (G. Van der Leeuw). Even if the mystical-prophetic components are present both in the feminine and masculine, historically prophetic attitudes and behavior are more associated to the male components of the person: law, requirement, condemnation, punishment....

### ***1.2. The prophetic experience***

Just as mystical life is characterized by the experience of the overwhelming presence of the “Other”, prophetic life is characterized by listening to the Word that comes from the divine and which the prophet feels constrained to transmit, often against his will. The prophet is spokesperson of a divine message, divinity breaks through not so much to make some intimate

communication to him, but more to make him an announcer of His saving Word. The Word, listened to and transmitted, always entails the need for a transforming action in history.

The symbolic space of the prophetic identity is not the intimate and recollected space of the cell, as in the case of the mystical experience. Its paradigmatic space is the public square, there where social life unfolds in this drama of interpersonal relationships intertwined with political, economic and cultural life.

In this sense we see how biblical prophecy unfolds in the interpretation of enigmas at the discovery of a mission and of a historical responsibility, engaged in the community. The preoccupation for justice, for the coming of a society worthy of God and of His children, becomes the center of Judaic prophecy.

### ***1.3. The bursting forth of “The Other”***

Mystics and prophets even in their diversity have something in common: both are witnesses to the bursting forth of “The Other” who transcends them and in whose name they are transformed, changing their personal identity.

Mystics experience “The Other” breaking forth within themselves from the deepest part of their being. The prophet instead describes this bursting forth of “The Other” not so much as something emerging from within but rather as a voice that comes from outside – an unexpected, startling and, in general, disturbing voice that calls to a difficult mission. “Woe to me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips... “ (Is 6,5). “Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a child!” (Jer 1,6). “Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel!” (1Cor 9,16).

## **2. The mystical and prophetic reawakening of our contemporary time**

The twentieth century notwithstanding its process of secularization and religious crisis, at least in the occidental world, is characterized by a growing interest for both the study and experience of mysticism. This amply documented<sup>2</sup> renewal movement tends to promote mystical life as fullness of Christian life and as prophetic denunciation of the secularized and materialistic culture.

We have all been and we are protagonists, to a greater or lesser degree, of the religious situation in the past century and in this our century characterized by a series of rapid and profound changes which marked our life: laicism, modernity, post-modernity, together with clamorous situations of injustice

and marginalization. In facing these situations and great changes, we have had to re-adjust the parameters of our consecrated life following the Council orientation of a “constant return to the sources of all Christian life and to the original spirit of the Institutes and their adaptation to the changed conditions of our times” (PC 2).

Personally, I have closely followed the evolution of the contemporary religious situation through the study of the trends in spirituality and through my pastoral commitments. Because of this, I will speak more from my experience than from theoretical, theological or pastoral programs.

My experience has been deeply marked by these two poles: the return to the sources of revelation and the openness to the needs of the contemporary world with its conditions of poverty, marginalization, violence and injustice. The link between them has been my interest for mysticism and more specifically, for Carmelite mysticism. This interest offered me the vital-existential synthesis of my theology and my religious consecration and launched me with a renewed awareness of the situations of lack of faith (of the first world) and of poverty (of the third world).

From these points, I tried to give a response to the problems that faith and its preaching present today. At the same time, I tried to respond to the challenges of consecration and mission of religious life in the Church, being sensitive to the situations of poverty and the exclusion of wide sectors of humanity.

On this point, I wish to present some convictions:

- 1<sup>st</sup> Christian life and, in particular, consecrated life cannot live along the sidelines of the contemporary situation that today challenges faith and spirituality in general. It is essential to know this situation in order to respond prophetically both to the deepest yearnings and questionings of the human being and to the dramatic situations of marginalization and poverty.
- 2<sup>nd</sup> In addition, Christian life must be founded on biblical and liturgical sources as also on serious theological reflection that helps us enter into the revealed mystery of our faith, thus overcoming the divergence between theology and spirituality. Sometimes we speak of a spiritual inadequacy of religious life, but, should we not also speak in some way of the inadequacy of theological formation?
- 3<sup>rd</sup> Finally, consecrated life must be based on a dual mystical and prophetic openness, as we have said earlier. The mystical experience represents the fullness of Christian life. It is the experience lived not only in the silence of prayer but also in the daily existence, in a theological

dynamic.

- 4<sup>th</sup> Prophetic experience, which is nourished in mystical experience, thrusts us towards ethical and social commitment and is translated not so much in the great causes of humanity as in small humanizing gestures: attention to the poor, to the infirm and the marginalized. The experience of God cannot be realized in isolation, indifference and lack of attention towards human suffering.

### 3. The mystical and prophetic vocation of consecrated life

We all know and have experienced the changes in consecrated life with its lights and shadows, its strengths and weaknesses, its success and limitations. Without attempting to take an account, today we have a better understanding of what consecrated life is, of its fundamental values, its theology, its spirituality and its mission in the Church. We also have a better understanding of the specific charism of our Founders.

Presupposing all this, we now ask ourselves in what sense religious life feels it is being called to respond today in its dual mystical and prophetic dimension. Everyone knows the text of *Vita Consecrata* on the prophecy of consecrated life (cfr. VC 84-85). Let us focus our reflection on the value of consecration and on the meaning of mission<sup>3</sup>, making reference to the International Congress on Consecrated Life of 2004.

#### 3.1. *The mysticism of consecration*

Religious consecration cannot be understood outside the mysticism of “*sequela Christi*” and conformation to Him. The “*sequela Christi*” is a *memoria Iesu*, which makes Jesus present in His way of living and acting by virtue of the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. This includes a union and familiarity with Him like that of His disciples, which deeply mark religious life. This is founded on the encounter, contact, familiarity with His life and His person, on the imitation of His lifestyle, His personal, free, chosen and beloved practice of poverty, chastity and obedience. It is the true, solid and unequivocal foundation of our consecrated life (cfr. VC 88-90).

Obviously, consecrated life is more than the vows, even though the vows continue to be an essential and meaningful part of this lifestyle which is called to live the vows in an integrated manner, as an element of personal identity, as a place for encountering God and as missionary dimension of existence, as part of prophecy, which it is. If this does not identify us and its effects are not felt in daily life, if we embrace middle-class values and minimize the evangelical meaning of the vows, we are definitely hiding the

talent we received for fear of putting it to use.

### 3.2. *The prophecy of mission*

Consecration does not exist without mission. Consecrated life is for mission. The same consecration, lived as surrender to God, as love for Jesus and as service to the people of God is already in itself mission: the mission par excellence of announcing Christ, of making Him present, repeating the existential gestures of His life through the evangelical counsels (cfr. VC 72-75). This is the prophetic dimension of consecrated life.

Today, prophecy is understood above all in its affirmative meaning, as was the life of Jesus, that is to say, in announcing the Good News. The mission of consecrated life is that of being converted in prophetic anticipation of the Kingdom, through community life, through its form of governance, its simplicity of life, its missionary, educative, charitable and contemplative works. This way, it becomes an eloquent sign of the Gospel, both for the society where it lives and for the Church where it flourishes. As regards vocations, this affirmative prophecy, which proposes visible evangelical alternatives to the evils of society, seems more necessary than a negative prophecy<sup>4</sup>.

During the Synod on Consecrated Life, Cardinal Ratzinger offered a magisterial contribution on the genuine meaning of prophecy as contained in *Proposition n. 39*. The values of prophecy are necessarily rooted in the experience of God and of His Word, in friendship with God that develops through dialogue in prayer, in passion for His holiness and His glory, in passionate search for His will and in a witnessing to truth. It is a prophetic action that requires the courage of proclamation and condemnation, a consistency in life to the point of sealing God's message with one's own blood. It is a prophetic action that also exacts a passionate search for new paths for building of the Kingdom of God, the ecclesial communion. Because of this, true prophecy is nourished with the Word of God and the contemplation of His presence and action in history.

### 3.3. *Mysticism and prophecy in "Passion for Christ and passion for humanity"*

In November 2004, the International Congress on Consecrated Life was celebrated in Rome with the theme: "Passion for Christ and passion for humanity". In it, the mystical and prophetic dimensions were tackled in the light of two biblical icons: Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well (Jn 4, 1-42) and the parable of the good Samaritan (Lk 10,29-37). The two images wanted to harmonize mysticism and prophecy,

contemplation and action, experience and mission in a fruitful way. In fact, in the encounter with God, consecrated life discovers the source of a love which becomes gift and service to others especially the least and the weakest. From here, one feels propelled towards the often disregarded dignity of the person and towards the God of love and mercy.

In the light of the two biblical icons just mentioned, “mysticism and prophecy” acquire a profound evangelical meaning and represent an impetus toward the renewal of consecrated life for the third millennium. The first icon – that of the Samaritan woman – emphasizes love and passion for Christ. The intimate conversation of the Samaritan woman with Christ is concretely “*adoration*”. The second icon – that of the good Samaritan – highlights “*compassion*”, the love and attention for the wounded along the roads of life. However, it does not deal with juxtaposed elements or separate moments, but the roots of the encounter with the God of life, with the Lord of mercy. This is the criterion with which the Lord is teaching us to express adoration thanks to the Mystery fused with a committed compassion for wounded humanity, as we will try to see in the next paragraph.

#### **4. The new Areopagus (fields of witness) of mysticism and prophecy**

The Apostolic Exhortation “*Vita Consecrata*”, speaking of the mission of consecrated life (“*Servitium caritatis*”) indicates the following fields: the *ad gentes* mission, inculturation, option for the poor, care for the sick (cfr. VC. 77-83). But the apostolic and missionary horizon of the Church extends to include new “fields” in which consecrated life must be present. It must be present in the world of education and means of communication (VC 96-99) and also the involvement in ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue (100-103). These Areopagus, these fields, retain all of their relevancy and we can say they are more urgent now than ever.

When we speak here of new Areopagus, however, we do it starting from the double perspective of mysticism and prophecy. This means that we are not treating them like fields of action or apostolate but rather like a style or form of life, like fundamental attitudes called to permeate all our apostolic activities. Because of this, even if they are presented separately, they form one undivided reality, as emerges from our previous presentation. The mystical and prophetic identities are two perspectives of consecrated life which are fused in one reality and which, therefore, cannot be lived and cultivated separately. If they were separated, their true meaning could be radically changed. Only the mystic is a prophet and all prophets must be mystics. The unity in the lived experience also brings about unity in pursuing

the pathways which, today, represent the new Areopagus, the new fields of witness.

These are fundamental attitudes which apply to all the fields, even if obviously it is possible to cultivate one more than the other according to the charism and mission of each Institute. Here, we shall indicate those that seem fundamental to us.

#### ***4.1. The Areopagus of mysticism***

We indicate the following: personal life of faith, listening to the Word, the experience of God “in the daily life”, the urgency of witnesses.

##### *a) Personal life of faith*

In a world – especially a European one - in which we are called to live our faith “in inclement weather”, without socio-cultural or religious support, consecrated people – together with Christians on the journey – feel the need to renew their personal faith beginning from the question of Jesus to His disciples: “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” (Mk 4, 40) “Do you also wish to go away?” (Jn 6, 67).

It seems something obvious that we normally take for granted, but we must not forget this: Consecrated life is born and nourished in faith. Its center is Jesus Christ, alive in our midst and sends us generously in mission in a world athirst for spirituality; He fills us with His Spirit so that we may be a song of praise to God the Father of every creature and an expression of His compassion. We have to affirm once again that the fecundity and the joy of our life come from a familiarity with God through an encounter with Christ, through the mystical experience of faith.

In this context, the words of Karl Rahner acquire a meaning: “The Christian of the future will either be a mystic – which means a person who has experienced something – or he/she will not be a Christian at all. The spirituality of the future will no longer depend on a conviction which is unanimous, evident and public, nor on a generalized religious environment but rather on experience and personal decision<sup>5</sup>.

The motivation suggested by Rahner appears much more radical today. It is not only an environment contrary to Christian faith that necessitates a personal experience of God, but it is the very nature of Christian faith, which is not only a doctrinal formula but a lived experience, a full adherence to God, a relationship of personal encounter with Him, the response to His loving invitation (cfr. DV 2.5).

The personal experience of faith, as the great theologian De Lubac

emphasized “is not a deepening of oneself, it is the deepening of faith; it is not an attempt to escape into the inner life; it is Christianity itself”. The novelty in Christian mysticism resides in the distinctiveness of adherence to God through faith. Outside of mysticism, the Mystery is externalized and runs the risk of getting lost in pure formula”<sup>6</sup>.

### *b) Listening to the Word*

The essential nourishment of faith is the Word of God, entrusted in the Sacred Scripture, primary source of Christian mysticism. Furthermore, in it, we are offered the history of salvation in the form of a covenant which is incarnated in the typology of Christian mysticism. Because of this, the Word of God as source of life cannot be wanting in the life of consecrated persons nor in their communities and congregations. The two icons – that of the Good Samaritan (Jesus Christ) and that of the Samaritan woman (us) – speak to us of an encounter with Him as Master and spring of living water, as so wonderfully described by St. Teresa of Jesus (*Vida*, 30, 19). A renewal process places Scripture at the center of life, prays it, mediates it, shares it, celebrates it, listens to it (cfr. VC 94). The last Synod on the “*Word of God in the life and mission of the Church*” (cfr. Synod of Bishops, Rome, October 2008) left us some precious suggestions regarding this.

### *c) The experience of God “in daily life”*

Today, we speak of a mystical experience “in the daily life”<sup>7</sup>. Its anthropological foundation is “this fundamental experience of a call (attraction) towards God” present in all men and women and which Karl Rahner defines as “supernatural-existential”<sup>8</sup>. According to a historical-existential perspective, the human person is constitutively open to transcendence.

Such an experience is not something exceptional, on the contrary, it happens every time that the human person clearly perceives the events of his/her daily life with its interior repugnance of evil, its irrevocable love towards the unforeseen “You”, its passion for well done works, its protest against injustice, its commitment for an effective brotherhood, for a living together... All these experiences, the most human and humanizing are always experiences of grace.

This experience happens from an outlook of theological faith: “Far from claiming extraordinary charisms and spectacular moments of grace, the Christian must be rather accustomed to contemplate the daily reality with the eyes of faith. In this way, he/she will be capable of searching for and detecting the presence of God”<sup>9</sup>. The experience of God is not an experience outside daily life, but is – Zubiri affirms – a way of experiencing

in it “the divine condition in which the person exists”<sup>10</sup>.

It is the experience of God in the human and the real, living in the world not “as if God did not exist” (*etsi Deus non daretur*), as the theologians of secularization and the death of God affirm, but rather “as if God does exist” (*etsi Deus daretur*)<sup>11</sup>. This is the God who manifests Himself in the flesh, in human weakness, in the suffering on the cross, who continues to be present in human pain and who has redeemed the world through His apparent helplessness, through the power of the Spirit who has raised Jesus from the dead (Rm 1, 4).

#### *d) The ecclesial urgency of witnesses*

Our current world needs witnesses. Paul VI already reminded us that the people today are tired of listening, annoyed by discourses and almost immune to words and, because of this, prefer witnesses to teachers to the point of listening only to those teachers who are witnesses at the same time. Today’s people understand better the language of facts and of life rather than the language of words (cfr. EN 41-42). “And I would add: for the Church, the first means of evangelization is witnessing” (EN 41).

John Paul II echoing these words affirmed in his encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*: “The contemporary man believes more in witnesses than in teachers, more in experience than in doctrine, in life and in facts more than theories. The testimony of Christian life is the first and irreplaceable form of mission: Christ, whose mission we continue, is the “Witness” par excellence and the model of Christian witnessing. The Holy Spirit accompanies the journey of the Church and associates her with the testimony he gives about Christ. The first form of testimony is the life of the missionary itself” (RM 42).

True testimony is not detached from life itself when lived intensely. It radiates outwardly its interior fullness. It is a true testimony when you live what you announce, that is, when you begin from your own experience. Benedict XVI, in one of his first pronouncements on consecrated life (Rome, December 10, 2005), proposed to religious women to be “witnesses of the transfiguring presence of God” and launched the challenge to be “prophetic pioneers”, like their respective Founders (Discourse at the Plenary Assembly, Rome, May 7, 2007).

## **4.2. The Areopagus of prophecy**

### *a) In an exile situation*

We live in a time that some have compared to an exile. Like Israel who finds himself deprived of all his securities (the temple, place of God’s presence), in consecrated life also, especially in the west, we have lost many

of our points of reference and steps have been embarked upon in the search. Exile is also a spiritual experience: “Crying out, I have searched for you and you were gone” (John of the Cross). It is an opportunity to resume the journey of consecration and mission with renewed hope.

Many voices describe it like this: “To evangelize from the sidelines”<sup>12</sup>, others describe the new situation as a paschal experience: the passage from the green house to the “inclement weather”, from the cloister to the streets along which we find our wounded neighbors. It is also a transition from “waiting for them to come” to “going in search of them”, etc.<sup>13</sup>. Finally, others speak of God’s concealment in the face of human suffering. Where is God in a world that is suffering His absence because of the many situations of pain, of injustice, of poverty?<sup>14</sup>

*b) Create a family (home-hearth), communion*

We live in a world in which home and family are experiencing an enormous intercontinental and intercultural crisis. The traditional model of family is experiencing a crisis on all the continents. Anxiety and the need of a home, of acceptance, of being listened to, are increasing everywhere. Because of this, one of the great signs that every consecrated life can offer, as a poor and humble evangelical sign is simply the home: that wherever consecrated people live, there is a house that is open, welcoming, caring as a sign of communion in the Church (cfr. VC 41ss.).

The home, the hearth (the community), is also the place of a shared reading of our personal and communitarian history, where we encounter the Lord Jesus as healer, in our wants, in our divisions, in our failures and in our justifications. This shared reading of our personal, communitarian and congregational history is a source of joy, of encountering God, of prophetic and missionary capacity.

Seen in this light, one of the great calls in religious life is to know how to listen. Listen to God, listen to His Word. But also to listen to the world, the society, listen especially to the poor with their problems and their joys, with their conditions in life and their dignity. Listen within the Church; listen to the bishops, the lay people of whom we spoke so much, the diocesan priests. Listen within our communities, to the young and the old, to those from other generations, to those who think differently. This listening presupposes receptivity and humility, patience and acceptance, openness of heart to allow others to dwell therein. In this way, the encyclical *Ecclesiam suam* of Paul VI (1964) retains all its validity: It offers us the whole theology of listening and dialogue as a requirement for renewal.

In a fragmented world that desires a hearth, communion, and brotherhood,

consecrated life can offer a magnificent evangelical sign. From this, an identity will strongly come forth that is strongly established as “being with”: being with Jesus Christ, being with the Church, being with companions in the community and the congregation, being with the poor. Being signs of communion is one of the evangelizing challenges which *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (n. 43) presents.

### c) *Humanize*

Another prophetic role of the consecrated life today is to humanize in the face of the slaveries of this world, by demonizing the idols of our culture. Some of these are easily recognizable: short term rewards, immediate pleasures, excessive and irresponsible consumerism, individualism, exaltation of a fragmented personal identity, etc. Others appear to be hidden under an appearance of well being: the “ego” as the defining centre of ultimate aims under the ideal of self realization.

Consecrated life will be capable of humanizing our culture and our society only if it becomes the “humanizer” of its own members. Here, a great challenge is offered to us. Here the encounter or lack of encounter of faith with the culture is at risk. How do we define the quality of our institutions or the results of our apostolic undertakings? If we adopt the culture of *marketing* and *management*, we will end up falling into the web of their values and idols: efficiency, efficacy, realized objectives, marketing quota. All this scheme completely ignores the wisdom of the Beatitudes. It follows the logic of production and not of fecundity.

### d) *The wisdom of little signs*

The world bleeds copiously, internet connects us with everything and leaves us alone in front of the screen. What do we do? How do we react? During the International Congress the wisdom of small steps and humble but real signs was emphasized. In facing the enormous breadth of evils that confront us, we run the risk of disregarding what is small, of wanting to find a global solution. But this is not the pathway of the Father of mercies. Besides, what we discover in the history of salvation is that God acts through small things, He chooses a small people: Israel (Dt 7,7); he trusts in a still smaller remnant of this people.

We are invited to take small but real steps and give humble but expressive signs. Miracles are signs of the Kingdom. Jesus did not organize some sort of “Social Security” for the whole Palestine, but rather he manifested, through some eloquent signs, that the Reign of God was being realized in His person. The salvation of God burst in through the victory of Jesus over Satan, over infirmity and death, as concomitant manifestations of God’s

remoteness and the absence of salvation.

Following this line of thought, consecrated life is called to offer signs of the Reign of God, to be, in its very being and life, a sign of God's Reign, of the breaking through of the grace that generates brotherhood, affiliation, joy, acceptance, generosity, adoration, courage, gratuitousness.

e) *The service of charity: "a heart that sees"*

"Faith that works through charity" (Gal 5,6). "The program of the Christian – the program of the good Samaritan, the program of Jesus – is "a heart that sees". This heart sees where there is need for love and acts accordingly" (*Deus caritas est*, 31b).

"Human beings always need something more than a technically correct cure. They need humanity. They need attention of the heart. Those who work in charitable Institutions of the Church must distinguish themselves by the fact that they do not limit themselves only to perform what is asked of them at the moment, but that they dedicate themselves to the other with attention coming from the heart in a way that those whom they serve may experience the richness of their humanity. In addition to professional preparation, these workers need a "formation of the heart". It is necessary to lead them to an encounter with God in Christ who may stir forth love in them and open their soul to others such that for them, love of neighbour is no longer only a commandment imposed from outside but a consequence of their faith which becomes operative in love. (cfr *Gal 5, 6*)" (*Deus caritas est*, 31 a).

## Conclusion: A song of praise

The poem of the *Fountain* and the *Spiritual Canticle* of St. John of the Cross end with a doxology, with a hymn of praise. It is a praise that embraces the whole of creation: "Mine are heaven and Earth; mine are the people, the righteous are mine and mine are the sinners; the angels are mine, and the Mother of God and all things are mine; and God is mine and for me, because Christ is mine and everything for me." (*Oración de alma enamorada*, 27).

It is the enamoured praise that comes from fullness of life, in which the natural world is integrated in divine beauty and breaks forth in a song of joy and hope. This is the great mystical-prophetic testimony that is expected today from consecrated life. This making ones own "the joys and the hopes" of the human family must be a "song", a life of "beauty", of rejoicing, to praise the Lord. It is like a corollary to faith, to believe in and follow Jesus. A sad and dejected religious life has no future.

Consecrated life in the future will be joyous and humble, if it is lived adorned with the presence of the Lord of which St. John of the Cross sings; “*Pouring out a thousand graces, he passed these groves in haste; and having looked at them, with his image alone, clothed them in beauty*” (*Spiritual Canticle*, stanza 5). It is the presence of God in creation and in history, it is God’s living and personal presence, the sacramental presence especially in the Eucharist, in the poor, in the mission, in the brothers and sisters of the congregation, in the Church, in prayer and in the reading of the Word of God, in the human family. May the mystical experience of this Presence illuminate the face of our hope and make our prophetic mission creatively dynamic.

## ***Mysticism and Prophecy***

### ***Questions***

1. Do you think of mysticism and prophecy as essential realities of consecrated life? How can they be incarnated in the cultural and religious reality where you live?
2. To what degree are mysticism and prophecy an ecclesial urgency that challenges consecrated life? How do you evaluate this urgency in the particular Church where you have been sent?
3. According to you, what are the new fields of mysticism and prophecy, keeping in mind, on the one hand the situation of religious life in your country, and on the other the Charism of your Institute? Please list them in order of your preference.
4. What characteristics define the mystical prophet today and with what figures do you identify them?

## **General Bibliography**

Aa. Vv., *Profetismo*, en *Dizionario degli Istituti di Perfezione*, vol. VII, Edizioni Paoline, Roma 1983, 972-993; Enzo Bianchi, *La vida religiosa, ¿signo profético creíble?* Confer 40 (2001) 43-56; Jesús Castellano Cervera, *Esigenze odierne di spiritualità: memoria e profezia*, en Aa. Vv., *Impegni e testimonianza di spiritualità alla luce della lettera apostolica “Novo millennio ineunte”*, Teresianum, Roma 2001, p. 75-197; Carlos Domínguez Morano, *Místicos y profetas: dos entidades religiosas*, *Proyección* 48 (2001) 307-328; José María Arnáiz, *Místicos y profetas. Necesarios e inseparables hoy*, PPC, Madrid 2004; José María González Ruiz, *Profetismo*, en *Nuevo Diccionario de Pastoral*, San Pablo, Madrid 2002, p. 1208-1214; José Luis Barriocanal, *Diccionario del profetismo bíblico*, Monte Carmelo, Burgos, 2004, p. 558-590 (“Profetismo/profetas, hoy”); Mons. Jesús Sanz Montes, *Mística y profecía. El hilo de Ariadna de nuestra fidelidad* (Editorial), *Tabor* 3 (2007) 8-11; José Cristo Rey García Paredes, *Profecía cultural de la vida religiosa hoy. Nuevos caminos, fuentes y oportunidades*, *Vida Religiosa* 102 (2007) 222-234; A. Arvalli, *Vita religiosa come profezia? Le lacrime di una difficile transizione incompiuta*, *Credero Oggi* 27 (2007) 131-144; Aa. Vv., *Palabra y profecía*, *Vida Religiosa* 104 (2008) 85-160

("Profecía y mística en una sociedad secularizada", p. 149-160); Jesús Álvarez Gómez, *El profetismo de los fundadores y el ministerio profético de sus discípulos*, Vida Religiosa 106 (2009) 469-479; M<sup>a</sup> Carmen Mariñas, *La Consagración contemplativa desde una mística de "ojos abiertos"*, Vida Religiosa 107 (2009) 375-379; Albert Nolan, *Esperanza en una época de desesperanza*, Sal Terrae, Santander 2010 (original inglés: *Hope in an Age of Despair*, Orbis Books, 2009); destacamos algunos capítulos ("Teología de carácter profético", p. 99-111; "El espíritu de los profetas", p. 113-124; "La vida consagrada como un testimonio profético", p. 139-147).

## Specific Bibliography

Aa. Vv., *L'expérience de Dieu au sein d'un monde indifférent*, Christus 36 (1989) 136-218; Aa. Vv., *Dieu dans un monde sécularisé*, Ibid. 36 (1989) 136-201; Aa. Vv., *L'initiation au mystère chrétien. Retrouver le chemin*, Christus 40 (1993) 135-222; Aa. Vv., *Présence et absence de Dieu. L'épreuve de l'indifférence*, Ibid., 40 (1993) pp. 311-464; Aa. Vv., *L'expérience mystique*, Christus 41 (1994) 133-213; A. Alvarez Bolado, *Mística y secularización. En medio de las afueras de la ciudad secularizada*, Sal Terrae, Santander 1993; J. Caillot, *La mystique dans les religions. Le Cristianisme exposé*, Christus 41 (1994) 147-156; A. De Munstzer, *Le buisson ardent de la vie quotidienne*, Christus 36 (1989) 146-157; J.-C. Eslin, *La nouvelle situation religieuse*, Christus 47 (2000) 136-144; C. Flipó, *Vers un nouveau "sentir" spirituel*, Christus 36 (1989) 158-170; T. Goffi, *L'esperienza spirituale oggi*, Queriniana, Brescia 1984; A. Guerra, *Experiencia cristiana*, en *Nuevo Diccionario de Espiritualidad*, Madrid 1991, pp. 680-688; W. Johnston, *Mística para una nueva era*, Desclée, Bilbao 2003; Id., *Fuego y luz. Mística y teología*, Editorial de Espiritualidad, Madrid 2009 ("La música de la vida cotidiana", p. 157-173); J. Y. Lacoste, *Expérience, événement, connaissance de Dieu*, Nouvelle Revue Théologique 106 (1984) 854-855; Ph. Lécrivain, *Comme à tâtons... Les nouveaux paysages de la mystique*, Christus 41 (1994) 136-145; Trinidad León Martín, *Dios presencia ineludible*, Proyección 47 (2000) 3-18 (SelTeol 157, 2001, 21-32); H. Madelin, *La sécularization nouvelle chance?*, Christus 36 (1989) 136-145; J. Marín Velasco, *La experiencia de Dios, hoy*, Manresa 75 (2003) 3-25; Id., *Mística y humanismo*, PPC, Madrid 2007; Th. Matura, *Les chemins de "l'expérience" de Dieu*, Vie Consacrée 74 (2002) 403-414; Th. Merton, *La experiencia interna*, Cistersium 212 (1998) 785-971; C. Mucci, *La mística come crocevia del posmoderno*, La Civiltà Cattolica 153 (2002) 3-12; B. Secondin, *Spiritualità in dialogo. Nuovi scenari dell'esperienza spirituale*, Edizioni Paoline, Roma 1997; K.-H. Weger, *Is Gott erfahrbar?* Stimmen der Zeit 210 (1992) 33-341 (*¿Es posible la experiencia de Dios?* SelTeol, 127, 1993, 165-171); Salvador Ros García, *La experiencia de Dios en mitad de la vida*, Editorial de Espiritualidad, Madrid 2007; José María Avendaño, *Mística en el espesor de la vida*, PPC. Madrid 2007; Pascual Cebollada (ed.), *Experiencia y misterio de Dios*, Comillas, Madrid 2009; Aa. Vv., *The experience of God today and Carmelite Mysticism. Mystagogy and Inter-Religious and Cultural Dialog*, Acts of the Internacional Seminar, Zagreb 2009.

<sup>1</sup> Lately, much has been written on this topic. Following are some titles which I have consulted: Aa. Vv., *Profetismo*, en *Dizionario degli Istituti di Perfezione*, vol. VII, Edizioni Paoline, Roma 1983, 972-993; ENZO BIANCHI, *La vida religiosa, ¿signo profético creíble?* Confer 40 (2001) 43-56; JESÚS CASTELLANO CERVERA, *Esigenze odierne di spiritualità: memoria*

*e profecía*, en Aa. Vv., *Impegni e testimonianza di spiritualità alla luce della lettera apostolica "Novo millennio ineunte"*, Teresianum, Roma 2001, p. 75-197; CARLOS DOMÍNGUEZ MORANO, *Místicos y profetas: dos entidades religiosas*, Proyección 48 (2001) 307-328; JOSÉ MARÍA ARNÁIZ, *Místicos y profetas. Necesarios e inseparables hoy*, PPC, Madrid 2004;

- JOSÉ MARÍA GONZÁLEZ RUIZ, *Profetismo*, en *Nuevo Diccionario de Pastoral*, San Pablo, Madrid 2002, p. 1208-1214; JOSÉ LUIS BARRIOCANAL, *Diccionario del profetismo bíblico*, Monte Carmelo, Burgos, 2004, p. 558-590 ("Profetismo/profetas, hoy"); MONS. JESÚS SANZ MONTES, *Mística y profecía. El hilo de Ariadna de nuestra fidelidad* (Editorial), Tabor 3 (2007) 8-11; JOSÉ CRISTO REY GARCÍA PAREDES, *Profecía cultural de la vida religiosa hoy. Nuevos caminos, fuentes y oportunidades*, Vida Religiosa 102 (2007) 222-234; A. ARVALLI, *Vita religiosa come profezia? Le lacrime di una difficile transizione incompiuta*, *Credere Oggi* 27 (2007) 131-144; AA. VV., *Palabra y profecía*, Vida Religiosa 104 (2008) 85-160 ("Profecía y mística en una sociedad secularizada", p. 149-160); JESÚS ÁLVAREZ GÓMEZ, *El profetismo de los fundadores y el ministerio profético de sus discípulos*, Vida Religiosa 106 (2009) 469-479; M<sup>a</sup> CARMEN MARIÑAS, *La Consagración contemplativa desde una mística de "ojos abiertos"*, Vida Religiosa 107 (2009) 375-379; ALBERT NOLAN, *Esperanza en una época de desesperanza*, Sal Terrae, Santander 2010 (original inglés: *Hope in an Age of Despair*, Orbis Books, 2009); capitoli da evidenziare ("Teología de carácter profético", p. 99-111; "El espíritu de los profetas", p. 113-124; "La vida consagrada como un testimonio profético", p. 139-147).
- <sup>2</sup> Allow me to make reference to some of our studies where the reader may find a rich documentation on this: CIRO GARCÍA, *Corrientes nuevas de teología espiritual*, Studium, Madrid 1971; *Ib.*, *Teología espiritual contemporánea. Corrientes y perspectivas*, Editorial Monte Carmelo, Burgos 2002; *Ib.*, *La mística del Carmelo*, Editorial Monte Carmelo, Burgos 2002; ; *Ib.*, *Mística, misterio y teología*, Lección inaugural del curso académico 2003-2004, Facultad de Teología del Norte de España, Burgos 2003; ; *Ib.*, *Mística en diálogo. Congreso Internacional de Mística. Selección y Síntesis*, Editorial Monte Carmelo, Burgos 2004.
- <sup>3</sup> There are good researches on the Theology of Consecrated Life. Here, we present the work of Gabino Uribarri, *Portar las marcas de Jesús. Teología y espiritualidad de la vida consagrada*, Comillas, Madrid 2008<sup>4</sup>.
- <sup>4</sup> G. URIBARRI, o.c., p. 305.
- <sup>5</sup> K. RAHNER, *Espiritualidad antigua y actual*, en *Escritos de Teología*, VII, p. 25.
- <sup>6</sup> H. DE LUBAC, en prólogo a RAVIER (ed.), *La mystique et les mystiques*, DDB, Paris 1964, p. 24-27.
- <sup>7</sup> Given the cultural and socio-religious changes of our times, the studies of these past years have given special attention to new pathways of the experience of God, helping to discern His presence in this situation of change. These studies constitute a real mystagogy or an initiation to the Mystery. We have included these in the Specific Bibliography.
- <sup>8</sup> K. RAHNER, *Naturaleza y gracia*, en *Escritos de Teología*, IV, pp. 215-243.
- <sup>9</sup> J. L. RUIZ DE LA PEÑA, *El don de Dios. Antropología especial*, Sal Terrae, Santander 1991, p. 400.
- <sup>10</sup> "The on going experience of God is not a marginal experience of everyday life... but a way of experiencing Him in all the divine conditions where man finds himself" (X. ZUBIRI, *El hombre y Dios*, Fax, Madrid 1984, p. 333).
- <sup>11</sup> SANTIAGO DEL CURA ELENA, *A tiempo y a destiempo. Elogio del Dios (in)tempestivo*, Faculty of Theology of Northern Spain, Burgos 2001.
- <sup>12</sup> Cf. PHILIP L. WICKERI, *Mision from the margins. The Missio Dei in the crisis of World Christianity*, *International Review of Mission* 93 (2004) 182-198.
- <sup>13</sup> Cf. AMELIA BELTRÁN, *Radicalidad y tolerancia en la vida religiosa femenina*, *Pastoral misionera* 192 (1994) 20-24.
- <sup>14</sup> Cf. AA. VV., *¿Dónde está Dios? Un clamor en la noche oscura*, *Concilium* 242 (1992) 571-697.



*OPENING THE HEART TO LISTEN.  
BECOMING MYSTICS AND PROPHETS TODAY*

Sr. Judette Gallares, RC

*Sister Judette Gallares, R.C., from the Philippines, is a member of the Religious of the Cenacle. She is involved in the ministry of retreats and spiritual direction. She has also worked for many years in formation both in her congregation and also in the inter-congregational religious formation programs. At present she is professor of Spirituality at the Institute for Consecrated Life in Asia and a visiting professor of Biblical Studies at the University of Santo Tomas (Philippines) She is the editor of Religious Life Asia Magazine and an author of several books and articles on women in the Bible, spirituality and formation.*

*Original in English*

I would like to begin my reflection with an image presented to us by Luke in the Acts of the Apostles. This is the image of Mary and the women gathered in deep prayer with the apostles and disciples as they awaited the birth of a new beginning, a new Pentecost—the birth of the Church. If we understand mysticism as the “spirituality of the direct experience of God”, a kind of knowing which goes beyond intellectual understanding, I believe that it is this particularly unique mystical experience of those gathered in the first assembly that brought about the explosion of the Holy Spirit in their midst. This direct experience of God goes beyond mere “rituals” or “belief”; but marked by love, true understanding and acceptance of one another, yet not confined to some sort of “emotional experience” alone. I suppose it is difficult to describe this mystical experience in plain language. That is why biblical authors as well as spiritual writers through the ages try to capture this experience by using metaphors such as that of the vine and branches describing how one’s union with God (“Remain in me, as I in you.”) brings about fruitfulness in the mission.

From the gospels we see how the disciples in the Early Church came to realize more profoundly the inextricable relationship between contemplation and action, between mysticism and prophecy. In his Letter to the Galatians, Paul reached the mystic state of losing his “self” when he testified saying: “I no longer live, but Christ lives in me!”(Gal. 2.20). This is but the beginning of many other testimonies in the Early Church. Every century has

been influenced by Christian mystics telling us that mystical experiences are available to anyone who disposes oneself to the Divine action of God. But many of these experiences simply come and go and are not translated into prophetic action because without the lasting experience of God, mysticism loses its prophetic edge.

Just as the mystical experience of those gathered in the first assembly cannot be confined within the walls of the Cenacle, their direct experience of God loosened their tongues to proclaim the power of God in their lives and in history, impelling them to go out and to fear no longer in proclaiming the good news and in giving witness to the Spirit of Jesus to peoples and in places needing God's healing and transforming message. We can therefore say that Christian mysticism is about nothing else but the transforming union finding its deepest expression in the following of Christ in prophetic witness and mission. The most characteristic form of "religious experience" in the Bible, as Martin Buber has pointed out, is not realization or rapture, but vocation and mission.<sup>1</sup>

## **I. The Story of Lydia's Conversion: God Opened Her Heart to Listen (Acts 16:11-15,40)**

For our reflective consideration this morning, let me use the story of Lydia, a woman convert to Christianity as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, to serve as our present-day icon of our religious vocation as mystics and prophets of today's world. In preparing for this conference, I had to discern in my choice of a woman figure from among the many women in Scripture, who could serve as a model for religious life today. In returning to the Pentecost scene where women were present yet rendered absent in most of the account of the Early Church, I was inspired to take the story of Lydia who was a key figure in Paul's social network—one of the pivotal sisters in the faith. We shall do a brief rereading of her story and from it draw insight about her process of conversion, which presupposes an experience of mysticism leading to prophetic witness and action.

The story of Lydia is located during the period when the Jesus movement was spreading into major cities in the Diaspora. The idea that women, especially those with considerable economic independence, were drawn to Christianity has based its evidence from the Acts of the Apostles, where specific reference is made of the conversion of Lydia at Philippi. Questions about her identity, her motivation, and her process of conversion and mission to the Philippian Church can be considered in restructuring her story.

The brevity of Lydia's story and its lack of historical authenticity make

its significance easy to overlook 2 as she fades into obscurity once Paul's initial mission was accomplished. We first listen to Paul's account of this extraordinary event, and do a brief re-reading of her story.

We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, 12 and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city for some days. 13 On the sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there. 14 A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. 15 When she and her household were baptized, she urged us saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home." And she prevailed upon us. ... After leaving the prison they [Paul and Silas] went to Lydia's home; and when they had seen and encouraged the brothers and sisters there, they departed. (Acts 16:11-15, 40 NRSV).

### ***Rereading Her Story***

The account begins with the itinerary of Paul during his second missionary journey. He comes to Philippi in response to a dream he had where a Macedonian man appeared to him urging him to come across to Macedonia to help them (cf. Acts 16:9-10). Yet, it was a group of women, not the Macedonian man in the dream, who were the first ones to show their attraction to Paul's preaching and to Christianity itself. While in the city Paul and Silas go to a designated place of prayer, outside the city gate by the river on the Sabbath day (16:13). What is this place of prayer by the river outside the city gate?

The "place of prayer by the river" carries with it a deep symbolic meaning connected to our Christian vocation. The symbolism does not only refer to the Jewish tradition of meeting "by the river" for ritual ablutions; 3 but also helps us recall initially the baptism by John the Baptist. It was by the river Jordan that John was baptizing the people and where Jesus received his own baptism from John (Lk 3:22). We can say for certain that this was a profound mystical moment for Jesus, a direct experience of the presence and affirmation of his identity by God.

It is important to note in this passage that a gathering is made up solely of women reminding us of the women who stood by the cross and who were the first witnesses of the resurrection. Lydia and her circle of women were not only assembled just anywhere, but in a "place of prayer by the river

outside the city gates”, where the preaching and their consequent conversion happened. The gathering of women in this ‘place of prayer’ indicates a community of faith already in existence before the arrival of Paul and Silas. Who were they?

The text identifies Lydia first and foremost by her religiosity—as a ‘godfearer’ or ‘worshiper of God’. As a technical term, the first century ‘godfearers’ were Gentiles who were attached to Judaism without being numbered among the proselytes.<sup>4</sup> As partial converts to Judaism,<sup>5</sup> the ‘godfearers’ had a clearly defined form of faith and life. They observed the ethical instructions of the Jews, the Torah, and also went to synagogue worship, taking part in common prayer. The fact that this place of prayer was outside the city gates indicates that there may not have been a synagogue in Philippi then. Being ‘godfearers’, Lydia and her community had a basic religious foundation to receive the Christian teachings. “The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul” (16:14), preparing her and her household to receive the baptism of Jesus Christ. “After having heard Paul and Silas, Lydia was eager to be baptized together with her whole household “(16:15a).

The most powerful effect that baptism had on Lydia was her capacity to speak, urgently saying to the missionaries, “If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay in my home” (16:15b). Thus with full voice Lydia gives a real expression of the radical and prophetic ethos of the Jesus tradition, which included the practice of equal and just regard for one another and a sharing of one’s home and possessions, deep values that would serve later on as radical expressions of one’s following of Christ in religious life. The latter, in fact, was the original ideal of poverty: a just distribution of goods expressed in an act of generous giving. Lydia’s house becomes the cradle of the first Christian community in Philippi as attested in verses 16:15 and 16:40. Her enthusiasm and spirit of hospitality were authentic expressions of her conversion to the Spirit of the Gospel. Thus her own life of obedient listening to God, the fruit of her contemplative spirit and her faithful application of the teachings of Christ become a strong foundation for the house church of Philippi to flourish.

It is fitting that her story should end with a note of authority: ‘And she prevailed upon us’ (16:15c). Part of the practice of hospitality during that time was to offer a safe haven for one’s guests, especially when there was an immediate possibility of real danger to them. This is confirmed in 16:40, where Lydia’s home figures again as a place of hospitality when she took the risk of welcoming back to her home Paul and his companions after their release from prison. In Lydia’s story, the contribution of women to Christianity

is not to be ignored. Christian women did not have to leave their home for the sake of the gospel; on the contrary they made their homes the center of Christian praxis.<sup>6</sup> Lydia's home, the first house church in Philippi served as a model for a 'contrast community', where those who came and shared their faith and resources as a community tried to live according to their baptismal confession and the spirit of Christian hospitality.

## II. The Conversion Process: Awakening the Mystic and Prophetic Spirit

The best way to speak of mysticism is to understand the process of conversion; and the best way to comprehend conversion is to observe the convert. Perhaps our rereading of Lydia's story has sparked a reflection in us about the meaning and consequence of a deep spiritual conversion. Perhaps too we must have begun to imagine what her conversion experience was like. It may have made us think of our own human experiences of conversion. The lines telling us of Lydia's conversion story may be very few, but they are enough to serve as a window through which we can peer into her inner self. This will enable us to catch a glimpse of what might have been her spiritual experience of conversion and baptism, which led her to live a life of faithfulness and commitment to Christ.

Here I would like to use the basic meaning of conversion according to Bernard Lonergan, which is: "a shift in one's orientation towards life." This shift, I believe, happens when the person experiences in one's depth a divine touch, a prompting of the Spirit, that enables the person to choose and to act for the sake of something or someone greater than oneself. A basic mystical experience, i.e., a direct experience of God, of oneness with God and God's creation is like a "coming home to oneself", an experience of a new birth, a new sense of identity, call and mission. Perhaps this was like the experience of Jesus at his own baptism by the river Jordan. Perhaps, this too was the experience of Lydia and her companions at their own baptism.

Based on Lydia's story, what elements of conversion can we draw? To be more precise, what goes on within the person during the conversion process? Since conversion involves much more than a moment, it is a process which involves long periods of time and interrelated causes and effects. It involves relationships that in some way slip from the control of the convert, as well as moments of inaction and repression, postponements and sufferings, and decision-making.<sup>7</sup> All of these are woven into the person's life story. The actual conversion process itself is much more complex than it is often perceived, as it is not a once-and-for-all kind of

experience. It is, in fact, ongoing, a lifetime process of deepening one's baptismal commitment and witnessing to it, which is what religious life essentially is. The complexity is to be found principally in the fact that conversion occurs in several phases or stages. Perhaps we can try to trace the inner dynamics that happen in stages from the few verses we have of Lydia's story.

### **The Movements and Phases of Ongoing Conversion**

(1) The first phase is an *experience of darkness or confusion*, an awareness of emptiness that needs to be filled, of thirst that needs to be quenched, of questions that beg for answers; yet there does not seem to be anything or anyone who could satisfy these needs. For some, this phase manifests itself in an experience of incongruities— in oneself or in life itself. In other words, deep and authentic conversion experiences do not just come about as experts in this field tell us.

The incongruities of our present state build up to the point where they become intolerable. Questions suppressed, decisions postponed too long, realities ignored, items of personal agenda tabled once too often, whatever it may be, they mount up and bring us face to face with the realization that things have got to change.<sup>8</sup>

Although these incongruities of life may be experienced in varying degrees, they do not necessarily lead to conversion. However we believe that almost all experiences of deep conversions seem to be preceded by some kind of difficulty, crisis, and questioning. In other words, the beginning stage of conversion is an experience of inner conflict in search of a resolution<sup>9</sup> or an experience of aimlessness that seeks direction. It is clear from the above description that the convert-to-be, as a precedent to one's decision to convert, is already experiencing some form of inner turmoil and crisis which intensifies, prompting the person to seek change or some kind of resolution. Even one's spiritual life, if any, is affected by such an experience of inner conflict. Patterns of spirituality that used to be meaningful would suddenly lose its significance. They no longer speak to one's experience of life; neither do they keep pace with one's expanding horizons. The situation cannot remain the way it is. Change has to happen. The experience of confusion or darkness becomes the opportunity and impetus for change and growth. A Chinese proverb says it all: 'Crisis is opportunity.'

What precipitated the conversion of Lydia and her household? From our rereading of Lydia's story, we saw that she and her circle of women were 'godfearers' or 'worshippers of God'. As such, they were already attracted to

the Jewish faith, particularly by the ethical implications of the Law and some ritual practices such as common prayers. Sabbath after Sabbath, they would have looked forward to gathering together as a community to support one another in their practice of faith and in their everyday struggles. But were mere observance of the law and ritual practices enough to feed their hunger and thirst for deeper meaning? As Gentiles, certain elements of the Jewish faith were impossible for them to live by, such as circumcision, the practice of ritual laws and the strict observance of the precepts of the law expounded caustically by the Jewish scribes.<sup>10</sup> Therefore their non-observance of some of these elements may have marginalized them within the Jewish faith. As studies have shown, Jews seemingly had an ambivalent attitude toward ‘godfearers’ and that even despite the degrees to which these people adopted Judaism; social inequality between them and the Jews seemed to have been an ongoing fact of life.<sup>11</sup> Would such a situation of prejudice and inequality be enough to cause inner conflict in Lydia and her companions? Most probably, yes. But they would have continued to endure the prejudice and inequalities if they had not found an alternative in what the missionaries were offering them.

As a faith community of women, meeting ‘outside the city gates’ seems to point to the experience of being marginalized by the mainstream religion. Despite that they were faithful to God and bold to go beyond the culture of hospitality where women cannot just welcome male strangers. There was something prophetic about them, even though they may not have been aware of this before they heard the liberating message of the Gospel.

If we were to put ourselves in the place of Lydia and her community of women, what would be the deep longings and yearnings of our heart? What incongruities do we begin to be aware of in our personal faith life or in the living our of religious vocation? Lydia and her little community of faith met Sabbath after Sabbath to engage in religious rituals which perhaps may have for a time satisfied their deep longings, yet realized that these external practices were not enough. How much of our various observances and the external practices of religious life and spirituality fill the void and satisfy our deepest longings and thirst for meaning in our lives? What is lacking? Like Lydia and her faith community, what kind of liberating message do we need to hear in order to be true to our vocation and ourselves?

Lydia and her community must have shared common experiences and vision of life that bonded them as a faith community even before the arrival of Paul and Silas. Considering the situation of the world, what is needed in our communities to meet the challenges from the world that tend to undermine the formation of faith communities in mission and fidelity to it?

The encounter of Lydia and the women had with the Christian missionaries made them realize that some things have got to change, that they could no longer remain as ‘godfearers’ and be treated like second-class citizens in the Jewish religion. They were awakened to their deepest desire and longing, the fulfillment of which Christian faith was offering them.

(2) This is the second movement, the *phase of awakening*. This is when one’s spirit is awakened by the touch of God, priming it to listen intently to the Word of life. Here, the mystic spirit is awakened. Listening, not merely hearing, opens us up to our inner longings and desires. Interestingly enough, according to the historical framework of religion, the growing energy of Christianity has always been drawn from primal spirituality.<sup>12</sup> This primal spirituality is often expressed through the language of desire, inner yearning and search for meaning, eagerly awaiting the fulfillment of one’s longing. In the words of the Song of Songs, the beloved anticipates: “I sleep, but my heart is awake. I hear my love knocking. ‘Open to me, my sister, my beloved, my dove, my perfect one’... “(Songs 5:2).

Based on the experiences of women, especially those from the third-world and Asia, the paradigm that speaks to them of conversion is more the ‘awakening’ type. In this there is an experience of a gradual yet strengthening and deepening unfolding of the mystery and meaning of one’s faith and an interpenetrating connection to that which is the source of life. Conviction is born out of such an interior experience of having one’s hunger for meaning satisfied. In fact one author describes conversion as a multi-faceted and never-ending process of spiritual formation wherein the Spirit plays many roles.<sup>13</sup> It is an experience of the ‘awakening’ of the self to the Spirit’s promptings in all facets of one’s life. This itself is already an experience of mysticism because only the Spirit can touch the heart directly, to awaken it and to await its fulfillment in union and communion.

We can only guess that such might have been Lydia’s inner experience.

Although this is not explicitly expressed in the narration of her story, we can somehow infer this based on the premise that the primal search for meaning is as old as humanity itself.<sup>14</sup> How did the awakening stage come about in Lydia’s conversion experience? Her life of faith as a “worshiper of God” prepared her heart to accept God’s liberating message and enabled her to listen. As if to emphasize this point, the narrator mentions twice in a single verse the word ‘listening’: ‘A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us... The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said...’ (16:14). The experience of deep desire or longing opens our deepest self to the action of God in our life. This is what God did to

Lydia—God opened her heart, which in its biblical sense is the innermost self of the person, the center of one’s personality, not just the seat of emotions. In biblical spirituality, the heart is considered the place of prayer, the locus of divine encounter. For true conversion to happen, one’s decision to change must stem from the heart. With her heart opened to the Word, Lydia’s only response was to submit herself to God by seeking baptism, and in accepting it, to live the mystic state by gradually losing herself in Christ. As Lydia is showing us, our listening and contemplation on God’s word will enable us as religious to become “the midwives of new consciousness, the heralds of suppressed or previously unsuspected human possibility.”<sup>15</sup>

This awakening phase does not only stay on the personal level. It’s not the case of God and me alone. In the conversion experience, this phase enables us to see what is happening around us and what needs changing to hear God’s call for us.

According to Schneider’s:

The prophet is part of the people to whom he or she is sent, nurtured from birth in the religious and social wisdom of that people, product of its history, participant in its prayer, inheritor of its dreams, victim of and sometimes even sharer in its sins and errors. It is because the prophet is one with the people that he or she can speak for this people to God and for God to this people.<sup>16</sup> Our prophetic spirit cannot be awakened unless we are immersed in the life of the people in a particular place and time enabling us to interpret the concrete situation in contemplative stance before the world in the light of God’s dream for the people and the whole of humanity. Listening to the voice of God, reading the “signs of the times” (see Mt. 16:13), and focusing the Word of God in the present are the defining features of prophecy.<sup>17</sup> Mysticism is an integral part of our prophetic witness and vocation. Just as Jesus’ prophetic vocation was rooted in and expressive of his intense contemplative prayer life,<sup>18</sup> it is through contemplation that we are able to see the world and the people we are called to serve from God’s perspective. Contemplation and mysticism require a growth in one’s capacity for discernment and critical thinking in the quest for the authentic self. Discernment based on attentive listening, not submission to the will of another, is the essence of prophetic obedience in religious life.<sup>19</sup>

Full participation in the spirituality of Jesus would have to include some experience of our oneness with people and with the universe for Jesus experienced all of nature, including humans, as God’s creation.<sup>20</sup> The “place of prayer by the river” where Lydia and her community of women gather thus becomes a symbol of the unifying power of prayer—a unity with one another in a community of faith and oneness with the whole of creation.

It is worth noting that religious in Asia, animated by their deep conviction of the oneness of creation are becoming aware of the urgent need to live and work in a manner which fosters: (a) participation and harmony among all people; (b) healthy personal and interpersonal relationships, (c) reverence for the earth, and (d) integration of spirituality and technology on behalf of the gospel. This emerging spirituality can also be described as a spirituality of wholeness and global interconnectedness.

Let us ask Lydia to help us recall those moments of spiritual awakening, when in the midst of the darkness of our seeking, we experienced God's word touching us and opening us up to receive God's grace. What and when were these moments in our life, in our religious life and mission?... after a time of crisis?... an experience of God's healing touch and forgiveness?... or while watching contemplatively the sunrise or sunset?... or a community experience of radical reorientation in mission? What kind of awakening is happening in our communities in front of concrete situations of injustice, violence and devastations?

As a faith community in mission, what situations and events in our region, country, and world are awakening us, calling us to deeper prayer and to discern our prophetic action?

(3) What follows after the awakening is the *phase of prophetic action*, an experience of an initial impetus of faith, a sudden surge of inspiration which brings about enthusiasm and desire to put one's new-found conviction or belief into action. This frequently effusive change in one's attitude and values is what we commonly call a conversion or a transformation. We usually have this phenomenon in mind when we think of conversions. In our rereading of Lydia's story, we saw that the immediate effect of her baptism was her capacity to speak and express the movement of her heart, consequently putting her faith into prophetic action. This tells us that: "The task of the prophet is to bear witness to God, by word and work, to God's people in a particular context or historical situation."<sup>21</sup> Once her heart was opened, her home was opened too.<sup>22</sup> As Lydia gives witness to us, her generous hospitality was her spontaneous and immediate prophetic action, a sign of her commitment to Christ and his gospel.

In today's fragmented world, which is characterized by different levels and degrees of homelessness, our mystic spirit, our sense of "belonging to God" must open us up to others and to the world, to offer ourselves, our communities and our planet earth as a hospitable place for humanity and the whole of God's creation. We are all called to contemplation, to fidelity and fruitfulness, to prophetic witness; and as a faith community in mission we

are impelled to give corporate witness to the charism of prophecy.<sup>23</sup> For instance, many of us are called to mission in areas where there is greater threat of violence and terrorism, tensions among religious traditions, a resurgence of religious and ideological fundamentalism, environmental exploitation, and sensitivity to other situations and forms of human conflict. All the more we are called to stretch our hearts to create a place for people who do not share our belief, our values, our culture, our background, and points of view. How can we listen with an open heart, willing to understand where the other is coming from? This is the true spirit of hospitality. It is not abrogated when there is danger or differences, but only at that moment proves itself to be genuine hospitality.<sup>24</sup>

I believe that it is part of our mystical-prophetic vocation to make hospitality happen, for our generous expression of this virtue to include the realization that our entire fragile earth, not just the “river” is indeed sacred, a true “place of prayer”. Through our mystic spirit, we allow to emerge in our consciousness in front of devastations brought about by global warming and other forms of manipulation of nature, sensitivity to the ecological question and a dawning awareness that for spirituality to be authentically mystical and prophetic, it must also be truly ecological. Our mystic vision will enable us to see ourselves as part of a sacred, interconnected whole.<sup>25</sup>

Yet, we cannot be hospitable unless we are truly “at home” with ourselves and with one another. This “at-homeness” is manifested through our capacity for self intimacy, a deep awareness of who we are before God and of everything that we are and have as coming from God. Together with this basic awareness, the law of nature also urges us to generously provide for the stranger who has no place to lay one’s head. In other words, when we become more “at-home” with ourselves, we become more welcoming of others. We come to realize that there is energy within us to reach out to others.

The Gospel therefore challenges us to revitalize our communities to be places where we can learn the language of understanding, to seek ways of bridging the gaps with other people, especially those who belong to our communities. What can touch the hearts of people is the transforming presence of God which happens within a community where stories of life are shared, where songs are sung, where prayers are raised, and where doors are open to welcome the homeless and the stranger. I can imagine that this was the kind of faith community experienced by Lydia and her group of women.

As a consequence Lydia was able to harness the strength of her character and her gift of leadership to advance the Christian faith within her household and eventually the Philippian community. Her experience of God’s direct

action in her life impelled her to express her prophetic action within the concrete social location of love of neighbor by opening her home to her visitors: “If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home.” Her words remind us of Jesus’ instructions to the 72 disciples sent on mission in Luke 10 where coming and staying in households were part and parcel of their mission. Like the house that becomes the center of the new believing community in Luke, the house of Lydia becomes the cradle of the Christian community in Philippi.<sup>26</sup> Her urging message “come and stay at my home” reminds us as well of the hospitality extended to the Risen Christ by the two disciples on their way to Emmaus where the two urged Jesus to stay with them in their house at the close of a day’s journey; and Jesus subsequently “entered” their house in order “to stay” with them.<sup>27</sup> The striking parallelism between the invitation of the Emmaus disciples and that of Lydia suggests a mystical and thus Eucharistic nature of the hospitality.<sup>28</sup> As faith communities in mission, we are called to recover and express the close link between the Eucharist and the spirit of hospitality. We are called to live with deep gratitude our mystic faith and to give witness to the oneness of the Body of Christ among our lay sisters and brothers.

If I were to open my heart and home as Lydia did, who will I invite to come and stay with me in my community? In what way can we make our communities centers of hospitality and encounter with God? What do I identify as concrete blocks in myself and in my community for the expression of the true spirit of hospitality? Following the example of Lydia, how do we foster a spirit of hospitality —welcoming, sharing, and invitation — particularly to those who have no faith, to those who have ceased being involved in the practice of their faith, and to those who belong to other faiths.

Although the narration of Lydia’s story ended with her having prevailed over the missionaries to stay in her home, we can just imagine how the process of conversion continued in Lydia’s life. In fact the narrator is silent again about her, except in 16:40 where the Philippian portion of Paul’s second missionary journey ends at her home, which has then become the house church in Philippi. Even the Letter to the Philippians makes no reference about her. I find the silence in the texts after this brief event rather symbolic in our discussion of the process of conversion, because the next stage is indeed a phase of silence.

(4) This is called the *quiet phase* where time is needed for contemplation. A frequent and faithful entering into the heart to listen and discern God’s word in the world is necessary for prophetic action. For change brought

about by conversion to have its deep and lasting effect on the person, a quiet phase is necessary after the ebullient stage. This is a time of reflection, of withdrawal and moments of aloneness, a time for making sense of what has happened, a time of testing the authenticity of one's mystical experience and the depth of one's conviction to engage in prophetic action. This is the time of internalizing the values put forth by the newly accepted and deepening faith.

The prophetic task requires friendship with God, an authentic intimacy with God. It is in this intimacy when a deep friendship is developed in quiet moments and where one learns to share heart to heart with God and begins to see and hear from God's point of view. This can be gleaned in the vocational call of Mary and Jesus. They were called by God to their special mission in some kind of intense, transformative, revelatory religious experience that scripture presents as an "inaugural vision" or a prophetic call.<sup>29</sup> They heard this call in the silence of their being. While it is often difficult to find the silence and stillness which are vitally necessary for spiritual self-discovery and contemplation, the depth and complexity of contemporary spiritual hunger requires the mystical.<sup>30</sup> It is this intimacy with God that eventually overcomes the possibility of the prophet's resistance to both speech and action, which are born of quiet contemplation.<sup>31</sup> Ruffing muses with these questions: How else does one hear God's word spoken in the heart or in dreams and visions? How else can one be confident it is God's word and not merely one's own? Then comes up with this assertion: "The mysticism of the prophets is what frees their imaginations and desires from the defining and constraining power of the world as it is, the world as it stands."<sup>32</sup>

Today as ever before, we are faced with a new challenge and a consequent invitation to return to mysticism, an experience of being in close contact with the divine, and to be touched by God's spirit. In the Church and among religious, there is a strong attraction to learn from other religious traditions and Asian spiritualities that teach a unifying and integrated experience of mystical practices. It has become clear for the churches and the Religious in Asia that triple dialogue—with the poor, with cultures and with religions—is a creative way of being church. The practice of silence enables us to listen in dialogue. So taken up with the demands of the mission and being caught up by the "production oriented" expectation of religious life, somehow mysticism has been a neglected part of the religious lifestyle. Prayer has become stale and routine, no longer experienced as the breath of life of the Spirit. The lack of contemplative prayer in members of a community has contributed to the breakdown of faith communities in mission to the extent

that the religious community can become the primary source of discouragement and disappointment for its members. There has to be coherence between the prophet's message and the prophet's life.<sup>33</sup> The supposed faith communities lose its prophetic edge in the process. Studies have shown based on interviews of religious in different parts of the world that the experience of God in personal prayer or through daily events and relationships with people constitutes the primary source of faith renewal and perseverance of religious commitment.<sup>34</sup>

This simply highlights that mysticism is an integral part of our prophetic witness and vocation. It is through contemplation that we are able to see the world and the people we are called to serve and minister from God's heart, from God's perspective. The prophetic way of living in a religious community must be highly conducive to the ministerial exercise of the prophetic vocation of focusing the Word of God in the concrete situations in which they minister.<sup>35</sup> Contemporary needs challenge us to see that there is no division between mysticism and the prophetic dimension of the spirituality of consecrated life. There is no antagonism between the mystic and the prophet; prophets were mystics and mystics were prophets.<sup>36</sup> *If we were to stay with Lydia and her household after the missionaries have left and return to our everyday life and work, how could our prophetic vocation be sustained and deepened? What are the everyday noises—both inner and outer—that block us from entering into silence or distract us from God's presence? It is necessary to identify these noises so that we can begin to bring them to inner stillness.* (5) This quiet phase then leads to the fifth and final movement, which is the **integration phase**. Here, the person makes the substance of the conversion an integral part of one's being. The period of silence and withdrawal has provided the time to make sense of what has happened, to integrate the change of attitude, perspective and belief into one's history and life, and to form a synthesis of all the parts of the mystical and prophetic experience of conversion.<sup>37</sup> Contemplation and mysticism require a growth in one's capacity for discernment and critical thinking in the quest for the authentic self. An ongoing life of prayer is important in this stage, to discern continually the action of the Spirit in one's life. Prophetic speaking and acting do not have the advantage of hindsight precisely because it is addressed to "what is happening" right now. Thus the more contemplative the person is, the more one can make appropriate prophetic action even without the privilege of long periods of prayer. This phase will enable the person to enter again into the community of faith and to put that faith into action based on one's conviction. The prophetic task is to focus the Word, the proclamation of the Reign of God, directly on and in a particular situation.<sup>38</sup>

In many parts of the world, especially in Asia, leaders of Catholic Religious congregations, more recently in India, have decided to let environmental concerns shape their lifestyle and activities. This was a fruit not only of discussion but also of periods of prayerful consideration of how religious must respond to the challenges of our times. The leaders have resolved to examine the moral and religious imperatives in their lifestyle including “insensitive use of natural resources” and a tendency to destroy habitable lands in the name of development.<sup>39</sup> The congregational leaders in their final document state that “greening consecrated life is the most demanding theme, and it has to be incorporated into every aspect of religious life.”<sup>40</sup> We may never know what happened to Lydia and her household after the departure of Paul and his companions. But one thing is certain: the mere fact that the church of Philippi grew and flourished in her generation<sup>41</sup> is enough testimony of the depth of Lydia’s conversion and her commitment to continue the mission of Christ. The example of Lydia and her faith community gives religious life a sense of hope that in spite of the many challenges besetting us today—such as decline of vocations, aging, problems in community life, new challenges in the mission, and so on—if and when we truly listen to God’s word, our hearts will be opened to listen deeply to how we may renew our baptismal commitment in the context of religious life. As a renewed focus on the new responses to mission is emerging, we are challenged to invest our spiritual and material resources in service for the poor/marginalised as well as for structural change on behalf of God’s people. Truly, all who read Lydia’s story can judge her fidelity in remaining faithful to the Lord and his mission up to the very end.

Just as Lydia responded to God’s call to live her baptismal commitment, what calls do we hear today urging us “to fill situations of darkness with prophetic light and to dwell courageously in new horizons”?

### ***Conclusion***

Thus our sensitive rereading of Lydia’s story and conversion as well as our subsequent discussion of the five phases of the conversion process have challenged us to reflect more deeply upon our religious call to be mystics and prophets in today’s world. As religious we are called to be more attentive to the presence of the sacred in our own inner journeys, in the lives of others, and throughout the whole of creation. Recognising contemplation as a way of life for the whole church, we religious will see our communities and ourselves as centers of spirituality and the experiences of God. Just as the first Christian community in Acts — who gathered together in deep prayer as they awaited the birth of a new beginning — experienced an

impelling force of the mighty wind (Acts 2:2) that emboldened them to engage in prophetic action of proclaiming and witnessing to the Word to the ends of the earth, we too are called to live our religious commitment in the same pattern as we continue Christ's mission in our world today. May the insights we have gained through our rereading of Lydia's story be the beginning of a new Pentecost in our religious life today. May it be an impetus for us who are today's disciples to recognize and acknowledge the great number of women who continue to take on the prophetic task for the church to flourish in a world that has suffered so much division, violence, exploitation, and disillusionment. The Spirit is the power within and around us that enables us to live out our ongoing conversion experiences as Lydia did and thus offer our generous hospitality as a sign of God's presence and reign in our midst.

- 1 Janet Ruffing, rsm, editor, *Mysticism and Social Transformation* (Syracuse: New York: Syracuse University Press, 2001), pp. 7-8.
- 2 David Lertis Matson, *Household Conversion Narratives in Acts: Pattern and Interpretation* (New York: Continuum Publishing, 1996), p. 136.
- 3 According to the footnote on the Baptism of Jesus in the Jerusalem Bible.
- 4 Susanne Heine, *Women and Early Christianity: Are the Feminist Scholars Right?* (London: SCM, 1987), p. 83.
- 5 A. Thomas Kraabel, "The Disappearance of the 'God-fearers'" in *Numen* 28 (1981), pp.113-126. The author questions the existence of this group, long accepted by New Testament scholars. Kraabel posits that the god-fearers function merely as a Lukan literary device to show how Christianity moved from its proclamation within Judaism to become a Gentile religion.
- 6 See Heine, p. 93.
- 7 David K. O'Rourke, OP, "The Experience of Conversion" in Francis Eigo, OSA, ed., *The Human Experience of Conversion: Persons and Structures in Transformation* (Pennsylvania: Villanova University Press, 1987), p.9
- 8 David K. O'Rourke, OP, *A Process Called Conversion* (New York: Doubleday, 1985), p. 34.
- 9 See O'Rourke, "The Experience of Conversion", p. 10.
- 10 See Heine, p. 84.
- 11 Florence M. Gillman, *Women Who Knew Paul*, Zaccheus Studies: New Testament (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1992), p. 36. The author cites as one of her sources G. H. R. Horsley, *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity. A Review of Greek Incipitions Published in 1976, 1977, 1978*, 3 vols. (North Ryde, N.S.W.: Ancient History Documentary

- Center, Marquette University, 1981-83). The reference is *New Docs 1977*, p. 27.
- 12 Andrew Walls, "Origins of Old Northern and New Southern Christianity" in *Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), pp. 68-75.
  - 13 Elizabeth Dreyer, "Images of the Spirit: Renewing Source for the Spiritual Life" in the *New Theology Review*. An American Catholic Journey for Ministry, Vol. 11, No. 4, Nov. 1998, p. 29. 13
  - 14 Dairmuid O'Murchu, *Reclaiming Spirituality: A New Spiritual Framework for Today's World* (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 1997), p. vii.
  - 15 Daniel Maguire, *The Moral Core of Judaism and Christianity: Reclaiming the Revolution* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), p.166.
  - 16 Sandra Schneiders, IHM, "Call, Response and Task of Prophetic Action", Part two of a five-part essay, "Religious Life as Prophetic Life Form" in *NCR*, Jan. 4, 2010.
  - 17 Ibid.
  - 18 Sandra Schneider's, IHM, "What Jesus Taught Us About His Prophetic Ministry", Part three of a five-part essay in *NCR*, Jan. 6, 2010. 19 Ibid.
  - 20 See Maguire., p. 168.
  - 21 Sandra Schneiders, IHM, "Tasks of Those Who Choose the Prophetic Life Style" in *NCR*, Jan. 7, 2010.
  - 22 John R. W. Stott, *The Spirit, the Church and the World: The Message of Acts* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1990), p. 263, as quoted by Matson, p. 147.
  - 23 See Schneiders, "Tasks of Those Who Choose the Prophetic Life Style."
  - 24 Ivoni Richter Reimer, *Women in the Acts of the Apostles: A Feminist Liberation Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), p. 124.
  - 25 Albert Nolan, *Jesus Today* (Philippines: Jesuit Communications Foundation, Inc. 2006, published in the Philippines by arrangement with Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY 10545-0308), p. 42. Many scientists, the best known being Stephen Hawking, went to work trying to trace the evolution of the universe which later became known as the new creation story.
  - 26 See Matson, p. 148.
  - 27 Ibid.
  - 28 Ibid.
  - 29 See Schneiders, "Call, Response and Task of Prophetic Action."
  - 30 Kathleen Coyle, SSC, "Prophetic Mysticism: The Call to Live Prophetically" in *EAPR*, Vol. 45, no. 2 (2008), p. 1.
  - 31 See Ruffing, p. 9.
  - 32 Ibid.
  - 33 See Schneiders, "Tasks of Those Who Choose the Prophetic Life Style."
  - 34 Maxi Fernando, "The Trajectory of the Asian Religious Vocation" in *RLA*, Vol. XI, No. 3, July-September 2009, p. 32.
  - 35 See Schneider's, "Religious Life as Prophetic Life Form".
  - 36 See Nolan, p. 72. The author refers to David Tracy, "Recent Catholic Spirituality: Unity amid Diversity" in *Christian Spirituality: Post-Reformation and Modern*, vol. 3 (London: SCM 1990), pp. 160-70. He also cites Philip F. Sheldrake, "Christian Spirituality as a Way of Living Publicly: A Dialectic of the Mystical and Prophetic," *Spiritus: Journal of Christian Spirituality* 3, no. 1 (2003), pp. 24-27. Nolan acknowledges the mystico-prophetic tradition, a term being used more frequently in Christian theology and spirituality as a way of recognizing the Judeo- Christian roots of the unity of both mysticism and prophecy.
  - 37 See O'Rourke, p. 10.
  - 38 See Schneiders, "Tasks of Those Who Choose the Prophetic Life Style."
  - 39 UCANews.com, Tuesday, Oct. 20, 2009, <http://www.ucanews.com/2009/10/05/religious-add-green-vow-to-consecrated-life/>. Retrieved 2009-10-18.14
  - 40 Ibid.
  - 41 See Gillman, p. 34.
  42. Judette Gallares, RC 3

# CALLLED TO ILLUMINATE WITH PROPHETIC LIGHT THE WORLD OF DARKNESS

Sr. Liliane Sweko, SNDdeN

*Sr. Liliane Sweko, former novice directress in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, is a member of the Congregational Leadership Team of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur.*

*Original in French*

## Introduction

**A**s an African and a woman religious who worked for many years in Africa before being elected to the general leadership team of my congregation, I can only approach our theme from the starting point of the particular experiences through which religious life is growing and taking root in African soil. Well known for its poverty, under-development, endemic sicknesses and its wars and HIV/AIDS, is the African continent not in the process of making its mark within the noble Christian tradition of prophecy and mysticism? Yes, for the past fifty years or so, many African women religious have been assassinated (235 in 2003) along with their brothers and sisters, men religious, priests and laity. By the end of last year, the number of assassinated women religious greatly increased. We remember with great sorrow and many tears Sister Denise Kahambu Muhayirwa, a trappistine of the Monastery of Notre Dame de la Clarté-Dieu from MURHESA. Sister Denise Hahambu was about to celebrate her forty-fifth birthday on the Saturday of the week she was killed. The unbearable images of her broken body left in a pool of blood were transmitted throughout the world. In his pamphlet *They Lay In Wait For Us* published in 2003, Father Neno Contran, a Cambodian, assembles in an anthology the lives of all these women religious killed for their Christian faith and their religious presence and witness. In the Preface to this pamphlet, Sister Pétronille Kayiba, OP, writes:

*If we examine the circumstances surrounding the death of these consecrated persons, we discover that they were not involved in*

*activities that were particularly confrontational: their time and energy were devoted to teaching, medical assistance, development, evangelization. Unarmed, they were a threat to no one, were capable of extraordinary courage, and stood out from others solely by the gratuitousness of their love, sign of God's solidarity with people. Their story demonstrates that, perhaps more than in the past, risks are part and parcel of consecrated life and they arise unexpectedly. Wars, dictatorships and the exploitation of ethnic divisions have a way of making targets of important values and of those who embody them. It seems that attacks on convents and flights into the forest or into a more secure area in order to escape rape and looting are becoming commonplace occurrences much like the anonymous cases of suffering among ordinary people. (Sr. Pétronille Kayiba, OP, Preface, 5).*

As described, the situation of religious life in Africa highlights what is in fact a constant feature of consecrated life: whatever the particular situation in this or that continent, in this or that culture, risks are part of religious life and it is this very fact that enables us to bear witness to what the world, in the Johannine sense of the word, cannot comprehend. The following reflection on our theme will develop four points: shadow and light; mystics and prophets for our time; you are the light and salt of the earth; actions designed to radiate light in the darkness.

## **1. Shadow and light**

To realize that our world is a world where, in the words of the prophet Isaiah, the people walk in darkness, a world where men and women live in the shadows, one has only to pay attention to the daily reality of many countries and their people. However, should not our faith in the one who died and rose again transform our gaze so that we may discern the light, feeble as it may be, which continues to shine despite all the winds of the world which could extinguish it?

The description of the dark continent has become a classic one: its shadow should not, however, obscure its light, light announcing the rising of a more radiant and strong sun. The *Lineamenta* for the Second Special Assembly on Africa of the Bishops' Synod (June 27, 2006) describe the shadows of this continent in this way:

*The widespread deterioration in the standard of living, insufficient means for educating the young, the lack of elementary health and social services with the resulting persistence of endemic diseases, the spread of the terrible scourge of AIDS, the heavy and often unbearable*

*burden of the international debt, the horror of fratricidal wars fomented by unscrupulous arms trafficking, and the shameful, pitiable spectacle of refugees and displaced persons.... The infant mortality rate continues to grow. After more than ten years, the constant deterioration of revenues persists in some of the poorest countries of Africa. Access to potable water is still very difficult for many. Generally speaking, the great majority of African people live in a state of want for basic goods and services. Today's situation in Africa cannot fail to touch consciences. In these times, Africa more than ever is dependent on rich countries, and is more vulnerable than any other continent to their manoeuvring aimed at giving with one hand and taking back twofold with the other, and at keeping a strong hold on the development of the political, economic, social and even cultural life of African countries. In constructing the world, Africa is deliberately left out (Lineamenta, Chapter 1).*

The authors of these *Lineamenta* discern, however, glimmers of hope, sparks of light which can transform the shadows of the African continent into a beautiful sunlit day:

*In many countries of Africa, only the Church functions well, enabling people to continue to live and hope in a better future. Furthermore, she provides necessary assistance, is a guarantor of living in harmony and contributes to finding ways and means to rebuild the State. However, she is also the privileged place where the subject of reconciliation and forgiveness can again begin to be treated. ... the advent of peace in some African countries; the burning desire for peace throughout the continent, especially in the Great Lakes region; growing opposition to corruption; a deep consciousness of the need to promote African women and the dignity of every human person; the involvement of the laity in "civil life" for the promotion and defence of "human rights"; and the ever-growing number of African politicians who are aware and determined to find African solutions to African problems.*

Similarly, even though our world may still be disfigured by violence, all kinds of terrorism, wars and conflicts often enflamed by those in power and by multinationals seeking to profit from these situations in order to exploit the riches of poor countries and keep people dominated and oppressed, our Christian faith assures us that God is always present in this world. The surge in solidarity and fraternity, pretty well worldwide after catastrophes and natural disasters, and even after wars and armed conflicts, is amazing. Because it was so widely publicized, the global mobilization to assist the

victims of the Tsunami or the earthquake in Haiti seems a good example. Thus, even when violence becomes inhuman, when everything would suggest that God has deserted us, when we declare that God is dead or bemoan God's absence and, as in the case of Eli, our eyesight begins to dim and we can no longer see clearly the wonders of God (1 Sam 3: 2-3), let us never forget that "the lamp of God has not yet gone out." Remember Etty Hillesum, the young Jewish girl who died in the concentration camps? She has wonderful words to say, words which should still be meditated upon and mined when the shadows, the darkness of our world, block all gaze upward toward the positive and all horizons of hope and of life. As an African and a Congolese, I feel all the humiliations, all the violence and rapes inflicted on my people's women, those many bodies demeaned, destroyed by the violence and wickedness of men.

Where do we find hope and the strength to continue to hope and live? I recall the words of Etty Hillesum, sisterly words, as a source of courage and faith: "I will help you, my God, not to extinguish yourself in me. It's my turn to help you and to defend to the end your home in us. See how well I take care of you. I do not offer you only my tears and sad foreboding on this windy and grey Sunday; I even offer you a scented jasmine. And I will offer you all the flowers I find on my path, and there are many, believe me. I wish to make your visit as pleasant as possible." (Etty Hillesum, *An Interrupted Life*, French edition by Pascal Dreyer, Desclée de Brouwer Publishers).

According to a wisdom saying of our African ancestors, however long the night, day does finally come. In this high-stakes play of darkness and light, Christian faith and hope empower us consecrated women to be bearers of a light, a torch, which the world needs in order to see and warm itself by. At times, this light and fire will be invisible to the eyes of the world but the world will still sense its presence and strength. To conclude this first point, let us recall an image used by Joan Chittister in the title of her book *Fire in These Ashes*. As she explains, this image refers to the process of burying the embers, watching over the fire and carrying the coals "to new places so that they can flame again." (Joan Chittister, *Fire in These Ashes*, 178). In this world darkened by so much drama, wars, violence and disdain for human beings, religious life should create new paths, find a new ability not only to watch over the fire within but also to find fresh opportunities to embrace the world in a profound and totally new way.

## 2. Mystics and prophets for our time

"Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is in this

place – and I did not know it! ... How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven” (Gen 28: 16-17). What is said of God applies also to God’s prophets and messengers. In our world today, disfigured as it is by all kinds of darkness, God is present and well represented by God’s servants. Countless consecrated persons, both men and women, have witnessed and continue to witness to evangelical strength and love. As in the case of the many African women religious assassinated from North to South in Africa whom I mentioned at the beginning of this talk, our world finds light in the presence and life of the many who speak of God more loudly than the noise of canons and the arrogance of the rich. The words of the author of the *Letter to the Hebrews* may be applied to the mystics and prophets, our brothers and sisters of today: “Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword: they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented – of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground” (Heb 11: 35-38).

An African proverb (Ntomba) states: “The civet has moved on but the odor of its musk remains” (though you may be gone, your reputation remains). At this point, how can we not call to mind some of those who continue to encourage us and point us toward hope and faith? A prophet and mystic, assassinated while presiding at Mass, Msgr Oscar Romero devoted his life to the defence of the poor and oppressed. He was persecuted and misunderstood because of his political stance. The following words of Msgr Romero are prophetic and should still ring in our tired and discouraged ears: “A Church which is not united with the poor and does not denounce from the perspective of the poor the injustice committed against them is not the true Church of Jesus Christ.” At the same time that he was denouncing extortions by the military junta in power, massacres, assassinations and other violations of human rights, he was also playing a reconciling role in advocating for peaceful reform and fighting against a spirit of hate and vengeance.

In his struggle for peace, justice and the defence of human rights, was he always understood by the Church? Did he not say that our Christian faith requires our involvement in the world? These are dangerous words for those who maintain that Christianity implies flight from the world. However, how can yeast make the dough rise if it is separated from it? His message constitutes a constant invitation to us: the centrality of the poor in our faith

and spirituality, the Gospel as Good News to the poor, the defence of life and the poor.

Mother Teresa of Calcutta, small of stature, frail in body, with a faith as solid as a rock, this woman of our time and world witnesses still today to the “power of love,” to what Christian faith is capable of, even among people of another faith. Nourished by a life of incessant and daily prayer, her prophetic struggle exhibits an extraordinary power and tenacity. She herself gives us a wonderful definition of a prophet in introducing herself: By birth, I am Albanian. By nationality, Indian. By faith, a Catholic nun. As to my call, I belong to the world. As to what lies in my heart, I belong entirely to the heart of Jesus.” To belong to the world through our vocation and to offer our heart completely to the Heart of Jesus, this is the invitation to us still today, the same invitation announced by blessed Mother Teresa. Passion for the dignity of the poor is then born and a mobilization of energies and projects results so that human beings, every human being, of whatever roots, culture, descent and nation, may be honoured as image of God ([www.vatican.va/.../ns lit doc 20031019 madre-teresa en.html-18.01.2009](http://www.vatican.va/.../ns_lit_doc_20031019_madre-teresa_en.html-18.01.2009)).

Dorothy Stang, my American Sister and a missionary in Brazil, spent her life defending Amazonia and the small farmers who were protesting against the big landowners and injustice. On the day of her death, February 12, 2005, as she faced her two assassins, “she would take the time to take out her Bible so she could say to them: ‘this is my weapon’ (“*eis a minha arma!*”) before being struck by six bullets, one in the stomach, one in the back, and four in the head” (<http://mercy.e-monsite.com/blog.sister-dorothy-stang-missionary-martyr,193867.html-18.01.2009>).

Called as we are to live a mystical and prophetic life, we women religious today are challenged by the Christianity, not only of so-called Church people, but also of lay people who truly know what it means to be salt of the earth. In this context, a particular woman deserves mention: Madeleine Delbrêl, a French Christian mystic, social worker, essayist and poet. A radical atheist regarding the existence of God, Madeleine is led on the disconcerting pathways of a God who meets her in prayer and reflection. From that moment on, her social work becomes a struggle against all types of exploitation and human oppression. Hers was a deep commitment whereby she also made use of her intelligence in order to change social policy. In my view, what she wrote in 1937 remains a constant challenge for all of us engaged in social work: “In a given day, it is perhaps more moving to visit five or ten large families and give them, after much red tape, this or that assistance; it would undoubtedly be less moving but more effective to work

on a particular legal document which would better family life for all large families, whether they are known to us or not.” Is this not an invitation to each of us to discover in her writing the gift for poetry and the depths of the mystical life of this committed lay woman, our contemporary? (See, for example, *The joy of believing* or *We Street People*).

The list of these men and women prophets for our time is a long one. Let us conclude by remembering my compatriot, the venerable Msgr. Munzehirwa, archbishop of Bukavu. During a life deeply nourished by prayer and his devotion to Mary, he always managed to surprise people by his simplicity, truth and love for all. Along with charity and prayer, his struggle for truth, justice and peace was actually his only weapon. As a matter of fact, two days before his death he was still insisting: “We Christians must remember that our greatest weapon is charity toward all and prayer to Christ through Mary.”

All these men and women, prophets for our time, should inspire us. What fire urged them on so that they shone like a precious flame in the midst of their brothers and sisters overcome by darkness of all kinds? Of course, I do believe that there are already among us, in this great hall, women who are mystics and prophets. I have no doubt about that.

## 2. You are the salt and light of the world

These words of Jesus addressed to his disciples (Matt 5:13-16) are meant for us today inasmuch as we are called to live a life that is both mystical and prophetic. This is the only way that our religious consecration can be the light which shines in the darkness and pushes back the shadows. Salt only adds taste if it accepts the mystery of transformation and abasement (self-emptying). Light only appears when the wick in our lantern is plunged deeply in oil, when it agrees to be consumed.

As mystics, we women religious of today are called to discover again the power of the Word and of prayer, the great longing to be with Christ in the silence of our hearts and homes. Having personally experienced a God who reveals Himself/Herself to whomever seeks God in the secret recesses of the heart, we are thus fundamentally women who seek and find God in the reality of the world. We must keep our gaze fixed on God, whatever the fragility and limitations of our life; we must model our life on Sacred Scripture; and, finally, we must steadfastly maintain these two attitudes throughout all the vicissitudes of human existence. This is the mystical meaning of our religious life. And continual conversion is the only condition for achieving this life: are our intentions in life and in our religious

commitment always totally pure in fact? In our ministry to the poor, in the struggle against injustice and lies, is there not still much of ourselves and little of God? The goal of our religious life is to let ourselves be drowned in God to the point of being stripped of all vanity and external riches: from that moment on, we find ourselves face to face with our inner truth, tormented by the longing for more intimacy with God, and driven by the urge to proclaim to the whole world what we will have intimately experienced and the riches we have will have discovered. A consecrated person's life is always one of conversion as she makes her own the words of Saint Paul: "It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me." Such a life has the power and gentleness to restore the world to its proper relationship with its Creator.

Thus stripped of ourselves, we can then gain the freedom and clarity of vision we need in order to be prophets in this world. And what is a prophet? A prophet is neither a dreamer nor one who foretells the future: the prophet is a person for the time, aware of breaking points in the flow of time. These breaking points may sometimes be events linked to "moral evil and injustices of human beings to each other which disfigure human communities temporarily or for a longer period." In such circumstances, "as R. De Haes forcefully reminds us, the word of the prophet announces God's moment in the world's moment, challenging human institutions with a tendency to shut themselves on themselves and quench the Spirit who wishes to renew the face of the earth in order to build the Kingdom" (L. Santedi Kinkupu, *The Prophetic Mission of the Church-Family of God in Africa: Post-synodal Perspectives*, 329).

If we are to be mystics and prophets in the world today, we are called to involve ourselves in a world where men and women, bruised by violence, famine, poverty, wars and so many other attacks on their dignity, cry out and appeal for help. By nature, prophets have three tasks: denunciation, annunciation and renunciation. Reflection on our vows and on our manner of living them may help us to find new ways of being prophetic today. How do we understand the vows or continue to understand them? We certainly do maintain that they are a source of freedom, pathways to freedom, maturity and fulfillment, but concretely what do we make of these evangelical counsels?

### **a. Denunciation**

John's Gospel emphasizes that Jesus came into the world to give life, life in abundance. By our profession of vows, we hope to witness to this life in abundance and help our brothers and sisters to benefit from such a

life. We must also denounce then all that harms the life of women, men and children. We denounce all the economic, political and cultural systems which cause the poverty and impoverishment of many nations. Along with Pope Benedict XVI who was referring to Africa in his remarks, we must denounce materialism and religious fundamentalism, toxic spiritual waste exported to the dark continent and the poor of the world (by all those sects who pollute these regions of misery), and the deviant culture of sex and nudity. Religious life must be “a veritable rebellion against degrading political and socio-economic structures which disfigure the image of God in human beings.”

It is through an authentic living out of our vows that we express this denunciation. Poor, we speak out publicly in the name of the poor by denouncing, at the cost of our life, riches and enrichment gained through the death and exploitation of peoples. Poor, we make use of all our resources to conscientize the rich concerning the phenomenon of poverty and to help the poor escape from their misery. Chaste, we denounce the desecration of love, rape, promiscuity and sexism, that is, all that would depreciate human love and its sacred character. Obedient, we denounce all that makes children of adults, all that makes human beings irresponsible and keeps them ignorant and unaware.

As well, we must denounce whatever is dehumanizing and oppressive in our own communities. Are we permanently healed of racism, tribalism, and the privileging of some over others for reasons other than sisterhood and common life? Should we not question ourselves on the fact that many of us leave our congregations when our community life no longer has a sisterly spirit, let alone a sense of humanity? In truth, when our laws become heavy dehumanizing “burdens” we must denounce whatever debases the dignity and worth of human beings.

### ***b. Annunciation***

The prophetic character of religious life today must be expressed through proclamation of our values and of all that constitutes the grandeur and dignity of human beings.

By our freedom vis-à-vis earthly goods, our refusal to accumulate for the sake of accumulating and by committing our resources to the service of the poor, we witness to the fact that the goods of the earth belong to everyone.

By our chastity, we proclaim universal brotherhood and sisterhood and we teach people how to truly love again. Passionate for God whom we learn to know in the silence of our prayer and our encounters, we gradually

become passionate for wounded and abandoned humanity, that humanity especially dear to the heart of Christ. We then become involved with the poor who frequent soup kitchens, with the dirty and abandoned children of our modern cities, with suffering widows, with raped and battered women whose cries are drowned out by the selfishness and insecurity in our societies. We become passionate for that humanity which, in the absence of love, has become incapable of loving. This is the humanity we wish to love with a love which respects people's freedom while at same time liberating all their power to love. We are sometimes called to a heroic love.

By our obedience, we proclaim each person's worth and ability to contribute to the humanization of the world when attentive to the word of God.

### ***c. Renunciation***

As prophets, we women religious must learn today to renounce our own securities, our own compromises with the powerful and rich, if we are to be credible. We must learn to evangelize ourselves continually since there are areas of darkness within us also and paths to truth blocked by our selfishness and fears. We must renounce all that prevents us from being authentic bearers of hope, faith and charity. While some congregations in many parts of the world dispose of just enough income to ensure their members' formation and the living of the vowed life, in other parts of the world women religious are considered part of the world's privileged. The temptation is then great to live a wealthy lifestyle or be party to the oppression and exploitation of people via the businesses we support. Prophetic by our vows, we must renounce in all its forms, an ownership which disfigures the image of God in human beings.

I particularly like one Gospel scene: the anointing at Bethany where Mary, Martha and their brother seek to honour and celebrate their common friend. They each have their role to play but one thing is clear: their savings have gone into buying a costly perfume. Should religious community not become more of a Bethany where each member renounces her own self-interest and puts in common all that can contribute to feasting daily The One who unites us and helps us grow as individuals and as a group? Does a Bashi proverb not state in fact that "a single tree does not give much shade?" It is by pooling all our efforts and moving beyond all that divides us that we will make of our communities places of sisterhood, friendship in the Lord and peace and truth.

#### **d. Community Witness**

The world needs credible witnesses, not only that of individuals but also that of a community. It is the community which must be prophetic. Is the community committed enough to bear this kind of witness? Do our present communities give a sense of the future of religious life? Community should wake us up and inspire us as, for example, in the case of the Jesuits killed for being awake as a community and fighting for justice and peace or the Trappists who died because they committed themselves together to defend the oppressed, etc. There are many other examples. I do not imply, however, that everyone should die as martyrs.

Are the welcome and solidarity of our community life inspired by this flame so that we become more and more the mystical and prophetic women of the Gospel we proclaim and live by? As l'Abbé Pierre said, the voice of the voiceless must keep the powerful from sleeping. Let us be this voice again today.

#### **4. Actions designed to radiate light in the darkness**

As articulated, this fourth point may seem somewhat pretentious. Is it really possible to suggest concrete actions each congregation and each woman religious throughout the world should undertake in order to witness to the value of religious life? All I can do in fact is offer a few thoughts which can lead to concrete actions while taking into account the situation in a person's own continent, country and mission. Yes, in the name of our mystical and prophetic vocation and in the name of suffering and poor humanity, we must commit ourselves at this very moment. It is no longer enough for us to moan, to whimper over our troubles, over the huge number of rapes of our sisters, mothers and daughters, over the exploitation of the resources of the poor, over the destruction of the earth and of nature. Our modern martyrs, beginning with Dorothy Stang, urge us to greater action and involvement.

#### ***First Action: The Sound Formation of Women Religious***

“For religious life to be worth its salt in the world now, we need thinkers who carry us beyond kind words and good deeds for desperate people, beyond the kind of charity that makes the obscene palatable to the kind of justice that makes the obscene impossible.

We need moral observers of the universe who will call us back to the heights of humanity from the murky depths of the kind of mad progress won at the expense of the invisible poor” (Joan Chittister, *The Fire in*

*These Ashes*, 138).

Let us pay tribute at this point to all the women religious who undertake research in theology, sociology, anthropology, economics, politics, law and every other area. Thanks to their work, we gain the knowledge to enable us not to be complicit in the suffering of the poor. Formation is necessary and must be valued today. Our apostolic commitment and formation are necessarily intrinsically linked: for attentiveness to the poor of the world must go hand in hand with study of the causes of their poverty. If we are to be “moral observers” in the international community, we need to look into the whole question of the debt of the Third and Fourth World and why they went into debt. Our growing awareness concerning the issue of ecology demands that we use our reason to become informed as to the true causes of the destruction of our forests, the pollution of our waters, etc.

The issue of women, of their exploitation and the violence to which they are subjected throughout the world, must prompt us to learn about the history of cultures and peoples and work in depth intellectually to uncover all the areas where women are subjugated in the name of religion, culture, etc. If we do not have an adequate human, moral and intellectual formation, much of our social activism can seem a mere slap on the hand to systems which destroy the dignity of women. For the sake of this world in transformation which calls for gifts of understanding and creative fidelity, should we not improve the quality of education within our congregations? In effect, education gives depth to our spirituality and value to our apostolic commitments, and it emphasizes as well the prophetic dimension of our spirituality and charism.

### ***Second Action: Involvement in Ecclesial, National and International Organizations***

While it is true that our vocation prevents us from becoming actively involved in politics, our prophetic vocation would not have us abandon certain spheres of influence and management. In terms of the Church, we are to take an active part in Justice and Peace Committees at the diocesan or national level. As I just said, such a commitment presupposes solid human and intellectual formation without which our presence can only be tokenism and ineffective. On the national political level, in our commitment to the cause of the vulnerable, of women raped and battered, we can target national assemblies through associations and organizations campaigning for human rights. By forming lay people who can take an active role in politics and by seeking out partners in public institutions, we can take action, indirectly, certainly, but effectively. On the international level, as

— Called to illuminate with prophetic light the world of darkness —

far as various bodies of the United Nations are concerned, we can and must find ways to make our voices and those of the poor and victims of the world heard.

***Third Action: Networking Concerning the Broad Issues of Justice and Peace***

We can seek to influence public institutions with information received from different parts of the world through intercongregational communications. In any case, our world also needs to see us leaving our cloisters – some congregations act sometimes like sects – to take common action developed through the expertise of many congregations.

**Conclusion**

**“Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch”** (Lk 5: 4). As we conclude our reflection on the theme: “Called To Illuminate With Prophetic Light The World of Darkness,” I wish to dwell on this invitation of Christ. How commit ourselves in a prophetic way to the transformation of our world and our congregations? Jesus tells us: “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.” Relying on the word of Jesus, putting out into the deep water means accepting to come into contact with the world through the risk inherent in religious life. Our vows in fact intend that our way of life shake up and should shake up the world because the light is not immediately welcomed by those who prefer the darkness. They also mean that we commit ourselves to living on the frontier, in places where people are trying to build a more just and fraternal world.

What seeds for the harvest could we plant together today which would make a difference, now and for the future, for us women religious called to fill dark places with prophetic light? Christ who invites us to put out into the deep has confidence in us: “You are the light of the world, you are the salt of the earth” at this very moment. Let us trust him and each other. A wise African proverb (Toucouleur) states precisely that “the fingers are the hand’s ornaments.” May we, marvelous creatures and witnesses of God that we are, bring glory and honour to God in this world!

## Bibliography

- CHITTISTER, J. *The Fire in These Ashes: A Spirituality of Contemporary Religious Life*. Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1995.
- HILLESUM, E. *Une vie bouleversante (An Interrupted Life)*. Pascal Dreyer. Published in French by Desclée de Brouwer.
- KAYIBA, P. "Preface" in Neno Contran. *They Lay In Wait For Us*.
- LINEAMENTA of the Second Special Assembly on Africa of the Synod of Bishops (June 27, 2006), Chapter 1.
- NENO CONTRAN. *Ils nous ont guettés (They Lay In Wait For Us)*. Kinshasa, Nairobi: Afriquespoir & New People, 2003.
- SANTEDI KINKUPU L. "The Prophetic Mission of the Church-family of God in Africa: Post-synodal Perspectives" in L. Santedi Kinkupu and A. Kabasele Mukenge. *A Prophetic Theology for Africa: Miscellanies in Honour of Professors Dosithée Atal, Sa Angang and René De Haes*. Catholic Faculties of Kinshasa, 2004.
- VAN HOUTTE, G. *Proverbes africains: Sagesse imagée (African Proverbs : Wisdom in Images)*. Kinshasa : L'épiphanie, 1976.
- ([www.vatican.va/.../ns lit doc 20031019 madre-teresa en.html-18.01.2009](http://www.vatican.va/.../ns_lit_doc_20031019_madre-teresa_en.html-18.01.2009)).
- : ([http://mercy.e-monsite.com/blog.sister-dorothy-stang-missionary-martyr\\_193867.html-18.01.2009](http://mercy.e-monsite.com/blog.sister-dorothy-stang-missionary-martyr_193867.html-18.01.2009)).

## Reflection questions

1. What do we women religious need today in order to be mystics and prophets in our world, in our communities and in our congregations? How do we respond in situations of darkness so that we are prophetic in the world, in our communities and in our ministries vis-à-vis creation, society, the Church and among ourselves?
2. What are the cries and appeals coming from our world today? What kinds of concrete action are we engaged in to answer these cries and appeals?
3. As leaders of our congregations, what are the challenges arising from our Christian tradition, Scripture and our religious vows which we must confront today? In what areas are we called and invited to call our congregations to profound conversion?

Called to illuminate with prophetic light the world of darkness —

4. Keeping in mind particular situations in our continents and countries and seeking greater involvement, what kind of specialized formation should be given to certain members of our congregations?
5. What do you think of the idea of networking? How, concretely, can we establish such networks?
6. Brothers and sisters of our day and world, women and men mystics and prophets direct us on a diversity of paths for witnessing to God today. What must we do so that their lives, ideas and testimony leave their mark on us? What does this diversity teach us about our apostolic involvement today?

# A THEOLOGY OF EMPATHY

Rabbi Arthur Green

*Rabbi Arthur Green is an educator of Jewish mysticism and Hasidism. He is a founder and current rector of Boston Hebrew College's rabbinical school and is a former dean of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. Green has published many works on Jewish mysticism and hasidism. Invited to deliver a series of lectures at Yale University, Green was described as one of the preeminent authorities on Jewish spirituality, mysticism and Hasidism.*

*Original in English*

**K**ing Solomon, in describing the “Woman of Valor,” says of her “She is like a merchant ship, bringing her food from afar (Proverbs 31:13).” I thank you, women of valor and leaders in your great church, for choosing to bring your spiritual sustenance from so far away, bringing me all the way from Boston to Rome and, more significantly, across the chasm that separates our two sister traditions, drawn from the same source in Scripture and the prophetic word. Our traditions are separated by a great wall of blood, tears, and hardheartedness, though they come from a single root. That wall has been breached in recent decades, partly by the memory of the many members of womens’ orders who risked their lives to save Jewish children during the dark night that fell upon us on this continent, but also by the great change of heart ushered in by Vatican II and the spirit of Pope John XXIII, may his memory be blessed. As a non-Catholic, I pray for the day of his canonization. I am prepared to pray for a long time.

I come before you today as a teacher, a teacher of teachers. I have devoted much of my life to the education of rabbis, having served as president of one seminary and then as founder of another. I firmly believe that Judaism, one of the world’s great religious traditions, still has much to offer, both to its own adherents and to the universal community of seekers. That wisdom, the inner light hidden within our Torah, needs to be sought out, discovered, updated, and rendered accessible by newly trained rabbis, as it has been passed on throughout the generations. This is the work in which I am engaged.

I do this work from a particular point of view. Although I do not belong to any of the well-known denominations within Judaism, I think of myself as a neo-Hasidic Jew. This means that I study and am inspired by the teachings of Hasidism, our great movement of popular piety that began in Eastern Europe, founded by disciples of the Ba'al Shem Tov, Rabbi Israel Master of the Good Name, who passed into eternity 250 years ago this month.

Hasidism teaches a radically simplified version of Kabbalah, the Jewish mystical tradition. It emphasizes that “the whole earth is filled with God’s glory (Is. 6:3),” in the words of the prophet, that God can be found in each place and in every moment. The purpose of tradition, prayer, and ritual, is to help us open our hearts to that presence. When we do so, we are able to uplift and redeem fallen sparks of divine light that are within us and all around us, restoring them to their source in the One.

*Neo*-Hasidism differs from classical Hasidism, which still exists and thrives, in two important ways. We do not share the Hasidic disdain for modernity, especially for modern education and science. We accept the legitimacy of scientific and historical investigation and believe that faith must be updated in response to it. We also do not believe that the insights of Hasidism should apply or be limited only to Jews. Its teachings are about God and the human spirit, expressed in many different languages across our vast human community. We seek a Judaism that recognizes its place within that wondrous and colorful spectrum, not one that seeks to stand outside or above it. My visit to you here is in that spirit.

We modern rabbis minister to a people who are fairly secular in their daily lives. They do not spend much time either talking to God or talking about God. Yet there is about them a quality of deep search for meaning, even if they cannot articulate this in classical religious language. They want to understand their lives as having some purpose. They have a strong sense that we are supposed to help make the world a better place, to lessen human suffering, and increase goodness among people. It is not accidental that names of Jews are found among every group that defends human rights and works to reduce human suffering; we still remember that we were slaves in Egypt. This memory, reinforced by more recent ones, causes us to care for the oppressed and suffering, wherever they may be. The sense of family and intergenerational connection also remains very strong. Jews, even those of seemingly little faith or Jewish knowledge, believe that we have a valuable legacy that we have been given by our ancestors and that we must pass on to our children’s children. Many struggle to understand what this legacy is, but they still seek to pass something of it onward.

It is especially around the life-cycle and this sense of legacy that Jews find themselves turning to rabbis and synagogue communities. The birth of a child, education in the tradition, celebration of life's milestones, tragic losses of life or misfortune, the aging and illness of parents, death and mourning – all of these bring Jews back from their secular pursuits to seek out wisdom and consolation from their tradition, and the personal support and affection of rabbis and other clergy.

Rabbis are expected to meet Jews in such moments with empathy, drawing on a deep well of caring, having an ability to give and to be present to people with whom they otherwise may have little relationship. At such times the traditional phrases of piety do not suffice, nor does the attempt at purely intellectual teaching. The rabbi has to be seen, above all, as genuine, truly caring, and not merely professional. As you know well, this ability to be present can only come out of your own spiritual life. To live a life of giving to others, you need to be nourished by God's presence in your own life. To *hold* people, in their pain as well as in their joy, you as a rabbi (or a priest, or a sister) have to manifest your own strength, which is really not your own at all, but God's, in which you are rooted by your own faith.

So teaching students to become rabbis, to help each one grow into his or her own rabbinate, as we like to say it, includes instructing them on how to cultivate their own inner garden. This includes prayer, both communal and personal. Spiritual direction and counseling also have a place in our program. But in our tradition the inner life is also very much nurtured by study of the sources, taught and discussed in open-hearted ways, so that each rabbi's spiritual life is rooted directly in the text and language of the ages. Please remember that in our tradition the Word that was with God from the beginning did not become flesh, but remains Word, manifest in Torah, which includes the ongoing process of teaching, learning, and the constant creativity of new interpretations. The *bet midrash* or study hall, where students sit in pairs or small groups and discuss texts among themselves, lies at the heart of rabbinic education.

But what is the theology that ties all this together? Where do we turn for a language that calls forth this deep sense of our shared humanity and encourages us to open ourselves to one another? I am talking about a theology of empathy, an understanding of God that sets our love and caring for one another at the very center of our religious journey. There is no faith in God I call authentic that does not lead us to care for and act for the most needy of God's creatures. But how do we say this in the context of a contemporary Judaism? I would like to take you into the heart of this quest for language, which will also be a journey into the heart of Jewish faith as

it exists today.

We can begin nowhere else but with *Shema' Yisra'el*, “Hear O Israel, Y-H-W-H our God, Y-H-W-H is One. (Please note that I spell out the letters of God’s name, which we are not permitted to pronounce.) This Biblical verse (Deut. 6:4) stands as our watchword of faith, recited by the pious twice each day, “when you lie down and when you rise up.”

The best-known of all Jewish prayers, *Shema' Yisra'el*, is in fact not a prayer at all.

Prayer is an act in which the human being turns toward God. Its essence lies in an opening of the heart; prayer is indeed called by the early rabbis “Worship within the heart.” It usually, but by no means always, has a verbal component, addressed to the Almighty. The most characteristic Jewish prayers are called *berakhot* or “blessings,” opening with the phrase “Blessed are You O Lord...”, But this line is rather addressed to the community, rather than to God. Now I will translate more fully: “Hear O Israel” — “Listen, my fellow-Jews!” “Being is our God; Being is one!”

I am going to return later to the word “Israel” in this line, because that is an essential part of our conversation. But let me begin here with the functional question, the big question when it comes to reality: What difference does monotheism make? One god, ten gods, a thousand, so what? Jews (we are most like Muslims in this regard) insist on the absolute oneness of God and take pride in the “purity” of our monotheism. But why should we? What is monotheism worth?

The only value of monotheism is to make you realize that all being, including every creature – and that means the rock and the blade of grass in your garden as well as your pet lizard and your human neighbor next door – are all one in origin. You come from the same place. You were created in the same great act of love. God takes delight in each form that emerges and bestows God’s own grace upon it. Therefore – and this is the “payoff” line, the only one that really counts: *Treat them that way!* They are all God’s creatures; they exist only because of the divine presence, the same divine presence that makes you exist. This realization calls upon you *to get to know them! Get to love them!* Discover the unique divine gift within each of them! Live in amazement at the divine light strewn throughout the world. That’s what it means to be a religious human being.

Within the human community, that love also means respect for difference and for boundaries. The mystical spirit that seeks to overcome all distance and separation between God’s children cannot become an excuse for ignoring boundaries. Respecting otherness is easy to forget in a religious context. It

sometimes happens to good and well-meaning people that they are so overpowered by the love within them that they lose control, discovering that the boundaries between *agape* and *eros* are not so firm as they had thought them to be. Love and self-restraint, the right and left hands of God, need to be properly balanced, within the cosmos as within the self.

I realize that it might be more polite for a visitor to be silent about painful and embarrassing matters taking place within your own family. But I have decided that it would be even more insensitive to remain silent. As a friend of your great church I mourn with you for the pain of all the victims, including the priests, whose lives have been so ruined by energies that got so deeply out of balance. If I am here to speak of empathy, I must first express empathy for the pain and loss felt by Catholics around the world in these recent years and months. That includes empathy for all those who have been harmed by abuse and inappropriate behavior, empathy for all those misled into thinking they could hide from themselves or from God behind the veil of attempted celibacy, and empathy for all the many hurt by confusion, doubt, and loss of faith. I pray that God be with you in the work of healing, healing the lives of individuals and healing the deeply wounded church itself. How ironic that you women, who had so little to do with the causing of this crisis, so much of it having to do with men and male psychology, will have so great a hand in the process of its healing. Indeed, I also pray that the church learn from this something about how greatly the wisdom and leadership of women is needed to right these balances that seem so hard for so many men, both in the church and throughout our world.

Now I return to the controversial part of my translation. The mystical tradition within Judaism, out of which I speak, insists on translating God's name as "Being." That is Y-H-W-H, the Hebrew name for God, the one we look at on the page but don't dare to pronounce. Scripture tells us (Ex. 6:2-3) that this is God's own name. But really it's not a name at all, not even fully a noun. Y-H-W-H is an impossible conflation of all the tenses of the verb "to be" in Hebrew: HYH, meaning "was;" HWH, indicating the present, and YHYH, "will be." They are all put together here is an impossible form. Probably it should best be translated as "Was-Is-Will Be." But since that's a little awkward to say each time, "Being" is the best we can do, though we must understand that "Being" as transcending time as well as space.

The meaning here is profound. "God" and existence are not separable from one another.

God is not some Fellow over there who created a separate, distinct entity called "world" over here. There are not two; there is only one. The mystics insist on carrying monotheism one step farther than some others do.

To say you believe in one God, but then depict that God as an old fellow with a beard seated on a throne – or in any other single way, taken literally – is just a concentrated form of idolatry. It's like that old story every Jewish child learns, in which Abraham's father Terah is the owner of an idol workshop. Once he needed to go out and asked his son to mind the store. Abraham smashed all the idols but the biggest one, then put an axe in the large idol's hand. When Terah returned, he looked around and said, quite in shock, "What happened to all my gods?" Abraham answered: "The largest idol smashed them all." "Don't be silly," said Terah, "they're just idols." "Aha!" said Abraham, and that "Aha!" is supposed to be the beginning of monotheism.

But what if there is something important being said beneath the surface here? How do we know that our one God is not just the biggest idol? If monotheism is just about numbers, all you've got left is a single big idol. Far too many people leave it at that. The real change has to be in the way you see existence itself. In fact the way you say "existence" in Hebrew is HWYH, pronounced *Havvayah*, the four letters of God's secret name, just re-arranged. To see "God" when you look at existence is a re-arranging of the molecules, as it were. Seeing the BIG picture instead of the many smaller ones. God is Being when you see Being as one, when you see the whole picture. Of course we can't ever really see *all* of that big picture. The sum is infinitely more than the totality of its parts. Transcendent mystery remains, even in my very immanentist theology. But for me transcendence resides *within* immanence. Transcendence does not refer to a God who dwells "out there" somewhere, on the far side of the universe (which has no sides, the astronomers assure us!). Transcendence means that God is *here*, present in this very moment, in a way so intense and profound that we could never fathom it. *That* is the mystery.

This is the secret truth. Listen to one of the great sages, a Hasidic master who revealed in a letter he wrote to his children and grandchildren. Here I quote the famous Sefat Emet, the rabbi of Ger or Gora Kalwarya in Poland:

The proclamation that we declare each day in saying *Shema' Yisra'el* needs to be understood as it truly is...the meaning of "Y-H-W-H is one" is not that He is the only God, negating other gods (though that too is true), but the meaning is deeper than that. There is no being other than Him...Everything that exists in the world, spiritual and physical, is God Himself...Because of this, every person can attach himself to God wherever he is, through the holiness that exists within every single thing, even corporeal things. You only have to be negated in the spark of holiness...This

is the foundation of all the mystical teachings in the world.

Of course that is not so easy as it sounds. To “be negated in the spark of holiness,” in order to make room for God’s Self to enter, is a lifelong labor. To do this inner work in a healthy and wholesome way is a goal toward which we all struggle.

‘But now I have to turn back to the beginning of our non-prayer. “Hear O Israel.” Who are “Israel” in this phrase? Remember where the word comes from. Our ancestor Jacob once had an all-night wrestling match with an angel. A tough fellow, that Jacob. Even an angel couldn’t best him. When dawn came, the angel said: “Let me go! Time to sing God’s praises!” “Uh-uh,” Jacob said, “not until you bless me.” So Jacob came out of that encounter with a new name: Israel, meaning “Struggler with God.”

I believe that name belongs to all strugglers, not just to Jews and not just to Christians. Everyone who wrestles with angels, who struggles to make sense out of life, is part of some broader community called “Israel.” *Shema’ Yisra’el, Y-H-W-H Eloheinu, Y-H-W-H ehad* then means: “Listen, all you who struggle, all you who wrestle with life’s meaning! Being is our God, Being is one!” Don’t look beyond the stars. No need to stretch your neck. God is right here, filling all of existence with endless bounty. Open your eyes. Turn that wrestling match into an embrace. Find God’s presence in the unified, transforming vision of all that is.

“Hear O Israel” is followed immediately by “You shall love Y-H-W-H your God with all your heart, with all our soul, and with all your might.” This is one of the two great statements of love in the Torah that Jesus has told you constitute the essence of its teachings. Our sages have struggled for many centuries over the question of how it is possible to command love, if this is indeed a commandment. Does love not require spontaneity? Does it not spring up voluntarily from the heart? But when the *shema’* is recited in the context of our daily liturgy, it is always preceded by a declaration of God’s love for us. In our daily morning prayers we say: “How greatly have You loved us, pouring upon us the bountiful flow of Your compassion;” and in the evening: “With eternal love have You loved the House of Israel, Your people.” We are thus first reminded of God’s love for us, and then call out the oneness of all being. At that point, we no longer need to be “commanded” to love. The love wells up from within us as response, as natural and essential to us as breathing or as speech itself. In this case the proper translation into English is no longer “You *shall* love Y-H-W-H your God...” but rather “You *will* love..., ” statement of fact rather than commandment.

Can the same apply to that other love prescribed by the Torah: “Love

your neighbor as yourself (Lev. 19:)?” Can that love too become so natural that we no longer need to experience it as “commanded,” but as welling up from within? For a Jewish response to this question, we have to turn to a famous debate between two of the early rabbis, living about a century after Jesus, Rabbi Akiva, also a martyr to the Romans, and his friend Ben Azzai. The Talmud records that they struggled over the question: “What is the most basic principle of Torah?” What is the teaching for the sake of which all the rest of Judaism exists? Akiva had a ready answer: “Love your neighbor as yourself (Lev.19:18).” Akiva was Judaism’s greatest advocate for the path of love, though perhaps I should say that he shares this honor with Jesus of Nazareth. Akiva was the one who insisted that the Song of Songs was indeed to be included in sacred Scripture, calling it the “Holy of Holies,” spoken by God and Israel at Mount Sinai. The tale of Rabbi Akiva and his wife’s love is one of the few truly romantic tales within rabbinic literature. So too the account of Akiva’s death: when he was being tortured by the Romans, he supposedly said: “Now I understand the commandment to love God with all your soul — even if He takes your soul, you shall love Him.” Thus it is no surprise that Akiva is depicted as seeing love to be the most basic rule of Torah.

But Ben Azzai disagreed. He said: I have a greater principle than yours. He quoted Genesis 5:1-2: “On the day when God made human beings, they were made in the likeness of God; male and female God created them.” That, he said, is Torah’s most basic principle. *Every* human being is God’s image, Ben Azzai says to Akiva. Some are easier to love, some are harder. Some days you can love them, some days you can’t. But you still have to recognize and treat them all as the image of God. Love is too shaky a pedestal on which to stand the entire Torah. It is too dangerous to base the world on the commandment to love. Perhaps Ben Azzai also saw that Akiva’s principle might be narrowed, conceived only in terms of your own community. “Your *neighbor*,” after all, might refer just to your fellow-Jew. Or your fellow Catholic. Or your fellow in piety, in good behavior. How about the stranger? The sinner? How about your enemy? Ben Azzai’s principle leaves no room for exceptions, since it goes back to Creation itself. It’s not just “your kind of people” who were created in God’s image, but everyone.

Once we have a basic principle, or even a set of basic principles, we have a standard by which to evaluate all other rules and practices, teachings and theological ideas. Does this particular idea or teaching lead us closer to seeing the divine in every person? Might this interpretation of our Scripture be an obstacle toward doing so? Could we interpret it differently, in a way

more in line with our basic principle? Here lies an inner Jewish basis for raising some important questions, one that should be more in use among those who shape our *halakhah* and your canon law for our day. I take the *kelal gadol*, the basic principle, to mean “that for which all the rest exists,” the animating principle behind our entire religious life. In that case, any Judaism that veers from the ongoing work of helping us allow every human being to become and be seen as God’s image in the fullest way possible is a distortion of our religion. That ongoing challenge requires us in each generation *to widen the circle* of those seen by us as fully human, as bearing God’s image, as we seek to expand the bounds of the holy. *As we find God’s image in ever more of humanity, we open ourselves to ever more of God’s presence.* To find God in every human being is no small task. We could spend a lifetime at it and still not perfect this art, but I call upon you to join me in it.

Judaism’s moral voice begins with Creation. Our most essential teaching, that for the sake of which Judaism still needs to exist, is our insistence that each human being is the unique image of God. “Why was Adam created singly?” asks the Mishnah. “So that no person might say: ‘My father was greater than yours.’” “How great is the Creator! A human king has coins stamped out in a press and each one looks alike. But God stamps us all out in the imprint of Adam, and no two human beings are the same!” Each of us humans is needed as God’s image and can be replaced by no other. It’s as simple as that.

“Why are graven images forbidden by the Torah?” I once heard my great teacher Abraham Joshua Heschel ask. Why is the Torah so concerned with idolatry? You might think that it is because God has no image, and any image of God is therefore a distortion. But Heschel read the commandment differently. “No,” he said, “it is precisely because God *has* an image that idols are forbidden. *You* are the image of God. But the only way you can shape that image is by using *the medium of your entire life*. To take anything less than a full, living, breathing human being and try to create God’s image out of it - that diminishes the divine and is considered idolatry.” You can’t *make* God’s image; you can only *be* God’s image.

Now I return to the question of empathy. To undergird empathy, you now see, I offer a theology where otherness is not quite absolute. Ultimately, we are all of the One, embodiments of the same divine presence. Behind the mask of the other lies the oneness of the Maker reflected in the deed. Empathy means *both* embracing each of us in our diversity *and* seeing through to our oneness.

You have a great language for this in your tradition, that of Corpus

Christi. We speak of the image, or even the body, of Adam that embraces us all. But some confusion arises around these concepts. Does the language of Corpus Christi include only those inside the church or does it embrace the entire human community, indeed the entire world? Of course that is a question for your theologians to answer, not for me. But we have a different version of the same problem. We remain a distinct people, an ethnic entity, as well as a community of faith. We insist that we can be both at once. But then how exclusive are we? Our prayers are filled with appeals to God to bless us “and the whole people Israel.” Do we pray only for ourselves? What about the rest of humanity? Do we pray for them as well?

For many centuries, Judaism has not been an evangelical tradition. In large part because of Christianity’s success and the fact that Christian and Islamic regimes forbade conversion to Judaism, we have not worked to bring our tradition to others, but have concentrated on our own survival. Yet our concerns remain universal. We want all humanity not to embrace Judaism, but to live by our most essential truths: the oneness of God and the faith that each of us, every person on earth, bears God’s image. This is our message for humanity.

This is the great struggle within Judaism today. How wide is our circle of empathy, of compassion? Can we open the doors of our hearts widely enough to include the whole human family, even the larger family of natural beings, within it, without losing our distinctive sense of history and ethnic identity? Can the special love I have for members of my own community be a love that encourages me to open further, to embrace ever wider circles in love? Or does it necessarily close me off from others, creating a circle of exclusiveness, to which most of humanity remains outside?

We Jews and Christians are the spiritual descendents of the prophets, who were religious revolutionaries. They needed to stand up firmly for the uniqueness of their message. The God in whose name they spoke was *entirely different* from anything worshipped in the pagan world. They mocked the gods of the heathen. “Eyes have they, but they see not; ears have they, but they hear not...Like them are those who make them and all those who trust in them. Israel, trust in Y-H-W-H (Ps. 115:5, 8-9).” The nations of the ancient world each had their own gods. Thus they saw themselves as separate from one another, having little concern for the outsider. In proclaiming one God, the prophets also spoke for one world and one human family. That demanded true concern for the other, who is not entirely “:other” after all.

Like all revolutions, this one created a complex legacy. It claimed that we alone stood for the truth. “Israel,” in this Psalm, are those who trust in

Y-H-W-H, none others. When the church claimed to inherit this mantle, becoming a “new Israel,” it also inherited this shadow-side of exclusivism. Yes, Christianity broke down the ethnic walls; all peoples were welcomed into the new church. But it replaced the ethnic walls with theological or ritual walls; Christendom became the community of the baptized or those who shared a specifically defined faith.

We both need to struggle with that legacy of exclusivism. You may blame ancient Israel and its prophets for having started it, but the church inherited it and raised the stakes, until we Jews too were seen as outsiders. But it is too late now for all this. The world has become too small. We all live side by side with one another, and the need is too urgent. We need to work side by side in facing the great challenges before us. These include the degradation of the human spirit in our profane modern culture, the endless lure of selfish materialism and the great injustices it engenders, and the very preservation of our planet itself as a home for higher forms of life. All these are the real work of religious people and communities, and we must be united to facing them. To do this, we need to go back to “Y-H-W-H is one” and the demand for universal love that it implies. This represents the teaching of both of our traditions at its best.

For us Jews, the struggle over exclusivism touches another matter that lies close to our hearts. I speak to you in the decade when the last survivors of our terrible Holocaust are about to end their time here on earth, the moment when their tortured memory of suffering will turn into “mere” history. We struggle daily with the question of the Holocaust’s legacy, the murder of one third of our people and the destruction of so many cultural and spiritual resources. What are we to learn from that terrible event? We do not believe that God visited it upon us; we believe it was the doing of human evil. But still, we must learn from it, we must seek God’s message, there as everywhere. Many Jews feel that the message is clear. “Never again!” means that Jewish blood is not cheap. We will defend ourselves, take pre-emptory action against our enemies, and never allow Jews to be victims. But the best among the survivors, including both Heschel and, may he be blessed with long life, Elie Wiesel, have understood “Never again!” to mean that never again will we permit genocide *anywhere* in our single human family, that we, as genocide’s survivors, will stand up for all who suffer. History has not made it easy for us to do that, as you know. But we were never promised that it would be easy.

Your church made great strides in openness of spirit, partly in response to that same terrible event. The spirit of Vatican II, and especially the words of *Nostra Aetate*, gave us all much hope that the truest catholicity or

universality of your faith was being given full expression. Many of us, including myself, learned from and were inspired by your church's ability to repent, to grow, and to change, while remaining faithful to your own identity. I urge you with my whole heart to continue in the path of that growth, not to compromise it in your hearts or in your teaching. I promise you that I, along with a host of my colleagues and students, present and future rabbis, struggle alongside you to read our own tradition also as one of universal human embrace. We need each other, we people of faith, to do the work of healing and repair that our communities, each in its own way, so desperately need. Let us help and support one another in this work. Let us not be divided by the burden of too much history or ancient claims of exclusive access to God's kingdom. That kingdom includes all of being, with all our differences, embracing us all.

# “THE ALMOND BRANCH AND THE BOILING POT” (JER. 1, 11-15)

## WHAT IS THE FUTURE FOR OUR MYSTICAL-PROPHETIC HERITAGE?

Fr. Bruno Secondin, O.Carm.

*Bruno Secondin, (1940) is an Italian Carmelite. He has studied in Rome, Germany and Jerusalem. He has a doctorate in theology and is Professor of Spiritual Theology at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome. He is a member of several Italian and international theological associations, and he collaborated as an expert in writing the Working Document for the 2004 Congress. He is always busy with conferences and writing articles on themes such as spirituality, pastoral ministry and consecrated life. He has written about thirty books, which have been translated into many languages. In recent years he has committed himself to “lectio divina” with the people, finding new ways of inculturating this ancient tradition.*

*Original in Italian*

**M**ysticism and prophecy belong to the genetic codes of our ecclesial identity and our mission for the Kingdom of God: this was repeated by all the other speakers and I join them on this. True prophets arise and remain authentic through a special mystical experience of God which marks, sustains, and consoles them in moments of crisis. An authentic mysticism, as an encounter with the living God, lover of life, cannot but nourish and express itself in bold and liberating prophetic action.

Thus, our religious families were born out of a mystical intuition which nourished and provoked an evangelical response within a historical situation. They have always been guided by an operative action for the good of suffering and humiliated men and women. This intuition and passion are nourished in a heart-to-heart dialogue with the God of life and hope and in familiarity with their contemporaries.

### **PART I: A look at the horizons**

*At the conclusion of the IX Assembly of Bishops dedicated to consecrated life, the Synod Fathers wrote: “Throughout the history of the Church, Consecrated Life has been a living presence of the action of the Spirit, a*

privileged space of the absolute love for God and others, a witnessing of the divine plan to gather all of humanity within the civilization of love, the great family of the children of God." (Concluding Message, *October 27, 1994*).

*John Paul II in his post synodal exhortation Vita Consecrata recognized "The prophetic character of consecrated life was strongly emphasized by the Synod Fathers. It takes the shape of a special form of sharing in Christ's prophetic office, which the Holy Spirit communicates to the whole People of God. There is a prophetic dimension which belongs to the consecrated life as such, resulting from the radical nature of the following of Christ and of the subsequent dedication to the mission characteristic of the consecrated life." (VC 84)<sup>1</sup>.*

## 1. An easy evaluation, but with caution

If we analyse the birth and the periodic rebirth of consecrated life, or if we try to look within each religious family to understand the spiritual, ecclesial and historical unfolding of the founders/foundresses, we will always find these two elements. <sup>2</sup> Where do the creativity, inventiveness, audacity of initiatives and service of our religious families, fidelity up to the point of martyrdom come from if not from an unexplainable mysticism and a most incandescent prophecy?

We have spoken of mysticism and prophecy not to go beyond our real problems nor to navigate in the virtual world of essential principles and unbounded horizons. On the contrary, it is to find the hermeneutics in these two dynamics which render the inherited charism a true trans-generational impetus. This will be the premise and the source of a new history still to be invented and lived.

We would like to understand how to go on in an authentic sequela Christi and for the sake of the Kingdom to entrust ourselves to the workings of the Spirit, the support and guide of our charisms. Jesus assured us that the work of the Spirit is to be the hermeneutic of memory and guide "towards the whole truth" (cfr. Jn 16,13).

We have to open a pathway towards the future, in company with this humanity, just as, at one time, they made some clearings in the forests to start new civilizations. There are seeds of the future which can still sprout from our roots, no matter how old they are. There is a creativity which we have and which has to be found and expressed in a new charismatic and prophetic way (VC 37). There are urgencies and opportunities which question us and challenge us within our current history and its anguishes. There are hopes and utopias which we must grasp and evangelize, thanks to the

orienting and therapeutic wisdom of our charisms. (VC 103).

Fecundity and creativity cannot be invented by sociological theorem nor by religious discontent. They come from a higher level of God’s plan to redeem and fructify our historical phase, thus transforming it. God works in our present to lead it beyond every paralysis and fatalism, towards a universal brotherhood. We are called to be interpreters and servants empowered by the utopia of God.

## **2. Learning from the experience of the prophet Jeremiah**

Jeremiah was a prophet in difficult times, during a great catastrophe concerning the destiny of his people. His language is full of participation, ardor, strength, of images and symbols. Jeremiah’s own person, his suffering, his frequent crises are the living elements of his prophecy.<sup>3</sup>

The two symbols of “the almond branch and the boiling pot” are found in the opening of his oracles. It is the memory of his vocation (about 627 A.C.). This page was written around 604 A.C., that is, by a 40 year-old man more than twenty years after the original experience. For twenty three years that experience remained unexpressed, but certainly vivid and the source of his courage. Now, it comes back to light before a sacrilegious gesture of King Joachim who, in total disregard, chopped up and burned the scroll that contained all that Jeremiah, with the help of Baruch the scribe, had written of what the Lord had said (Jer 36,1-32).

Therefore, it was written not by a “young man full of enthusiasm for an encounter with the Word, full of visions for the missions which must be carried out, but by a deluded man who had gone through many failures and yet remained faithful to his initial vocation.”<sup>4</sup> The memory of the initial grace, we can say of the original prophetic charism, served to give him strength to acknowledge that notwithstanding everything, he had simply obeyed God. Jeremiah clung to that original moment to remain faithful, in order to overcome that shocking profanation.

Let us keep in mind the first chapter of Jeremiah in its entirety. The first part (vv. 4-10), is fundamental to a constitutive vocation: there is dialogue between God who has made His choice and the young Jeremiah who proclaims his own unpreparedness. It is the awareness of a choice which comes from the free and absolute will of God: “I am with you” (vv. 8.19); “I will put my words in your mouth” (v. 9). The prophet does not only possess the word in its incandescent state, he has to take it with his bare hands. It will be fire and terror, but also poetry and intuition, song and mourning the loudest of all. Four images then followed. Let us stop and take a look at the first two

images: they are not images suggested by God, but visions of Jeremiah. They question him and must be explained. God himself offers His explanation.

**a. The almond branch:** it does not speak of a tree, but of a *flowering branch* (*maqḗl*). It is an agrarian image, a vital productivity which God guarantees and which signals the arrival of a new season. The almond is the first to bloom at springtime. The word *almond* (*šāqēd*) is similar to the word "*vigilant guard*" (*šōqēd*), and therefore we have a play on words here by God explaining the image seen. "I will keep watch over my word to realize it" (v. 12).

It will be like the flowering of the almond: the word of God signals in advance the action of God, and the prophet is the announcer, acting as the sentinel. Jeremiah announces a springtime of disaster, of condemnation and destruction for the infidelity of the people. But he does this not with the desire to witness that all may go into ruin, to assist helplessly at the destruction of hope. God watches over the realization of His Word: one cannot make fun of God.

The prophet must be custodian of this vigilance of God, of this exacting presence, of this purification which is medicinal but not vengeful. In this situation, Jeremiah also becomes a prophet of intercession: he puts himself in their midst confessing his own delusions and fatigue, but also his trust in God. In the midst of tragic situations the questioning voice of Jeremiah and his confessions are a testimony that there is still hope, there is still fertile dew on earth.

**b. The boiling pot:** *represents a household imagery. Some of the boiling liquid spills out of the pot that overturns. It is the "breaking forth of evil" (v. 14) that spreads from the historical valley of the North – this is the sense of the pot "with its mouth tilting from the north" – sweeping away everything. It is not God who brings disasters, and it is not even the people who are the real destroyers, but the people, guided by incompetent leaders bring down the disaster upon themselves with their perverse idolatry. This people will lose its identity and autonomy forever because it has forgotten its roots and covenant with God, looking for other masters to serve. Even if seemingly everything is a catastrophe, the season of hope buds forth together with the disaster and it bursts forth from within, thanks to the "watchfulness" of God, thanks to the tenacious resistance of the Prophet. The prophet is "watchful" together with God over the truth of the Word, but he also witnesses the effort of the people to believe in a better future and to act for a better future. The prophet must know how to discern the footprints of God and of His fruitful and efficacious Word in complex, chaotic and global situations, pointing out new pathways. But he has a timid character, he often*

*falls into depression, and feels violated by God himself, more than protected by Him.(cfr. Jer 20,7).*

### 3. Considering our heritage

We said that this page was written in the context of a deep crisis of the prophet Jeremiah. He is rethinking his vocation. The choice was God’s, and God’s alone, and it is consecration and mission, tenderness and fire together, delusion and violence. It is easy to apply this perspective to our own situation when the illusions disappear.

Like Jeremiah, we can also multiply the desperate confessions, full of bitterness and helpless rebellion. Or else, precisely like the resistant Jeremiah, we can think over the roots of our own adventure, the founding experience that gave a start to everything. Yes, it was not we who invented our charism, nor the mission to build and uproot, to destroy and to plant, to cry out and to intercede.

The Lord gave and consecrated right from the start, first to the founding Fathers and mothers and then to each one of us, this identity, this mission, this adventure full of risks. He asked us to invest everything we have in this. His Word and His presence, His unswerving fidelity and our own fragility, the boiling pots of planetary evil and the fragile signs of his invisible yet trustworthy Presence. Even if some Religious Institutes are experiencing the difficulty of survival or the fragility of a springtime not yet established, we cannot lose hope.

Certainly, we have also experienced delusions. We were deluded that our sacred temples, our strategic covenants, our filled granaries, our progressive statistics were blessings from God, acquired and comforting rewards. And today we can see well that it was not like this. In its turn, post - modern society has already dismantled the heritage of inherited values and lives irresponsibly dancing on the brink of an ecological, financial, cultural and anthropological abyss<sup>5</sup>. Let us not fall together into this catastrophic black hole. Let us rediscover the reasons for a theological hope which belongs to us and is still inspiring.

We must rediscover the radiance of the original experience, when we were fragile like the flowering almond branch, but also audacious like the boiling pot. Only thus can we again become wise, and not carefree interlocutors, audacious and not paralyzed, trusting in God in a new and mystical way.

But we can also be explorers of just glimpsed and abruptly interrupted pathways, solid intercessors and critical protagonists.

We open new pathways of diaconia and trust in a Church which seems to be afraid of prophecy and lacks the courage to pass through the dark nights of a post-modernity of unhappy passions<sup>6</sup>. Let us give a new language and a new form to our symbolic, critical, transforming function in the Church and in society.<sup>7</sup>

Let us not reduce our identity to a fetish, to a miracle-performing sanctuary. The actual crisis is similar to the boiling pot that destroys everything. Let us commit ourselves to become like that blossoming almond branch announcing a new season. We have to inhabit the horizons, to love the horizons, to tread new horizons and not live behind the bush!<sup>8</sup>

## **PART II: Gather the precious pearls**

The relationships, which up to this point have given rhythm to our days, showed us the white heat of unitive and illuminative mysticism, which takes us to the higher and mysterious pathways of the living God, "To Be," as Rabbi Arthur Green has well explained to us – which we approach with empathy and wonder.

But in these days, there has also been the consuming fire of prophecy, which like a bursting fire sweeps everything away, animating everything, just like the restless and liberating force of the Word. The talks of Sr. Judette Gallares and of Sr. Liliane Sweko were actually this fire which makes our hearts explode (Jer 4,19; 20,9). The ouverture of Fr. Ciro Garcia offered the serene and wise clarification of the guiding concepts and possible applications.

### **1. The pathways of empathy and a listening heart**

Rabbi Arthur Green introduced us to a mysterious "inner garden" with an argumentation typical of the most genuine rabbinic tradition made alive with chassidic tradition viewed with an experience open to new "sparks of holiness". The proposal to translate the well known tetragram (YHWH) as "To Be" brought us nearer to the ineffable mystery of "the One", "the Holy One" of whom we are all likeness, to be acknowledged and safeguarded with empathy, inclusion and vigilance.

Mysticism is not an object of assault nor of vertiginous ascent but above all a gift and an encounter to be acknowledged and to be loved also through times of struggle and of terror. The discovery of monotheism by Abraham is beautiful – in the acclamation "Ah!" – after having crushed the idols of the father Terach! Transcendence resides within the immanence... transcendence means "God is here", we are approaching the great Christian mysticism, the tradition of the pervasive immensity of the presence of God.

This is mysticism.

With her intense and challenging comments on the icon of Lydia of Tiatira (Acts 16,11-15), Sr. Judette Gallares exposed us to the risk and the surprise of a Word with mysterious resonance, capable of accompanying a journey of conversion according to the paradigm proposed by Lonergan. She gave the theme “conversion” a new explorative and liberating dynamic that resembles the breathtaking pathways of mystical adventures and also shows the incandescent spring from which prophecy is born.

The process of conversion makes us discover its true dynamics, one that knows moments of darkness, passages of re-awakening, explosions of overwhelming enthusiasm, warm and soothing sharing of these new convictions. And yes, it is finally completed by a movement of transforming integration in oneness with the environment.

We know that Paul had a particular predilection for the domestic community of Philippi. He kept it in his memory full of concern and dedication, occupying himself with its development and progress. In fact, it is precisely in his letter to the Church of Philippi that Paul gave us the jewel of his precious Christological Hymn (Phil 2,5-11). Paul the Apostle read the simplicity of those beginnings and the weakness of the situation in the light of the icon of the Son of God, who made Himself a servant, humbling Himself till death, but who reigns glorious and sovereign over the cosmos.

## 2. Like sparks of prophecy

I will compare the role of Sr. Liliane Sweko to that of a diviner of a lost spark, to cite a Hebrew legend on the incompleteness of creation. She dug deep into the womb of our present history to meet and point out these sparks of prophecy that “run through the stubbles” (cfr. Ws 3,7) of our fears and set them afire. She quoted names of men and women familiar to all – from Msgr. Romero to Mother Teresa di Calcutta, from Etty Hillesum to Dorothy Stang, from Madeleine Delbrêl to Bishop Munzihirwa, to hundreds of assassinated African Sisters – and from these figures she drew out many sparks, always unique and original, which must remain alive and capable of drawing out of us a “host of ministers like flames of fire” (Heb 1,7).

*Their memory must remain like that blossoming almond branch, like a fragile but efficacious sign that illumines the night. They can also be similar to the boiling pot, like unending prophecy, like an impetuous torrent of charity and generosity that reveals how much a life totally dedicated and exposed to risks in the following of Christ is capable of doing (cfr. VC 86).*

Sr. Liliane added the inspiring function of brotherhood to the three

great prophetic categories of denouncing, announcing and renouncing, and made appeal for a new formation in a process that renders one capable of discernment and objectivity with competence and adequate strategy. There is always a need for intelligent strategy side by side with a generous prophecy.

### 3. An orienting wisdom

The dense and concise conference of Fr. Ciro Garcia at the opening may also be taken up now in a wider working space for reflection to serve as scheme and crucible. It anticipated the clarifying orientation which was good to follow and gave useful premise to gather and put together the horizons now open. He warned us at once that there is a need to put our discourse on mysticism and prophecy in the context of the evident re-awakening (even if wild and confused) of the cultural and religious type, which in turn nourishes a hoard of nostalgia and consoling escapes within which there might be some legitimate longings.

With many references to important sources, Fr. Ciro made us understand that it is up to us to be wise and patient interlocutors of hopes and expectations. Only a conscious, critical and transforming presence will trace out new pathways. We have to be mystics and prophets, with renewed and passionate hearts, with penetrating eyes and a strong intuition of where the sun rises, while all the rest are saddened by the fact that the evening lights have gone out. We have inherited a high level of mysticism and prophecy: it is up to us to know how to put this heritage back in play. This is the time for heirs!

The school of prophecy lies in an obedient and assiduous listening to the Word. From there will spring forth both the encounter with the heart of God who attracts us to Himself in an embrace of close transforming unity and the ardour of a prophecy that becomes an instrument of consolation and liberation. We have to open new wells to quench this new thirst for clean and generous values. We have to open new construction sites to repair the breaches (Is 58,12) of rundown houses so we may once more inhabit them together as experts open to hospitality and communion. Once again we have to give the splendour of gratuitousness and gift, to rediscover the value of poor resources and small signs: The "city of man" is promoted not only by rights and duties but even more and above all by relationships of gratuitousness, mercy and communion (Benedetto XVI, Caritas in Veritate, 6).

## **PART III: Prophets, poets, pragmatists**

What has to be done then? How can we remain like the blossoming almond branch announcing the new season, and how can we preserve the incandescence, the impetuosity and the creativity of our origins? Let us look for some indications that may help us to inhabit these open horizons and allow and foster new pathways and a direct, effective and critical impact to our charisms that is transforming at the same time.

Prophecy is a fluid and versatile word with numerous meanings. The word mysticism is just as evasive, intangible, indefinable, unclassified, and today it is even sumptuous. Neither of the two was born in a pure state. They came out already shabby with meanings according to places and cultures. Therefore, in using them, we have to pay attention not to use them as innocent and bare instruments. We have to pay attention to the symantics with which they have been covered for so long<sup>9</sup>. Fr. Ciro reminded us about this and so did Rabbi Arthur. From the start Sr. Judette invited us, with a quote from M. Buber, to acknowledge that religious experience is real when it implies a transforming message, a prophetic audacity coming from within a mysterious encounter with God. Sr. Liliane exemplified the plurality of the original and meaningful experiences even in different ecclesial and social contexts.

In considering our theme, we must not begin very far from here. Notwithstanding fatigue and nightmares, “the lamp of God has not yet gone out”(1Sam 3,3). Under certain aspects maybe there is only a little oil left, perhaps there is too little vigour (cfr. Rv 3,2), particularly in some Institutes of the northern hemisphere, which certainly record a reduced number of members and weakening of forces. But history and memory still have a hidden, but burning vigour, like embers under the ashes<sup>10</sup>. And God knows this secret fire: “In fact, God, would not be so unjust as to forget all you have done, the love that you have for His name or the services you have done and are still doing for the holy people of God” (Heb 6,10). And therefore, we speak because “we only wish that each one of you show the same zeal, that your hope may find its fulfilment in the end, that you may not become lazy but be imitators of those who, with faith and perseverance, become heirs of the promises”(Heb 6,12).

### **1. Starting from the Spirit of Prophecy**

We are all heirs and active beneficiaries of a foundational experience we call charism: every charism has in its initial phase both the peculiarity of mysticism and that of prophecy. The charism of consecrated life has the

Holy Spirit in its generating and directing protagonist. It is the Spirit who made possible the vital encounter with salvation through Jesus Christ. To pick up the analogy with the episode of Lydia (Acts 16,11-17), the Lord (who in this case is the Spirit) has marked and planned us for an evangelical adventure that was to be received as a gratuitous gift of kindness and lived as mission/commitment that consecrates and transfigures values and goals, orienting life in a clear and determined way.

To speak of prophecy is to speak above all of the specialty of the Spirit who "has spoken through the prophets" as we say in the "Creed". And the Spirit continues to speak through the prophets. This "speaking through the prophets", as prophetic vocations teach us, happened at the beginning through a strong, mystical, overwhelming experience which left no room for escape, or refusal. "You have seduced me, oh Lord, and I let myself be seduced: You have overpowered me: You were the stronger" (Jer 20,7). And from that day, in the heart of the Founder and Foundress, "there seemed to be a fire burning in my heart imprisoned in my bones" (Jer 20,9). And this is the experience that is transmitted to us so we may know and safeguard it, live and develop it attuned to the Body of Christ which is in perennial growth (Mutuae Relationes 11).

Charism is precisely a gift of prophecy which, however, comes forth from an awareness of being called to accept the gift of salvation and to contribute to its historical impact as a commitment and challenge, and not like a closed storage bin. There is no union and fusion with the living God other than through the grace of the Spirit who opens the doors of faith and of love. In the same way, there is no prophecy if not in the horizons of the same Spirit. He knows the "designs of the Father" (Rom 8,27) and intervenes so that we may be aware of them and responsible for them. He interprets them by calling us to a responsible choice so that we may put ourselves on the line and allow ourselves to be led toward their full realization.

Charism cannot be dragged along with fatigue nor interpreted with sadness. It was given and transmitted with an ardour that burned down obstacles and resistances. It cannot be transmitted only as maintenance of the daily routine of a sterile and sham faith, a charity of appearances, a vague and measly sense of church. Charism will be fruitful only if we possess a "heavy heart" (Etty Hillesum) that is in love, and if we bring our charism back to its generating motivation for which it was given to us. Without a creative re-reading and re-foundation, charisms become sterile. Their fruitfulness is measured in the multiplication of innovative interpretations and not in rigid literalism.

surprise, when our charisms are communicated to the youth of cultures different from those of the West. They find in them meaningful, colours, flavours and significance that seemed non-existent to us. They offer to live and renew them as protagonists. This is the surprise that we have many times in our dialogue with the youth from Africa, Latin America, Asia: they are not only young people in age, but they have a new regenerating approach to the charisms which we had catalogued in sacred schemes and forms.

## **2. In Christ and with Christ, our mystical and prophetic heritage**

“To remain faithful to Christ and the coming Reign of God, the Church, which often adapted to things of this world, needs communities which follow Jesus radically and express the freedom of Christ<sup>11</sup>. In this radical Christocentrism, passion for Christ and passion for human history find their meaning and fecundity. The Spirit works in us, through every means we know, for a conformation and total adhesion to the “sentiments of love and compassion” which were in Christ Jesus. (Phil 2,1.5). The activity of the Spirit has no scope or model other than that of “forming Christ in us” (Gal 4,19). “Consecrated Life constitutes a living memory of Jesus’ way of existing and acting as Incarnate Word before the Father and the brethren” (VC 22).

At the conclusion of the Great Jubilee, Starting Afresh with Christ was the synthetic and efficacious proposal of John Paul II to contemplate the face of the Son of God, the face of the Suffering One, the face of the Risen One. But it was also a proposal to follow Him in a life of holiness and of service, of dedication to the Kingdom and in solidarity with the poor and the least.<sup>12</sup>

Refocusing on Christ must be a ever open challenge for ourselves if we wish to approach the threshold of mysticism and holiness and trace out pathways of prophecy. “There is no doubt that this primacy of holiness and of prayer cannot be conceived from any other than a renewed listening to the Word of God” (NMI 39).

Charism, prophecy and mysticism pass through this door. Charism is nothing but an abbreviated evangelical word, but it embraces the entire richness of Revelation, and, so to say, pinpoints the dynamism which orients the entire spectrum of human and Christian existence towards a “style” that speaks and influences, as the theologian Christoph Theobald said. The themes of harmony between content and form in the current culture generated a totally different “modus vivendi” which is a true motley of fragmented

experiences. The sociologist Z. Bauman observes: "Short-term projects and juxtaposed episodes do not allow for vertical (i.e. stable) orientation but only for lateral ones, that is, for escapes and diversions (divertissement of Paschal), strategic moves in order to avoid and panic accelerations so as not to remain stuck<sup>13</sup>.

In our sequela Christi we must introduce the new Christologies in a consistent and viable way. They can offer much impetus to our charism, regenerate it and enrich it in praxis. The Christology that is reflected in the theologies of religious life at times appears far from the current progress of a "pneumatological" re-reading of Christ's identity and mission, from the contextualization in the experience of the victims of violence and of new feminine consciousness, from faithful dialogue with the great religious traditions of Africa and Asia. Ours is a season of original theological reflection on Christ and of innovative praxis. We can compare it to the great season of the Fathers (IV-V century). How much more efficacious and meaningful would be a sequela Christi in African, Asiatic and Latin American categories and symbols! In all these contexts ecclesial experiences and theologians' works have opened up new models and new mystical doctrines. Often they deal with experiences which are guided and chosen by religious men and women. And often behind all these, there is a prophetic ability that comes from a real mystical history which does not lack the test of martyr. It is actually this mystical, prophetic martyr character that makes these ways worth welcoming and accepting. Luther admonished: "Non legendo vel studendo, sed patendo immo et moriendo fit theologus".

This does not deal with something that must remain relegated to a particular continent or cultural context. It can and must be offered (and must be assumed) even in other continents and contexts. It may be introduced in the universal language, in the great theological synthesis, in the practical form of living and witnessing, of formation and governance, of prayer and discernment. Why should the language or the mental and cultural framework of the European tradition always prevail? I think we will truly be able to weave together these new richnesses if we work more for living together while accepting our differences, as an exchange of gifts. Then we would rediscover a new and original ecclesial role which is both constructive and inspiring. After all, everything is fruit of the Spirit and "Who are we to satand in God' way?" (Acts 11,17).

### 3. Journeying with the people

Today we are much more aware of the ecclesial dimension of our consecration. In the past, more emphasis was given to individual and isolated

religious effort. The Church was like some sort of external backdrop or a depository of useful and sacred things. And the people were not first of all protagonists of God’s project and journeying with the whole of humanity towards horizons of justice and freedom, of brotherhood and fullness of redemption. Theology has warned us, with more clarity than in the past, that not only the Church but Jesus Christ Himself is at the service of the Kingdom and is committed to give it a definite form. In His parables He pointed out exigencies and urgencies for the coming of the Kingdom, not already fixed implementations.

To have this awareness of a relative Church tending towards the Kingdom, with Christ as first fruit and servant of the Kingdom, implies also to bring over to this threshold, all the other previously treated aspects, beginning from the prophetic function that is not our monopoly nor exclusiveness, but an intrinsic quality of Christ and communicated to all the people of God through the Spirit. (cfr. J1 3,1-5 and Acts 2,17-18). Consecrated Life has its peculiar way of living this common role through the special consecration and profession of the Evangelical Counsels. It is a matter of “totalizing tension” (VC 6), which is not simply elevated vertically, but is the fermenting yeast, the restless and subversive memory agitating the very foundation of humanity, the typical resource with which it lives among the people and puts any other expectations and plans into crisis.

Our life must be credible and trustworthy not only by the honesty with which we consistently live the commitments we have publically made, but also by our ability to be witnesses of this desire for salvation and happiness, especially for those who have experienced violence and wrongdoing and also for those who have inflicted them. Here, it is opportune to recall the heart of prophecy, the prophetic “rīb”. It deals with a particular “juridical biblical procedure” of the bilateral type<sup>14</sup>, in which the one who experienced being wronged and has been a victim of a crime, directly confronts the perpetrator accusing him/her of the wrong done. But this accusation is done not with the intention of punishing or humiliating but rather so that the guilty one may see, become aware and experience that “to do harm” is “harmful” and therefore, he/she might set out towards what is good, and allow himself/herself to be led towards friendship.

Applied to salvation history, we see very well that this is really God’s attitude towards our guilt. He accuses us and calls us to re-establish the covenant in fidelity. At the service of the divine rīb, the prophet uses different linguistic expressions and styles of appeal and denunciation to touch the conscience of the people and to break down the barriers and defensive alibis. In this, our quarrelsome and terrorized, fanatical and

fearful, judgemental and vindictive society, the prophecy of religious could really be at the service of the divine *rîb* not like a threatening denunciation as an end in itself, but like an "interpellation", a healing therapy, an "inter-cession" that awakens consciences. This is exercised in non-violence, with the choice of gestures of mercy and gratuitousness, of justice intertwined with solidarity, compassion and empathy<sup>15</sup>.

The examples of prophecy which have been presented in the conferences have precisely this "empathic" quality. And we could still add to these the many other mystics of dialogue and hospitality, of non-violence and reconciliation, of care for the integrity of creation and saving of oppressed and endangered cultures, of displaced communities.

The Northern hemisphere, of course, is not without prophets and mystics, even if at times their testimony seems to be the only one that exists. In some places the shortage of vocations and the preoccupying aging of members is provoking some movements for survival which leave one perplexed. The somewhat sudden grafting of vocations coming from other cultures and sensitivities is not without its problems and uncertainties. Why not believe also in the prophetic value of "*ars carismatica moriendi*"? It does not mean to die in peace without disturbance, but to die still giving out some sparks, "without allowing the fire to burn out" (cfr. Zp 3,16). It means sparks of sweet and meek wisdom as all elderly persons give off; transparent faith that recognizes God alone as the value and the substance of one's life; humble testimony made up of works and daily grinds that took definite shape and form only in God and are deposited only in the womb of God. There is also gratitude for being considered worthy to love Him and to serve Him together with many other generous persons full of charity.

It would be great if instead of embarking on new pseudomissionary adventures with the aim of "importing" vocations to continue our works and lifestyles which, perhaps, may not be the icon of the "Kingdom of God", we were to give witness to a serenity that does not co-exist with the neurosis of perpetuating ourselves. In transmitting the feeling that life still makes sense, that the outcome does not obstruct the source of fidelity to God and abandonment to Him after having lived and fought for Him, would we not be giving a prophetic message and profession of faith in God who alone is what counts? Were we really able to feel the truth of this song: "I know full well the fountain that springs forth and flows.... although it is night." And were we able to sing it in spite of everything in a society that holds the myth of youthfulness, of efficiency, of vigour at all cost, even if with viagra and futile care. This, too, would be a prophetic message and a hope that opens other horizons<sup>16</sup>.

#### 4. Mysticism in the daily round

It seems that our religious epoch no longer has great mystical writers and also lacks prophets carrying out great undertakings. Rather, we encounter mystics and prophets who in the daily round know how to perceive and inhabit the “sacred spaces”, rendering it possible to sow the seeds of reconciliation and transformative liberation. We encounter men and above all women who are able to remain in touch with the opaque and poor reality, giving out sparks of compassion and solidarity, of gratuitousness and liberation, with a tenacity which challenges the more hardened resistance, with a patient trust that is able to break through the most obstinate prejudices, with a gratuitousness which disarms and baffles every commercial and highly efficient intention. It is here that many consecrated women encounter one another, those who want to be sign and leaven of that “Kingdom” for which we are consecrated in chastity, poverty and obedience for the well being of the world.

When our life does not come in close contact with those who move about without a goal and without roots, or those without hope and with features deformed by violence and injustice, prophecy is only ideology and mysticism is plastic. This “daily round” is the rich experience of our Institutes as always, but today it becomes more risky and also dangerous because the daily in many situations is truly dangerous, the daily bread is mixed with violence and humiliations, the dreams of human rights for dignity and freedom are trampled upon with scandalous impunity. I believe that to remain there, to continue to share fears and tears, hoping and struggling, there is need for an inner strength which is not sold in the market place but obtained in the silence of supplication and mutual support.

These are the communities, exposed and uncertain about their future and not only about the present, that are like the great flowering of the almond tree, signs which are fragile and gratuitous, an indication of a springtime which many implore but only a few know how to anticipate. They are almond branches that keep watch and maintain the light of hope and expectation, and they proclaim, at times right in the midst of a mess of boiling pots spewing out ruin and devastation on peoples and nations, that the sap still flows from the roots and a newness is still possible even where everything is destruction. Surely, compared to the great works of the past, compared to the efficient modernity and the substantial budget of other situations and churches, these resources seem very small and short lived, which could disappear at any moment. But their strength lies precisely there in the local rootedness that makes them loved by all, respected even by the domineering, hospitable and trusting, free and capable of audacity. Examples

can easily be added and all of you could bring some of them forth.

Meekness and strength, brokenness and resistance, dreams and realism mix together and nourish each another. These are the realities that give true strength to our Institutes, the secret lifeblood that makes our charism bloom and does not allow it to be overcome by false idols. These are the places where, close to the ground, authentic and confident dialogue with God is cultivated and where bonds with the least and the scourged are forged by bringing together the darkness of Calvary and the certainty of the Resurrection. Their lives have no defences or pretexts compared to the lives of others, only communion and sharing, serene sobriety and immediate reaching out. Maybe because of the "sacred" concept of religious life and the detached attitude of our lifestyle this does not go well. We are more interested in the form than in the substance of values, the differences rather than the similarities, the mistrust rather than the living together. I believe, however, that God has His own way of keeping account of things as the Gospel tells us (cfr. Mc 12,41-44).

## Open conclusion

We need others to liberate us from the imprisonment of our cultural stereotypes and to acknowledge our own woundedness, but also to invest all our resources. The thousand new forms of involvement in the most different contexts helped us to discover new features and to widen the horizons of our charism. It will not be possible to maintain this newness if we do not search for the face of the Lord in a heart to heart dialogue. But any mysticism that does not open up to prophecy, to solidarity and gratuitousness only becomes a dangerous escape.

I end with a final challenge. When it is a matter of prophetic responses to difficult situations, does our prophetic ability not suffer a shortfall at times? Why on earth are we not able to become convincing witnesses of mystical fidelity, of a transfigured and yet affectively healthy and empathetic existence?

In these past few months, the scandal of pedophiles among priests has disturbed the Church. The ecclesial reaction consisted of reminders of rules and laws and public disapproval. Our consecration in virginity and chastity could have contributed to show the mystical roots of a joyous and limpid fidelity and help to implement a more empathetic and healing acceptance of the victims. The sufferings and the hardships caused by the "Apostolic Visitation" to the women religious in the United States or in other difficult and complex situations, should not deprive us of prophetic parrhesia in the name of a matured experience, of a faith that liberates energies and new

diaconates. It is easier to make our prophetic voice heard during natural disasters than in problems concerning Church and society: Haiti and Chile, Darfur and the Great Lakes Region, Israel and Pakistan and many other places, some of which have been Areopagus of inventiveness and solidarity which we have exercised in full autonomy and creativity.

These different crises are a Kairòs of purification, but they can also be occasions to express feminine creativity and genius. At times, what is lacking is an empathetic and compassionate reading of the reality, but they are supported by the *parresia* of words and works which are fruits of a transfiguration brought about by grace. The consecrated woman has this special grace: she has to cultivate it in intimacy, but also she also has to offer it prophetically with feminine rhythm, precisely in less limpid moments and in most serious human tragedies.

If women, and in particular consecrated women, will learn how to participate as protagonist not only in the collective catharsis of mistakes and scandals, but also in the challenge for a new logic of service and gratuitousness, we will be able to return to singing the Cantic of Canticles with a heavy heart, but also with limpid eyes and at a dancing pace. For love and tenderness, dreams and expectations, tears and songs, mysticism and prophecy must be intertwined for a renewed Church and for the benefit of all humanity.

<sup>1</sup> Regarding prophecy in the Synod and in the post Synodal exhortation, we recommend: *Per una fedeltà creativa. La vita consacrata dopo il Sinodo*, Paoline, Milano 2005, 349-373 e *Il profumo di Betania. La vota consacrata come mistica, profezia e terapia*, Dehoniane, Bologna 2007, 94-106.

<sup>2</sup> A very useful documentation is found in the book: J. M. ALDAY (ed.), *I religiosi sono ancora profeti?*, Ancora, Milano 2008.

<sup>3</sup> For an exegetic interpretation open to meaningful suggestions: L. ALONSO SCHÖKEL-J.L. SICRE DIAZ, *I profeti*, Edizione italiana a cura di G. Ravasi, Borla, Roma 1996, 451-746. Una proposta di *lectio divina*: C.M. MARTINI, *Una voce*

*profetica nella città. Meditazioni sul profeta Geremia*, Centro Ambrosiano-Edizioni Piemme, Casale Monferrato 1993.

<sup>4</sup> C.M. MARTINI, *Una voce profetica*, 81.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. H. JONAS, *Sull'orlo dell'abisso. Conversazioni sul rapporto tra uomo e natura*, Einaudi, Torino 2000.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. il felice titolo del libro: M. BENASAYAG-G. SCHMIT, *L'epoca delle passioni tristi*, Feltrinelli, Milano 2005.

<sup>7</sup> An overview of the actual situation: AA.VV., *Dio oggi. Con lui o senza di lui cambia tutto*, Cantagalli, Siena 2010.

<sup>8</sup> A general perspective which should interest us: J.J. TAMAYO-ACOSTA, *Nuevo paradigma teológico*, Trotta,

Madrid 2003.

- <sup>9</sup> Among the many literatures available, the indications given by C. Garcia are worth noting and I would add: R. ZAS FRIZ DE COL, *Teologia della vita cristiana. Contemplazione, vissuto teologale e trasformazione interiore*, San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo 2010; AA.VV., *The esperienze of God today and Carmelite Mysticism. Mystagogy and Inter-Religious and Cultural Dialog*. Acts of the International Seminar, Zidine, sept. 2007, KIZ, Zagreb 2009. It is also well to make a review of this topic in this light: B. SECONDIN (ed.), *Profeti di fraternità. Per una visione rinnovata della spiritualità carmelitana*, Dehoniane, Bologna 1985.
- <sup>10</sup> This book has been quoted many times: J.D. CHITTISTER, *Il fuoco sotto la cenere. Spiritualità della vita religiosa qui e adesso*, San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo 1998.
- <sup>11</sup> J. MOLTSMANN, *La Chiesa nella forza dello Spirito*, Brescia 1975, 420.
- <sup>12</sup> I refer to the famous encyclical *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, of John Paul II, 2001. It is also good to keep in mind the Instruction from the Congregation of the Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life: *Ripartire da Cristo. Un rinnovato impegno nella vita consacrata nel terzo millennio*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana 2002.
- <sup>13</sup> Cf. Z. BAUMANN, *Modernità liquida*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 2006; ID., *La società dell'incertezza*, Il Mulino, Bologna 1999.
- <sup>14</sup> Cf. P. BOVATI, *Ristabilire la giustizia. Procedure, vocabolario, orientamenti*, Analecta Biblica 110, PIB, Roma 1986, 21-148. See also B. COSTACURTA, "Ti farò profeta tra le genti" (Ger 1,5). *I profeti nella Bibbia*, in J.M. ALDAY, *I religiosi sono ancora profeti?*, 28-32; in the light of "pathos and ethos" which is developed in the book of A. HESCHEL, *Il messaggio dei profeti*, Borla, Roma 1981.
- <sup>15</sup> More concrete explanation is offered by: J. RIFKIN, *La civiltà dell'empatia*, Mondadori, Milano 2010. Vedi anche L. HUNT, *La forza dell'empatia. Una storia dei diritti dell'uomo*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 2010.
- <sup>16</sup> I have tried to widen the horizon of this topic in B. SECONDIN, *Abitare gli orizzonti. Simboli, modelli e sfide della vita consacrata*, Paoline, Milano 2002.

# CONCLUDING EUCHARIST

Fr. Antonio M. Pernia, SVD

*General Superior Society of the Divine Word*

*Original in English*

## ***No better Gift than God's Spirit***

*Readings: Acts 16:22-34 / Jn 16:5-11*

**I**t is not difficult to sense the intimacy that surrounds this gathering of Jesus and his disciples in the upper room. Jesus takes leave of his friends. The master bids farewell to his disciples. The disciples grieve and are saddened. And Jesus promises them the best gift of all, the Holy Spirit. He almost even says that the gift is better than the giver. “But I tell you the truth, it is better for you that I go. For if I do not go, the Advocate will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you.”

Here we see the ideal missionary – one who knows that his time is over and that it is time for someone else to take his place. It echoes the words of John Baptist in reference to Jesus himself: “He must increase, I must decrease” (Jn 3:30). And now it is Jesus’ turn to say in reference to the Spirit: “She must increase, I must decrease; She needs to come, I must go away”. Jesus cedes center stage to the Holy Spirit.

••• And so it is a time of transition. A time of transition for Jesus. Having finished his ministry on earth, he now returns to the Father. He passes over from being the Son of Man who walked this earth to being the Son of God who sits at the right hand of his Father. But also a time of transition for the early Church – from being the community of the disciples of Jesus to being the universal Church of the Spirit. With Jesus, the community of disciples walked, so to say, leaning on the master – like a child with her hand in the hands of her parents. But now the Church needs to walk on her own in order to carry forward the mission entrusted to her by the master – like a child that needs to learn to walk on her own.

And precisely in this time of transition, the Holy Spirit comes. For it is the Spirit that makes every transition possible. It is the Spirit that accompanies any genuine transition. It is the Spirit that creates a new situation.

This, indeed, is what we see in the event of Pentecost which we will be celebrating in a few weeks time. The way the Acts of the Apostles describes it, Pentecost appears to be a dramatic event which attracted the attention of the whole city of Jerusalem. A loud noise, a mighty wind, tongues of fire, different languages, men and women from diverse nations – this symbolism gives us the impression of the entire universe being shaken to its very core, of the whole world being jolted and awakened, of the whole of creation being purged and made new. Something entirely new is taking place. The Spirit of God is making itself felt. It reminds us of that primordial time when the Spirit of God hovered over the primeval waters, when the earth was a formless void, when darkness covered the face of the deep. God’s Spirit blew and creation emerged from nothing.

The first to experience this newness were the disciples of Jesus gathered in the upper room. They had locked themselves up, fearful of exposing themselves to the crowd. Along with their fear, they felt greatly disappointed and disheartened by the death of their master and the apparent failure of their hopes and dreams. And they were immensely confused, for there were talks about their master being seen alive. They themselves seem to have had the experience of the master appearing in their midst. And then, the wind came, tongues of fire alighted on each of them, and they were filled with the Holy Spirit. It was as if they were shaken out of their fear, disappointment and confusion. As a result, they felt empowered to go out, witness to their master and proclaim the good news.

We can, therefore, say that the Spirit is the divine impulse to move to new situations, and thus the divine antidote to stagnation and retrogression. There are voices today which say that we need a new Pentecost in the Church at this time of her history. We need to experience once more the wind and the fire of Pentecost, so that we may be shaken up and cleansed. Shaken up – from the temptation of returning to old securities, from the inertia of moving into new situations, from the fear of being led by the Spirit. And cleansed – of the dross that has gathered over time, of the veneer that has developed over the years, of the dust that has accumulated throughout history. A shaking up and a cleansing so that what remains is only what is essential, only that which matters, the “unum necessarium” – that is, “God’s reign and his justice” (Mt 6:33), as Matthew puts it, or “the power of Christ’s resurrection” (Phil 3:10), as Paul has it.

Consecrated women and men are the special bearers of this divine

impulse to move to new situations, this divine antidote to stagnation and retrogression. For the consecrated life in the Church is a way of life that is called forth in a special way by the Spirit. As we know, the consecrated life belongs to the so-called “charismatic”, rather than to the “hierarchical”, structure of the Church. The various forms of religious life give shape to the various charisms of the Spirit. Through the founders of religious congregations, the gifts of the Spirit are called forth in response to needs of the Church at a given time.

But we, too, consecrated men and women, we need a shaking up by the Spirit – from the same temptation of returning to old securities, from the same inertia of moving into new situations, from the same fear of following the lead of the Spirit. But also shaken up – out of our lack of commitment and our willingness to compromise, our superficiality and mediocrity, our confusion and timidity. A shaking up, so that what remains is what is essential, that which matters – and that is, the mystical and the prophetic in our way of life.

Indeed, the Spirit is source of mysticism and prophetism. It is the Spirit that enables us to learn to gaze at God so that we may learn to gaze at the world with the eyes of God. It is the Spirit that allows us to be women and men who make it their way of life to move back and forth between the “ascending” and “descending” moments of contemplation – between the ascending moment of gazing at the face of God and the descending moment of gazing at the world with the eyes of God. For it is only from the perspective of God’s larger world that we see how much the world is in need of redemption, liberation and salvation. Only from the perspective of God’s larger world do we see how much the world suffers, how many are the people who hunger, how often children die an untimely death.

How different would our world be if we all learned to see the world with the eyes of God. Under the gaze of God’s eyes, enemies would become friends, separating walls would become open doors, strangers would become brothers or sisters, borders would become bridges, diversity would lead not to unresolved differences but to enriched unity.

Dear Sisters (and Brothers), in today’s gospel reading, Jesus tells us: “I tell you the truth, it is better for you that I go. For if I do not go, the Advocate will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you.” There can be no better gift than the gift of the Spirit. Let us ask for this gift for ourselves, for our Church and for our world.



## DECLARATION

of Women Religious Leaders  
members of the International Union of Superiors General  
participating at the UISG Plenary held in Rome May 7-11,  
and ratified by the Assembly of Delegates on May 14 2010.

*Original in French*

### STATEMENT

*“I know the fountain well that flows and runs... though it is night”*  
(St John of the Cross)

### THE FUTURE OF RELIGIOUS LIFE IS IN ITS MYSTICAL AND PROPHETIC FORCE

*“My soul is thirsting for God, the living God”* Ps 42, 3

During this Assembly:

We, 800 superiors general coming from 87 countries, have quenched our thirst together at the Fountain of life, the God of Jesus Christ, source of our joy, our hope and our strength.

#### **We commit ourselves to:**

- Rediscover anew and listen to the Fountain which speaks in our hearts, through others and through creation.
- Draw water from the Source of our charism and find once again the dynamism of our first call.
- Taste and share together the Word and the Bread.
- Promote a constant dialogue between the Word of God and the events which happen in our world.
- Invite others to come and drink at the Fountain.

*“If you consider me a believer... come and dwell in my house”*  
Acts 16, 15

Like Lydia, a listening and faith filled woman, we are invited to open our hearts and our homes and to remember the living waters of our baptism.

#### **We commit ourselves to:**

- Create a new style of mystical and prophetic life, open and hospitable,

---

inclusive, respectful of differences and acknowledging the richness of other cultures and religions.

- Recreate the art of living in common, marked by deep human relationships, a listening heart, empathy and non-violence in order to be witnesses of Gospel values.
- Focus on initial and on-going formation in order to unify the mystical and prophetic dimensions of our consecrated life.
- Live in harmony with the whole Cosmos and to dwell respectfully on this Earth.

*“Put out into the deep... and cast your nets...”* Luke 5,4

We have become aware that we should not fear the night of the deep waters.

**We commit ourselves to:**

- Courageously identify the “nights” of the Church, of society and of our congregations.
- Discover the sparks of light hidden in the heart of violence, poverty and the lack of meaning.
- Open our eyes to discover new paths of light in the darkness of our world: in the precarious situation of women, the existential restlessness of the youth, the consequences of war and natural catastrophes and the extreme poverty which engenders violence...
- Offer as consecrated women a ministry of compassion and healing.
- Build inter-congregational networks at local and international levels, involving the laity in order to initiate different projects and to work for the transformation of unjust structures.
- Go beyond the frontiers of our respective charisms and unite ourselves in order to offer a mystical and prophetic word to our world.
- Engage in truthful dialogue with the hierarchical Church at all levels in order to achieve a greater recognition of the role of women.

As Mary, let us remain awake and vigilant,  
constantly searching for the Fountain that flows,  
certain that It will be found, although it is night.

### *Trafficking "Talitha Kum"*

UISG joyfully announces that the website of TALITHAKUM (The International Network of Consecrated Life Against Trafficking in Persons) is now open to visitors starting June 10, 2010.

The website address is:

<http://www.talithakum.info>

We hope that this website may truly be for us a venue for a real sharing of information and best practices; mutual support and collaboration.