

The Prophetic Word

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Antonio M. Pernia, SVD
Superior General

The *Instrumentum Laboris* of the Synod on the Word of God speaks about the “Word of God as a Hymn with many voices” (IL 9). Through this expression, the *Instrumentum Laboris* refers to the fact that there are several levels of meaning to the phrase “the Word of God” (e.g. the Word of God as the Second Person of the Trinity, the Word of God as the created world, or the Word of God as the Incarnate Word, etc.). The *Lineamenta* for the Synod had spoken earlier of a “symphony of meanings” of the Word of God.

Although not in exactly the same sense, I think we can use this same imagery for the series of reflection days that have been organized by USG-UISG and SEDOS on the occasion of the ongoing Synod on the Word of God. During these three reflection days, we wish to examine the various dimensions of the Word of God – namely, the Word of God as creative, prophetic and liberative. Last week, we reflected on the consecrated life and the creative dimension of the Word of God. Today, we wish to reflect on the consecrated life and the prophetic dimension of the Word of God.

In responding to the request to offer a reflection on the consecrated life and the prophetic dimension of the Word of God, I thought I would ask myself three questions – namely: (1) In what sense is the Word of God prophetic? (2) In what way does the Word of God enhance the prophetic character of the consecrated life? (3) What has been the experience of my own congregation in this regard? These three questions form the three parts of this short reflection.

1. The Prophetic Word.

The first question, then, is in what sense is the Word of God prophetic? I believe three elements need to be considered.

1.1. The Word of God as a Call to Action:

The first element is the character of the Word of God as a call to action. As we know, the Word of God is not an idle word. It is a dynamic and active word. It brings about what it says. In Genesis, we hear God saying: “Let there be light”, and there was light. In chapter 55 of Isaiah, we read:

For just as from the heavens the rain and snow come down and do not return there till they have watered the earth, making it fertile and fruitful, giving seed to him who sows and bread to him who eats, so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; It shall not return to me void, but shall do my will, achieving the end for which I sent it (Is 55:10-11).

As we know, prophetic literature in the bible is replete with examples of how individual prophets or the whole nation of Israel is stimulated to action by hearing the Word of God or reading the Torah. The Word of God is dynamic and active. In the words of Pope Benedict XVI, it is “performative”. Although not exactly in reference to the Word of God, we read the following in his encyclical *Spe Salvi*:

So now we can say: Christianity was not only “good news” – the communication of a hitherto unknown content. In our language we would say: the Christian message was not only “informative” but “performative”. That means: the Gospel is not merely a communication of things that can be known – it is one that makes things happen and is life-changing (SS 2).

1.2. The Word of God as a Call to Conversion:

The second element is the character of the Word of God as a call to conversion. Once again, prophetic literature in the bible contains many examples of the Word of God as a call to conversion. In chapter 8 of the book of the prophet Nehemiah, we hear about the reading of the Book of the Law “from daybreak till midday, in the presence of the men, women and those children old enough to understand” which provoked the people to repent from their sins and seek God (cf. Neh 8:3ff). Perhaps the most dramatic example is the book of the prophet Hosea. The book opens with these words: “In the beginning of the LORD’S speaking ... the LORD said to Hosea: ‘Go, take a harlot wife and harlot’s children, for the land gives itself to harlotry, turning away from the LORD’” (Hos 1:2). In chapter 6, the prophet says:

In their affliction, they shall look for me: “Come, let us return to the LORD, For it is he who has rent, but he will heal us; he has struck us, but he will bind our wounds. He will revive us after two days; on the third day he will raise us up, to live in his presence” (Hos 6: 1-2).

In other words, the Word of God is not only “performative” (bringing about what it says), it is also “transformative”. As the Holy Father says in *Spe Salvi*, the Word of God is “life-changing” (*ibid.*). It calls for a transformation – transformation not only of the individual person but also of the larger society or of the entire nation, as we see in the book of the prophet Hosea. Often, in order to bring about this transformation, God calls on the prophet to go, as it were, “against the current”. He asks the prophet to challenge the complacency of his contemporaries. A courage like that of Hosea is often what is required in prophets sent to a world in need of transformation.

1.3. The Word of God as Response to the Cry of the Poor:

The third element is the character of the Word of God as a response to the cry of the poor. Prophetic literature abounds with descriptions of the oppression and mistreatment of the poor and voiceless by the rich and powerful. Prophets like Isaiah, Ezekiel, Jeremiah, Amos describe the situation of the poor and what God intends to do on their behalf. For example, Amos records the thoughts of the powerful plotting against the poor in the following words:

When will New Moon be over so that we can sell our corn, and Sabbath, so that we can market our wheat? Then, we can make the bushel-measure smaller and the shekel-weight bigger, by fraudulently tampering with the scales. We can buy up the weak for silver and the poor for a pair of sandals, and even get a price for the sweepings of the wheat” (Amos 8:5-6).

In many instances the poor cry to the Lord because they see him as their only refuge. Those who should protect them have become their persecutors (Is 3:15). The poor find in the Word of God a response to their cry. They are consoled and reaffirmed by passages like Psalm 10:17-18: “God, you listen to the laments of the poor, you give them courage, you grant them a hearing, to give judgment for the orphaned and exploited, so that earthborn humans may strike terror no more”.

On the other hand, the oppressors who turn to God to prove their innocence receive words like those of Isaiah 58:6-11:

Is not this the sort of fast that pleases me: to break unjust fetters, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break all yokes? Is it not sharing your food with the hungry, and sheltering the homeless poor; if you see someone lacking clothes, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own kin?

Indeed, for the poor, the conversion of the oppressor is the most certain sign that God has heard their cry. In the story of the prophet Elijah, God’s response to the cry of the poor is mediated by the prophet’s defense of the poor against the powerful of this world (1 Kg 18-19).

To sum up, then, the Word of God is prophetic insofar as it is experienced as a call to action (the Word of God as performative), a call to conversion (the Word of God as transformative), and a response to the cry of the poor (the Word of God as liberative).

2. The Prophetic character of Consecrated Life.

The second question is in what way does the Word of God enhance the prophetic character of the consecrated life? Let me begin by quoting the post-synodal document, *Vita Consecrata*:

The prophetic character of the consecrated life ... takes the shape of a special form of sharing in Christ’s prophetic office 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. The sign value, which the Second Vatican Council acknowledges in the consecrated life, is expressed in prophetic witness to the primacy which God and the truths of the Gospel have in the Christian life. Because of this pre-eminence nothing can come before personal love of Christ and of the poor in whom he lives (VC 84).

In other words, there are two elements which give the consecrated life its prophetic character – the radical following of Christ and dedication to mission, or personal love of Christ and love of the poor. Today, this prophetic character of the consecrated life is being enhanced in the attempt of religious congregations to rediscover the centrality of the Word of God in their life and mission.

2.1. The Word of God in Scriptures.

First, the Word of God in Scriptures. Renewal of the religious life today generally comes in the form of putting the Word of God at the center of their spirituality and community life. Such practices as the daily reading of Scriptures and a regular Bible sharing are becoming more and more common in religious communities. The *Lectio Divina*, recommended by several recent documents of the Church, is being re-learned and practiced by religious communities. Indeed, familiarity with Sacred Scriptures is a powerful and indispensable way of nourishing the following of Jesus and love for the Lord. Listening to the Word of God in Scriptures fosters a personal relationship with Christ, and thus enhances the first element of the prophetic character of the consecrated life, namely, a personal love of Christ.

2.2. The Word of God in frontier situations.

Second, the Word of God in frontier situations. As we know, the Word of God is not “locked up in writing”. Many Synod fathers have referred to this statement in the *Instrumentum Laboris*. As mentioned earlier, the *Instrumentum Laboris* speaks of the Word of God as “a hymn with many voices”. The Word of God is not limited to the biblical word. In his intervention at the Synod, Fr. Wilhelm Steckling, the superior general of the OMI, emphasized the Word of God as found in the “extra-biblical word” – in creation, in history, in the cultures of nations, in the lives of people, especially those in frontier situations. Listening to the Word of God in the Bible is like a schoolroom task which allows us to learn the grammar of God’s Word so that we may recognize the Word of God revealed outside and beyond the Bible. Knowing Christ in the Bible is like getting to know him face to face so that we may recognize him as he passes by among the people in frontier situations.

Vatican II’s document, *Dei Verbum*, begins with the phrase “*Dei Verbum audiens et proclamans*”. The Church proclaims the Word of God but also listens to it – listens to it as it is revealed in Sacred Scriptures, but also, to use the words of *Gaudium et Spes*, in “the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men [and women] of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted” (GS 1). It is particularly through consecrated men and women that the Church does this, especially those consecrated men and women who are engaged in mission at the frontiers of our faith and the margins of society. In frontier situations, they endeavor to listen to the Word of God revealed in the lives of ordinary people, in the aspirations of the poor and marginalized, in the searching of faith-seekers, in the cultural and religious traditions of people of other faiths. This enhances the second element of the prophetic character of consecrated life, namely, dedication to mission or love of the poor.

In both ways, then – that is, listening to God’s Word in Scriptures and listening to God’s Word in frontier situations, the Word of God enhances the prophetic character of consecrated life.

3. The Word of God in Society of the Divine Word.

And now to the third question, namely, what has been the experience of my own congregation in this regard? Let me begin by saying that Vatican II, through its decree, *Perfectae Caritatis*, called for the renewal of religious congregations in the light of three principles – namely, the Gospel, the charism of the founder and the changed conditions of our time (PC 2). In our case, we tried to respond to this call for *aggiornamento* by going back to our founder’s charism, as expressed in the very name of our congregation – “Society of the

Divine Word”. In several general chapters, we sought concrete ways of making the Word of God the center of our life and mission. In one general chapter, we made the biblical pastoral ministry a priority for our congregation. More recently, we have begun to consider the bible a “characteristic dimension” of our life and mission. This means that we seek to imbue any and all of our activities (whether parishes, schools, or frontier mission) with the biblical dimension. To bring this about, coordinators of the biblical pastoral ministry are appointed at all levels of our congregation – general level, continental, province, and local levels.

I believe I can speak of two moments in this effort to instill a biblical dimension to our life and mission.

3.1. The Word for Others.

The first moment was the enthusiasm in carrying out all kinds of biblical initiatives in our missionary activities – creating bible centers, forming bible study groups, giving basic bible seminars, undertaking correspondence courses on the bible, etc. All of this effort was directed to the people, *ad extra*, in our missionary activities. This was the moment of emphasizing the “Word for Others.” In general, our confreres were very good at this – addressing the Word to others. Here, the Word of God was something we do, a work we needed to accomplish. There was very little about the “Word to us”, the Word addressed to ourselves, making the Word of God the center of our lives. Here, many confreres were rather timid or hesitant, or even uninterested.

3.2. The Word for Us.

This situation has, however, gradually changed. We have gradually realized that the Word we proclaim to others will sound empty if it is not a Word that is listened to by us. Thus, in 2005, we declared a “Bible Year” for the whole congregation. We called it “A Year of Divine Word Missionaries Reading the Bible”. Everyone was encouraged to read the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles throughout the year. In addition, 13 passages from Luke and Acts were chosen to be the subject of a monthly *lectio divina* in all of our communities throughout the whole congregation. A special booklet was produced as an aid to this effort, containing the reflections on the 13 passages contributed by selected confreres from all over the world. The possibility of reading the whole bible throughout the year was also offered and a scheme was developed for doing so.

The response to this initiative was extremely good. About 95% of all confreres and all local communities faithfully carried out the program laid out in the booklet. And more importantly, as a result of this exercise, confreres now continue to read the bible regularly, communities continue to gather for *lectio divina*, even provincial councils begin their meetings with a form of bible sharing. In a particular community, regular *lectio divina* has led to members going out and initiating a new apostolate among the beggars, street vendors, and cart-pushers in the city. In other words, the effort to pay particular attention to the “Word for Us” is giving confreres renewed zeal and creativity in continuing their various activities, or starting new ones, in the biblical pastoral ministry – a renewed commitment, in other words, in the mission of bring the “Word to Others”.

Conclusion

It is now time to conclude, and I wish to do so by referring to Jer 20:7-9. Here, the prophet Jeremiah complains about God seducing him into becoming a prophet.

You seduced me, O LORD, and I let myself be seduced; you were too strong for me, and you triumphed. All the day I am an object of laughter; everyone mocks me. Whenever I speak, I must cry out; violence and outrage is my message; The word of the LORD has brought me derision and reproach all the day. I say to myself, I will not mention him, I will speak in his name no more. But then it becomes like fire burning in my heart, imprisoned in my bones; I grow weary holding it in, I cannot endure it.

A similar imagery appears in Luke's story about the disciples on the road to Emmaus. As the risen Lord disappeared from their sight, the disciples said to each other: "Were not our hearts burning (within us) while he spoke to us on the way and opened the scriptures to us?" (Lk 24:32).

The real prophet is the one in whom the Word of God burns as a fire within him or her. It is my hope that the ongoing Synod on the Word of God will bring about consecrated men and women – indeed, an entire Church – whose hearts burn with the Word of God.

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