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The Mission of Religious in Contemporary World. What does it mean to be prophetic in our world?

The topic of this contribution includes three main elements: 1) religious life; 2) mission and prophecy 3) the contemporary world. I begin with the last point, and will briefly note contemporary threats to religious prophecy based on the belief that failure to acknowledge the harsh reality presented by the contemporary world will render our discussion of the prophetic mission of religious invalid, unfruitful discussion of the other religious life and its prophetic mission. The second step will be to define the prophet as understood historically and scripturally, to ensure a common starting point. Here I specifically note differing hermeneutics. With these foundations, I will proceed to the third part – the core argument of the role of the religious as prophet in our contemporary world. This role will be analyzed in the context of “relation” and a three-fold knowledge required for any prophetic mission, but specifically for religious ministering in the Church today.

I. A world without prophets

Though we are all aware of the many challenges presented in our post-secular world, however, I think it is best to revisit some specific philosophical, ‘religious’, and cultural trends which inherently negate the possibility of prophets and undermine prophecy, and thus something of religious life. Here I am speaking of three distinct but interrelated terms and movements: moral relativism, tolerance, and political correctness.

Relativism holds that there are no moral absolutes, but rather, morality or moral values are “relative” to an individual or a culture, and as such, no one else can judge my values or my culture’s values. Nor can I judge the values of another person or their culture.

Subsequently, “**tolerance**” is one of the chief – or the chief virtue touted by relativists. For if we *should not* judge other’s values, we must instead tolerate the values proclaimed and lived by others, and we wish that they will be tolerant of our own.

The tolerant person therefore speaks and acts in accord with this “virtue”. He or she is “**politically correct,**” making no statements which might indicate judgment of another person, culture, race, opinion, etc. Their actions align with their statements, thus everything they do or say manifests tolerance of the other.

This sounds nice, but I would compare the rampant spread of relativism to a Japanese plant called kudzu, introduced into the United States in the 1800s to help prevent soil erosion. No animals eat kudzu, no native plants can contend with it, and it grows faster than you can kill it, virtually taking over the South-Eastern United States. Though deceptively pretty when viewed from the road, it is actually smothering all other vegetation, including entire trees. Relativism is similar, creeping into every aspect of our lives - social and private. No one is immune, not even the Church, and it’s hard as the dickens to kill.

But there is a more critical problem directly related to our topic today: *if* our contemporary secular culture is correct regarding tolerance and relativism, then prophets are inimical to society. If society is made up of persons who abide by these terms, who live this politically correct life of so-called virtue,

then the virtuous man or woman will never judge another, nor proclaim against another's actions or values. In such a world, the prophet, by his very nature, is unvirtuous, for the prophet's role is to judge the other's action. By doing so he or she is deemed both intolerant and politically incorrect ... and, like Jeremiah and the Prophets of old, should be imprisoned or even killed. ... Behold the "dictatorship of relativism" (BXVI).

II. What is a prophet?

The above positions, do not imply that one adheres to the extreme of claiming that prophecy (and the mission of religious) is merely to condemn the other or to justify one's own position. In order to walk the tightrope between these errors, I believe we must define terms, beginning with that of 'prophet'. Prophecy is not unique to Judaism and Christianity. Many ancient civilizations included prophets, most noteworthy being the many ancient Greek Sibyls like those of Delphi and Cumae. Heraclitus gives a vivid description of the Greek prophetess and her oracles: "with frenzied mouth uttering things not to be laughed at, unadorned and unperfumed, yet reaches to a thousand years with her voice by aid of the god."ⁱ

Both pagan and Judeo-Christian concepts of the προφήτης (profétés), include conveyance of a message spoken by the gods. The Greeks spoke of προφημι (prophemi), a 'foretelling' of future events, and in the religious context it implied a gift of interpreting oracles and revealing the will of the gods. However, 'future' was not essential, for prophets could also interpret past and present events. What was essential was that a prophet convey a message, thus the Hebrew term for prophet נָבִיא " (nāvî), 'spokesperson'.

2.1. From prophet to religious

With the Incarnation, Old Testament prophecy ceased – it became obsolete when The Word took on flesh. But though Christ himself is the fulfillment of all prophecy, the Church maintained prophetic elements, not because anything was missing in the message of Christ as the Incarnate Word, but because the members of the Church were and are still on the way to salvation, still falling away, still in need of prophets to remind them that the present world will pass away. Thus *Vita Consecrata* 73 states:

religious life has the "prophetic task of recalling and serving the divine plan for humanity, as it is announced in Scripture and as it emerges from an attentive reading of the signs of God's providential action in history. This is the plan for the salvation and reconciliation of humanity (cf. Col 2:20-22)."

Herein lies the relationship between religious life and prophecy, one which the Fathers of the Church repeatedly confirmed. They identified the prophet's way of life as the seed which would 1 Heraclitus, Fragment 12. 4 develop into 'religious life'. This connection appears in the Mass for the Feast of St. Benedict, founder of Western monasticism. The text praises the life of Elijah who withdrew from the world and fled to the desert to live a life of fasting and prayer. Elijah and other prophets, including John the Baptist, broke with the world to live a life apart, a life of asceticism, a life of silence.ⁱⁱ Silence enables the prophet to hear the voice of God because other voices are silenced. The well-known spiritual writer Jean Leclercq claimed that this life of silence, this 'profound recollection', was

“more than a restriction in the use of speech [...], and is constitutive of the real value of the monastic desert.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Other similarities between the life of the prophets and that of religious included leadership and obedience: the ‘sons of the prophets’ were spiritual sons of the great prophets whose authority, John Cassian argues, is symbolized by the staff, which later Abbots would carry.^{iv} Though this authority was not identical to those of Aaron or the Pope, which designated priestly authority, the staff of the prophet sometimes ‘accomplished the mysteries of God’^v based on the charism of the prophet.^{vi} Even the clothing of the prophets, the animal skins and camel’s hair of Elijah, John the Baptist and others was interpreted in light of the religious habit of later centuries.^{vii}

Bernard of Clairvaux makes further parallels between a prophet and religious:

State of frenzy / ecstasy: [A prophet] is a man who lives under the influence of the Spirit of God and who, in a state of enthusiasm, a sort of intoxication, believes that which he does not yet clearly see, ‘awaits’ that which he does not yet fully possess.^{viii}

Content of the preaching: based on Paul’s words to the Corinthians (1Cor 13:9), the religious, like the prophet, “proclaims what he believes; and, since he ‘knows in part’ the truth of God, ‘he prophesies in part.’”^{ix}

Life of faith: to walk according to the Spirit, to live by faith, to seek only the goods of heaven instead of those of earth, to forget the past and apply ourselves exclusively to that which is before us.^x

2.2. New Hermeneutics of Religious as Prophet

Acknowledging the long tradition connecting the religions and the prophet, just what do these comparisons mean for a religious in 2019? There are different ways of interpreting this tradition, and I would note that we must be careful to avoid two contemporary errors.

1) The first error interprets the tradition of ‘relation’ between prophet and religious as ‘identity’. If religious life and the life of the prophet are so similar, then each religious is a prophet. But this is not true. Though prophecy and religious life are related, they are not identical. The term prophet is used analogically when applied to religious life. Religious vows do not transform an individual religious man or woman into a prophet, but rather, in the words of Sandra Schneiders, it is *the way of life* which manifests a “corporate witness to the charism of prophecy”.^{xi} So though each religious is *called* to the religious vocation which by its very nature has a prophetic value, as already noted regarding the desert, silence, authority, etc., the individual religious *qua* religious is not necessarily a ‘prophet’ in the proper sense defined above.

2) Though I agree with Sandra Schneiders on the point above, I have to disagree with her on other points, developed here as a second error. In her three volume theology of religious life, the last of which focuses on prophecy, as well as in other works, Schneiders presents a new hermeneutic of the prophetic nature of religious life not merely as a form of life witnessed to by the Old Testament prophets, but instead in direct connection with Jesus Christ.^{xii} I note from the outset that Schneiders makes her end quite clear, even if not explicitly stated: a justification for individual religious or religious congregations who disagree with the magisterial authority of the Church. In our context, I address some key steps in her argument and brief responses:

1) Christ is a prophet who has a “special relationship” with God; Jesus as prophet is the “ministerial magna carta” of religious life.^{xiii}

2) In his life and teaching he countered the contemporary ecclesiastical authority of his day, and “the religious officials of Jesus’ time were no more wicked, hypocritical, oppressive, immoral, or corrupt than officials of state and Church in other ages.”^{xiv}

- Yes, Christ’s life is the model for all Christians, including religious. And he confronted the authorities of the Temple in Jerusalem.
- Christ is not *merely* a prophet with a ‘special relationship’ with God but rather, He is the Son of God who, as defined by *Dei Verbum* 2: “is himself both the mediator and the sum total of Revelation.”
- He counters religious authorities, not as a prophet, but as the Son in His Father’s house.

3) “There is virtually always tension, if not opposition, between institutional and prophetic authority”,^{xv}

4) and when conflict arises, since Jesus’ obedience was not “blind or absolute submission to official authority,”

5) and “human beings do not take God’s place in the life of believers.”^{xvi} Further, religious make their vows to God.^{xvii}

- As noted above, prophecy, of its nature, speaks against the norm, but it is not its own norm.
- It is true that blind obedience is not true obedience, and no human being is God, but religious make their vows to God not privately, but publically, in the hands of a superior, and these vows are accepted by the Church established by Christ himself.

6) Schneiders’s conclusion: the Church ‘coopts’ the prophetic mission of religious by expecting them to “argue against their own theologically well-grounded judgment, mature experience, and pastoral sensibilities to enforce teachings and policies, which the hierarchy itself cannot defend credibly enough to persuade the majority of its Church’s members and cannot actually enforce... It is a cooptation that Religious not only may but must resist.”^{xviii}

- While Schneiders references *Vita Consecrata* #84ff, on the prophetic character of the consecrated life, she ignores a key element of this prophetic witness taught in *VC* #85, which states that the prophetic nature of religious life is “guaranteed by *full harmony with the Church’s Magisterium and discipline*, there will shine forth the action of the Holy Spirit.”^{xix} 19
- *Perfectae Caritatis* #6: “Let them more and more live and think with the Church, and let them dedicate themselves wholeheartedly to its mission.”

III. Role of the Religious Prophet today: Relation and Knowledge

With these points established, we can now move forward and define an “ecclesial hermeneutic” of the prophetic mission of religious in the contemporary world. As noted earlier, the essence of prophecy is the conveyance of a message, and message requires knowledge. Thus, Thomas Aquinas will define prophecy as ‘a kind of knowledge’^{xx}; not just any knowledge, but a knowledge about things which are revealed by God, even if some of them could be known by reason alone.^{xxi} 21 The analogy of the

prophetic nature of religious life must also then be a knowledge, but a knowledge of what? The knowledge cannot be merely a 'content', but, as previously noted, it involves knowledge *in relation to*. I will argue that this relation is both multi-faceted and intertwined with a threefold knowledge.

Relation

The relation both precedes and is concomitant with knowledge: the religious, like the prophet, does not speak or act for the self, but on behalf of another, and therefore must remain in constant relation to the other. For the Greeks, this communication was not necessarily direct, but could occur within the natural structure of the world – thus one could read nature and interpret the flight of the eagle or the entrails of the ox. Judeo-Christian prophecy did not negate nature, but included communication with a personal God who used the prophet to reveal his message to His people. With Judaism and God's stepping into history as a personal God, the notion of "divine intimacy" changed. The prophet continued in his or her role of interpreter of oracles – of hidden things, but he was now a prophet not of various gods, but of the one true God. The Jewish prophet was a representative of "the absolute, the man who lives in the intimacy of God, who communicates his desires, his orders, his blessings and his revelations" (cf. Amos 3:7).^{xxii} Implicit within this concept of relation, is the notion of humility – a humility which enables the prophet to recognize that there is another, greater than he or she, to whom the prophet must submit as an active instrument. This relation therefore implies a twofold knowledge: of self, and of the other who is God.

Self-Knowledge and the Knowledge of God

We see this double knowledge in the call of the Old Testament prophets. Isaiah sees a vision of God, and responds with a reference to himself: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips" (Is 6:5); Jeremiah responds in a similar manner, crying out, "Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth" (Jer 1:6). Both respond to the other by looking first at themselves, aware that they were incapable of fulfilling the mission. In response, they are sent forth in spite of their weakness with assurance that the Lord will be with them. Knowledge of personal weakness alone was insufficient. It was knowledge of the Lord's strength and their trust in him that enable them to take on the mission. 9 But what of the prophet Jonah? When he hears God's command to go to Nineveh, he immediately run as fast as he can in the opposite direction, boards a ship, and sails for Tarshish (cf. Johah 1:2- 3). One might think that Jonah had a great deal of self-knowledge and little knowledge of God, but the American poet Robert Frost disagrees. He claims the book of Jonah is the first in history whose entire focus is mercy, not only towards the people of Nineveh, but towards Jonah himself. Frost opines that Jonah runs because he *does* know something of God. When commanded to preach to a people repugnant to him, Jonah is so convinced of God's mercy that he *knows* God will let him down and have mercy on the sinners of Nineveh. Fr. Paul Murray goes so far as to call Jonah a 'religious bigot', of "strong will, but of narrow intelligence, a staunchly religious man, who simply could not bear the idea that God might extend his kindness" to people who were not Jews and even worse, serious sinners.^{xxiii} Frost adds that Jonah cannot trust God to be unmerciful. "You can trust God to be anything *but* unmerciful. So [Jonah] ran away and – and got into a whale. That's the point of that," Frost says, "and nobody notices it. They miss it."^{xxiv} God won out in the end, and Jonah reluctantly responded, gaining knowledge about himself *and* about God along the way.

Growth in Self-Knowledge

Many religious are like Jonah; they want to choose their mission, to choose the people they will serve; and sometimes they can, to a degree, that is, if in accord with their vow of obedience, which implies a being sent out *by the community*. Obedience means I cannot always choose. As to the whale, Jonah found himself in a place where he couldn't be disturbed – by anything but himself. He was forced to face himself and God – to be alone with God. There is a lot of silence in the belly of a whale, and silence is a prerequisite for growth in self-knowledge. Today we face so many distractions that sometimes a fish belly doesn't sound too bad ... no meetings, no emails, no texts, phone calls, or other people. Silence is difficult today, even for religious. It is much easier to be active – on the move – and 'in touch' with the world. This is necessary. The physical and spiritual needs of the people religious serve demand this, but these efforts will not bear fruit unless there is a source greater than oneself. *Nemo dat quod non habet...* one cannot give what one does not possess. The prophets first withdrew to receive from the Lord. The life and mission of religious life demands a contemplative foundation, whereby one comes to know oneself in God. Self-knowledge is an ancient concept. Roughly two thousand years ago a pagan pilgrim passing through Delphi noted the inscription 'know thyself' (γνώθι σεαυτόν) in the court of the temple of Apollo.^{xxv} The Dominican expert on self-knowledge is St. Catherine of Siena, and although her emphasis on self-knowledge applies to all Christians, such knowledge is particularly necessary for religious; the prophet becomes a witness through by means of an intimate relationship with Christ.

Self-knowledge is not a one-time event. It is a process with various stages, and though it begins with self, it cannot stop there; that would mean isolation, confusion, and neurosis. True selfknowledge requires silence, reflection, *and* relation; only in relation with others is any false image of self stripped away. But if I can trick myself, so too can I trick others. The only one immune to my manipulation and lies, the only one who can truly help me to know my deepest self is one who knit me in my mother's womb.

Silence, reflection, and relation are all discovered in what Catherine calls the 'cell of selfknowledge'. This cell is not a physical place but an interior cell, a spiritual manner of living in the presence of God, in spite of the confusion and noise which surrounds me. Consider just one passage from Catherine on relation and self-knowledge:

I long to see you truly espoused to truth, a lover and follower of that truth. But I don't see how we can experience and live this truth unless we get to know ourselves. For when we know ourselves in truth, we know that we are not, but find our being in God, seeing that God created us in his image and likeness [. . .] You must, then, come to know truth so that you will want to be espoused to truth. Where? In the house of self-knowledge, recognizing that you have your being from God – gratuitously, and not because it was your due.^{xxvi}

Once inside the cell we must lock the door from the inside and never leave. So though a religious is active in the apostolate and ministry, he or she must have silence within – a place of peace in which one can remain in the presence of God. This is not easy – especially in our noisy world where it is so easy to be in relation with everything and everyone, except God. Oftentimes, we leave the cell so silently that we do not even notice. We wake up to find ourselves caught up in the busyness of the apostolate, or work, or family. We find ourselves complacent, *comfortable* in life and its routine; we

are *established*, capable in our apostolate. But religious, just like any other man or woman, sometimes wake up to find themselves in the ranks of the new ‘addicts’, shackled to their smart phones, unable to turn off the outside world, and unable to even conceive of the prophet’s desert. Such failings offer opportunities for growth in humility and self-knowledge. The Father told Catherine, “The source of humility [...] is the soul’s true knowledge of herself and of my goodness... only when discernment is rooted in humility is it virtuous, producing life-giving fruit and willingly yielding what is due to everyone.”^{xxvii} This virtuous humility requires that one be, in the words of Pope Francis, “fearlessly open to the working of the Holy Spirit.”^{xxviii} One does not acquire self-knowledge, knowledge of truth, and fearlessness in the Spirit by one’s own power, but through daily prayer, reading of the Scriptures, and adoration of the Eucharist. This is Catherine’s message, that in prayer—in knowing God and myself before God—I realize what it means to be human, a creature made by a God who is a ‘Mad Lover’, crazy in love with what he has made; a man created by a God who is ‘drunk with desire for [our] salvation’.^{xxix} This was the fire behind Catherine’s prophetic life – the fire of the Holy Spirit who helped her to understand God’s incredible love for her. This knowledge impelled her to help others know the same fire of love. Do religious today have this fire?

Knowledge of the Word

We already noted that relation requires a second knowledge - of God. This knowledge ensures objectivity. The message is not about what *I* want, or what *I* think and feel. The content of the Christian message is not words, but the Word, and one comes to know the Word, not merely through study, but in silence. Entering into the prophetic mission of the Church begins with contemplation of the Word. Only there will the religious discover that his or her study, preaching, and apostolate are not mere duties and obligations, not merely ‘teaching’, but participation in a much larger mission.

An image that captures the essence of this knowledge of the Word is a modern iconic painting of St. Dominic by Sandra Brunetti. Dominic stands full-front, and in his hands stands the Christ child who in turn, holds an open Bible in his hands. Dominic, as the humble servant stands behind the Word in the shadow of the Truth he preaches. It is a Word he has received, not one he creates. But at the same time the religious is actively engaged in the mission. As Jerome Murphy-O’Connor wrote:

The preacher (prophet), then, cannot be a witness who stands aside and points [...] He must be vitally involved. The truth he presents must be *une vérité vécue*, [and] if he points, it must be to himself.^{xxx}

How often today do Catholics and non-Catholics disregard or disparage priests and religious who act like the scribes and Pharisees, preaching a holiness they themselves do not follow. We do well to heed the words of Pope Paul VI, who reminded all Christians that “modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.”^{xxxi}

The apostle Paul serves as model. Writing to Timothy he speaks of guarding the Word entrusted to him,^{xxxii} and of jealousy protecting the ‘standard of sound teaching’.^{xxxiii} Safeguarding the integrity of the Word demands more than words. It requires becoming another Christ. As Paul told the Corinthians, “be imitators of me.”^{xxxiv} Paul well knew, just as any religious knows, “if his witness is merely verbal and not existential, if his whole existence is not a living manifestation” of the truth he teaches, “if there is a discrepancy between the preacher’s words and the witness of his life, he will fail.”^{xxxv}

Returning to the Brunetti image, behind Dominic one sees his books on the shelf, opened but abandoned. He has studied the truth as a religious and a prophet, but his study leads him beyond the words of treatises. The Christ child stands on Dominic's left hand and arm, but with his right hand, Dominic grasps the Child—the Word—because this child fulfills the very words of Scripture that he points to in the open book: *Et Verbum caro factum est*.

Vita Consecrata 84 neatly summarizes these points when it says:

True prophecy is born of God, from friendship with him, from attentive listening to his word in the different circumstances of history. Prophets feel in their hearts a burning desire for the holiness of God and, having heard his word in the dialogue of prayer, they proclaim that word with their lives, with their lips and with their actions, becoming people who speak for God against evil and sin. Prophetic witness requires the constant and passionate search for God's will, for self-giving, for unending communion in the Church, for the practice of spiritual discernment and love of the truth.^{xxxvi}

The document adds that true prophecy includes “the denunciation of all that is contrary to the divine will and through the exploration of new ways to apply the Gospel in history, in expectation of the coming of God's Kingdom.”^{xxxvii} This ‘exploration of new ways... in history’ introduces yet another relation and a third knowledge, without which our mission in the world today will fail.

The Mission: Knowledge of the Recipient

The first two knowledges belong in some sense to every Christian since salvation requires that all must enter into a relationship with God, and this relationship requires at least the most basic principle of this two-fold knowledge: of God as Creator and self as Creature. The specificity then, of the prophet and religious, is that the message they receive includes yet a third knowledge related to a mission *to* the other.

The religious, like the prophet, is sent on a mission – not to a place, but to a people. Contemplation and silence not only nourish the spiritual life of the individual religious. Contemplation of the Word pushes the religious to preach and to minister to others. In his letter to the Romans, St. Paul identifies preaching's twofold necessity: that which corresponds to the preacher— “How are they to proclaim unless they are sent?”—but also that which corresponds to the hearer. “How can they believe in him if they have never heard of him?”^{xxxviii}

This relational principle of preacher and hearer is further developed by Thomas Aquinas. Speaking of the cause of faith in the question six of the *Secunda Secundae* of the *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas notes that since man cannot have faith unless something be proposed to him, God has revealed the truths of the faith to man. But since God does not reveal the truths to each man individually, preachers must be sent. “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations [...] teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.”^{xxxix}

Consider again the image of Dominic: after touching the Truth and contemplating its depths which extend beyond reason, Dominic holds Truth in his hands and offers Him to those to whom he is sent. The prophetic mission of the religious begins with the intellectual knowledge but cannot remain there, for the simple reason that, contemplation of the Word opens the preacher to the beauty of God, but also to the beauty of the people and the world around him. Only if one first knows the beauty of God can a preacher discover and preach beauty in a world of suffering, poverty, war, and unrest, where terror and evil seem to multiply faster than the good.

IV. Prophesying in a Secular World

In a 2014 talk, David Glenday had noted that the evidence of God is no longer visible in the world.^{x1} This truth lies at the heart of this project and today's conference. In past centuries, religious and scholars did not have to rethink their presence in the world, particularly in the West, because they were an integral and accepted part of that world. The change of culture has, in some sense, made the task of religious today more difficult than that of the prophets of old. At least the pagans and sinners of the Old Testament world – and of the world up until the last decades accepted the existence of a moral code, even if their actions contradicted it.

How do we preach to this world where there is not only suffering but also relativism and a false tolerance? In light of Sr. Nicole Grochowina's presentation on the *Spiritual and pastoral needs in changing times*, how does the prophetic nature of religious life apply to the New Evangelization – which is no longer “new” and yet, due to continual changes in the world, ever new?

The 2012 Synod on the New Evangelization dedicated proposition 20 to ‘the New Evangelization and the Way of Beauty’.^{x1i} Proposition 20 stipulated that the New Evangelization should pay particular attention to the way of Beauty, and that Beauty ‘should always’ be a special dimension of the new evangelization. As a rationale, the bishops quoted St. Augustine's *Confessions*: “It is not possible to love what is not beautiful.”^{x1ii} They added that ‘beauty attracts us to love, through which God reveals to us his face in which we believe’, therefore, the role of the religious is to give testimony not only of the goodness and truth of Christ, but ‘also of the fullness of his beauty’.^{x1iii} 1

I believe the way of beauty is key to addressing the needs of our world today; not merely physical beauty, but a deeper more profound beauty witnessed to in a life of truth, of charity, a life where the threefold relation and knowledge are fully integrated. In a world where vowed religious life is not understood and considered ‘medieval’, where logical arguments for the faith are frequently ignored, and or considered merely subjective opinions of the interlocutor, beauty is essential – as a transcendental, truly transcending the confusion and suffering of our world. Beauty offers another approach; it extends beyond terminology, religious creed, and prejudice. While words express what we believe, ‘beauty attracts us to love’. Therefore, if beauty and love are related, and if God chose to reveal his love to us through beauty,^{x1iv} then each human being needs to see beauty, to experience beauty. But not all prophets of the past (Jonah), nor all religious today, nor do any of us in every moment succeed in full mature integration at every moment. Sometimes rather than beauty, we portray, like Jonah, a reluctance to enter into relation, or a lacking in knowledge of self to the point that we blame the other for our failure.

Demands of Prophetic Preaching

What would this beauty look like? Oddly enough, a 13th century example, from the life of St. Dominic can serve as a model for the 21st century. While still a young priest in Osma, Dominic was asked to accompany his bishop who was serving as an ambassador to arrange a marriage with a princess of the Nordic countries. Passing through Toulouse, France, where the Albigensian heresy raged, they spent the night in an inn owned by an Albigensian. We know only the bare facts: Dominic spent the night arguing with the Albigensian innkeeper, and in the morning the innkeeper returned to the Christian faith. But what was the nature of their discussion? Consider two men engrossed in a debate in a bar, into the wee hours of the morning. We can postulate a few key points: this was no mere lecture or

forced encounter; there was no severe judgment by one of the other, nor was it mere tolerance of the others position without any judgement. Any of these approaches would have ended within minutes or at least could not have endured the entire night; one or the other would have gotten up and left due to being offended, bored, or simply realizing dialogue was impossible. Nor was Dominic simply teaching the faith to someone who'd never heard it before. The heretics of the Albi were fallen-away Catholics attracted to the Gnostic conviction that the believer possesses a higher knowledge, a secret knowledge not revealed to the Church. Dominic's challenge was to bring back to the truth a man who thought that Dominic was less intelligent (an attitude which is none too rare in dialogue between people of science and people of faith today). Dominic would not have been able to break through such error and demonstrate the truth of Christ if he had not first understood something of this man's beliefs, his logic, his hopes, his fears. This was no simple conversation. It was an intense dialogue in which both men spoke and both men listened.

Listening is not always easy. Religious work in various ministries, cultures, among the rich and the poor, the educated and uneducated. We often teach or work among people we may not really like or agree with, perhaps even some heretics, and they even smell bad—either literally or figuratively. But as Pope Francis says in the oft-quoted line from *Evangelii Gaudium*, the preacher must 'take on the 'smell of the sheep''.^{xlv}

Dominic did this in the inn. He sat at the table with a well-known heretic. Christ had done the same. He chose a tax collector as an apostle, allowed a prostitute to anoint his feet, and sat down at table with sinners even worse than these. We look back at the Gospels and take in the message, but how do we apply it in our own lives? Who are the heretics, tax collectors, and sinners present in our daily life? How will they hear our word if we do not speak their language? Just as the Good Shepherd spent time with the sheep, leading them away from the hedgerows where they become entangled and not allowing them to indulge in the grain that might kill them, so the preacher must know his audience and the dangers that threaten them. He needs to understand their desires and fears, their joys and sorrows. The preacher fails if he proclaims a message to people who cannot understand it, or who simply cannot hear because of their fear of the various wolves they encounter each day. It is situations like these that Pope Francis intended in *Evangelium gaudium* when he speaks of those who hear orthodox words, but "take away something alien to the authentic Gospel of Jesus Christ."^{xlvi} The fault is not always their own, because sometimes the language spoken by the preacher is alien to them. Or the preacher may hold fast to a formula and people miss the point. He preaches the truth, but they walk away with 'a false god or a human ideal'.^{xlvii} Francis urges religious to not be afraid to step beyond 'what always worked before'. He or she must be bold enough 'to discover new signs and new symbols', and even 'unconventional modes of beauty'.^{xlviii} Such an approach challenges each of us to step beyond my own special interests to address the needs of the faithful. Yet, even here one must use care, avoiding the dangers of falsifying the word, or worse, joining the ranks of false prophets whom Paul condemns in 1 Timothy, those who are conceited, tickling the ears of those to whom they preach in efforts to gain popularity and human respect.^{xlix} Religious life is not about approval – it is, like the prophet – a life which 'disturb the complacent' – even the complacent within the Church and within religious life itself.

Conclusion

What, then, is the answer to the question posed in this conference: 'Being Prophetic in a Secular Society, a new call?!' I reference a warning Benedict XVI issued to religious on the Feast of the

Presentation of the Lord in 2013: “Do not join the ranks of the prophets of doom who proclaim the end or meaninglessness of the consecrated life in the Church in our day; rather, clothe yourselves in Jesus Christ and put on the armor of light – as St. Paul urged (see Rm 13:11-14) – keeping awake and watchful.” The situations are new – the call is old.ⁱ The response required is not merely one of mission, but mission based in identity and identity requires knowledge and this knowledge is based in relation. The challenges today on the level of mission, identity, knowledge, and relation are real, but Benedict also encouraged religious to “have a faith that can recognize the wisdom of weakness. In the joys and afflictions of the present time, when the harshness and weight of the cross make themselves felt, do not doubt that the kenosis of Christ is already a paschal victory. Precisely in our limitations and weaknesses as human beings we are called to live conformation with Christ [...]. In a society of efficiency and success, your life, marked by the ‘humility ‘ and frailty of the lowly, of empathy with those who have no voice, becomes *an evangelical sign of contradiction*.” The prophetic mission of religious today is to be a humble, frail sign of contradiction. How ridiculous; how irrelevant, how irrational... how beautiful.

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ⁱ Heraclitus, Fragment 12.

ⁱⁱ John Chrysostom says they are the first to live the “angelic life.” In *S. Petrum et Eliam*, 2 (PG50, 728); *De virginitate* 79 (PG 40, 591-592); also Euthymius, Peter Damian. See Leclercq, Dom Jean. *The Life of Perfection: Points of View on the Essence of the Religious State*. Collegeville (MN: The Liturgical Press, 1961), 45.

ⁱⁱⁱ Leclercq, 51. Cassian speaks of a “Twofold law of enclosure and of silence” (52); “secret of the desert” procures “purity of Heart” Cassian Coll. 14.4 (PL 49, 957).

^{iv} See 4 Kings 4:29; Cassian Instit, I.9 (PL 49, 7576).

^v Leclercq, 57; Rupert of Deutz, In Reg. S. Bened., IV.3-6 (PL 170, 527-530).

^{vi} Leclercq 57.

^{vii} See Cassian Coll 18.6 (PL 49, 1101); Peter Damian Opusc. 28.2 (PL 145,514).

^{viii} Leclercq ,47 referencing St. Bernard of Clairvaux.

^{ix} Leclercq adds that the religious “speaks under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, whether to foretell the future or, in a more general way, to praise God and edify the Church,” p. 47.

^x Bernard of Clairvaux, *De diversis sermo* 37.6 (PL 183,642). In this context, Bernard would conclude that the essence of prophesying was so exalted, so otherworldly, that it demanded “a superior way of life; for in it one becomes attached to nothing temporal, nothing passing, but only to spiritual and eternal realities. Bernard of Clairvaux, *De diversis sermo* 37.7 (PL 183,642). [I would simply note the care needed in interpreting such statements, particularly as to the distorted idea that to say “superior” means that one is setting up a hierarchy of holiness.]

^{xi} S. Schneiders, *Prophets in Their Own Country: Women Religious Bearing Witness to the Gospel in a Troubled Church* (Orbis, 2011), 100.

^{xii} *Finding the Treasure* (2000); *Selling All* (2001); *Buying the Field* (2013). Earlier work includes *New Wineskins* (1986).

^{xiii} Schneiders, *Prophets*, 84.

^{xiv} Schneiders, *Prophets*, 94.

^{xv} Schneiders, *Prophets*, 95.

^{xvi} Schneiders, *Prophets*, 97

^{xvii} Schneiders, *Prophets*, 103.

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- xviii Schneiders, Prophets, 106.
- xix Schneiders, Prophets, 79.
- xx Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* IIa-IIae q 171a6.
- xxi ST IIa-IIae q171a3ad2.
- xxii Aranda, p. 16.
- xxiii Paul Murray, *A Journey with Jonah: The Spirituality of Bewilderment* (Dublin: Columba Press, 2002) 53.
- xxiv “Robert Frost” in *Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews*, quoted in Murray, 54.
- xxv PAUSANIAS, 110-180 A.D; cf. S.E. ALCOCK, J.F. CHERRY, J. ELSNER, *Pausanias: Travel and Memory in Roman Greece* (Oxford, 2001).
- xxvi Caterina da Siena, Letter 104.
- xxvii Caterina da Siena, *Il Dialogo*, 9.
- xxviii *Evangelii Gaudium*, 259.
- xxix Caterina da Siena, *Il Dialogo*, 153.
- xxx J. MURPHY-O’CONNOR, O.P., *Paul on Preaching* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1964), 255.
- xxxi PAUL VI, Address to the Members of the Consilium de Laicis (2 October 1974): AAS 66 (1974), 568. Pope Paul VI repeated this statement in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* on evangelization. *Vita Consecrata* 85 notes that religious life is prophetic when there is “*consistency between proclamation and life.*”
- xxxii Cf. 1 Tim 6:20.
- xxxiii 2 Tim 1:13.
- xxxiv 1Cor 4:16.
- xxxv J. MURPHY-O’CONNOR, 255-256.
- xxxvi Cf. Benedict XVI *Feast of the Presentation of the Lord* 2.2.2013.
- xxxvii Cf. *Ibid.*
- xxxviii Rm 10:14. It should be noted that Paul ends this passage paraphrasing Isaiah: “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!”
- xxxix Mt 28:20.
- xl Interview David Glenday –Tertio 2014.
- xli XIII ORDINARY GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Synodus Episcoporum Bulletin*, “The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith,” 27 October 2012, Proposition 20: The New Evangelization and the Way of Beauty. The proposition opens with the following statement: “In the New Evangelization, there should be a particular attention paid to the way of beauty: Christ, the ‘Good Shepherd’ (cf. Jn 10:11) is the Truth in person, the beautiful revelation in sign, pouring himself out without measure. It is important to give testimony to the young who follow Jesus, not only of his goodness and truth, but also of the fullness of his beauty.”
- xlii AUGUSTINE, *Confessions*, Bk IV, 13.20, quoted in *Synodus Episcoporum Bulletin*, Proposition 20.
- xliiii *Synodus Episcoporum Bulletin*, Proposition 20.
- xliv *Ibid.*
- xlv *Evangelii Gaudium*, 24.
- xlvi *Evangelii Gaudium*, 41.
- xlvii *Ibid.*
- xlviii *Ibid.*
- xlix Cf. J. MURPHY-O’CONNOR, 204; 1 Tm 6:3-10.
- ¹ Aranda argues that religious, like the prophets, are ‘before all else, defenders of the tradition’, p. 21.