

Religious Life as a Prophetic Life Form

(The following is extracted from several articles by Sister Sandra Schneiders, IHM, that appeared in the National Catholic Reporter (U.S.A.) from 4-8 January 2010.)

Religious life has been called a prophetic life form both in official documents and in spiritual writing almost since its inception. It must be emphasized that it is the life form, not the individual religious, that is characterized as "prophetic." Different life forms in the Church offer corporate witness (corporate as in "organic," not as in "corporation") to particular dimensions of Christian life in which all the baptized are called to participate. All are called to contemplation, to fidelity, and fruitfulness, to prophetic witness. But certain life forms, such as enclosed monastic life, matrimony, or ministerial religious life raise one or another of these dimensions to particular visibility by their corporate living of this charism. Not all ministerial religious are prophets, nor does religious life have any monopoly on the charism of prophecy in the Church.

That said, the life form as corporate witness to the charism of prophecy does (or should) explicitly challenge its individual members to the exercise of this charism and empower, support, and promote their fidelity to this charism. The felt call to prophetic ministry and the gifts of spirit, mind, and heart for the exercise of such ministry, therefore, should be factors in discerning a vocation to religious life.

For this reason, most congregations today prefer candidates who have a sturdy sense of self developed through education and work experience and sufficient maturity to live and work well outside a "total institution" environment. Such candidates are more likely to grow into a truly prophetic ministerial identity and spirituality.

The Inaugural Vision or Prophetic Call

Religious life begins, both corporately and individually, in an experience analogous to the inaugural vision of the Old Testament prophets and of Jesus himself. All of the texts you might consult on this topic will indicate that the prophetic vision is not undertaken on one's own initiative. Nor is one appointed to it by human beings. The call comes from God, often to one who feels frightened, unworthy, or incompetent.

Religious orders begin, typically, in the charismatic experience of one or more founders who feel impelled to give themselves to God and to God's work, almost always in response to some historically pressing need. Subsequent members respond to a personal call to join the founders in this

divinely-originated enterprise. The ensuing process of mutual discernment for later candidates is designed to test the “fit” between the prospective member, the foundational charism, and the historical shape that the order has taken since its founding.

Religious life, then, is a charismatic life form, called into existence by the Holy Spirit, to live corporately the prophetic charism in the Church. No congregation “needs” more members than are actually called to it by God. There is no optimal or minimum size for orders or length of their lifespan. Some orders have never had more than a few dozen members, and others have thousands. Some are centuries old and others have had a very brief history. The purpose of the life is not to perpetuate particular congregations nor to staff institutions; it is to live intensely the witness to the Gospel to which the congregation is called and for as long as it is so called.

The Prophetic Task

The distinguishing mark of the prophetic vocation is the proclamation of the Reign of God directly on and in a particular situation. This is why, historically, most orders speak of being “founded for” a particular ministry such as education or helping the poor. Over time, this charism of bearing prophetic witness in the sphere of education, for example, may evolve into addressing all kinds of ignorance (intellectual, moral, political, spiritual, etc.) caused by all kinds of factors (poverty, discrimination, lack of pastoral care, etc.) in all kinds of different situations (schools, spiritual life centers, environmental projects, famine feeding centers, catechetical centers, etc.). But the question giving rise to the particular order is always contextually concrete and can never be answered once and for all or in general. Thus, ministerial innovation by a religious congregation belongs to the nature of the vocation as prophetic.

It is precisely because the prophet is addressing the actual situation, publicly lamenting current oppression as contrary to God’s will, and energizing real people to imagine and begin to strive for an alternate future, that the prophet is often perceived as dangerous to the status quo. Furthermore, the prophet is not simply a political organizer or a humanitarian benefactor but is announcing the Reign of God, good news to the poor. This good news is “release to captives,” “freedom to the oppressed,” a new state of affairs here and now, in which domination, exclusion, stigma, discrimination, oppression of all kinds is overcome. The prophet is acting out of the universal compassion of God by practicing and empowering people to a practice of justice that will make God’s compassion the normal state of affairs, God’s reign on earth as it is in heaven.

Religious Life in the Church Today

Religious, both by the contemplative prayer which grounds their life and by their free choice of and deepened appropriation of consecrated celibacy, evangelical poverty, and prophetic obedience, have reconstructed their lives to maximize their freedom from the kinds of influences and pressures – from persons, possessions, and powers – that would tempt them to ignore or distort the voices that they are actually hearing, or prevent their seeing “the signs of the times” pointing to God’s will in the present situation. Their way of living in community is highly conducive to the ministerial exercise of their prophetic vocation of focusing on the Word of God in the concrete situations in which they minister.

This is what Yahweh asks of you; only this:
To act justly,
To love tenderly,
And to walk humbly with your God.

Micah 6:8