

by Anthony J. Gittins, CSSp

# They will know who we are by how we live: prophecy or pretentiousness?

*Anthony J. Gittins, CSSp, a member of the Congregation of the Holy Ghost (Spiritans), has taught theology and anthropology at The Catholic Theological Union in Chicago since 1984. He has taught and worked in some 35 countries and is the author of numerous books and articles. He also works with Chicago's disenfranchised, especially homeless women. In his presentation to the 2011 Congress of the Religious Formation Conference, he encouraged religious to consider the role and behavior of prophets, to look deep within, and to allow the Holy Spirit to lead them and their communities into a prophetic future.*



*"Give the reason for the hope you have" (1 Pet 3:15)*

Reflecting on faithful discipleship reminds me of T. S. Eliot's line: "In a world of fugitives, the person taking the opposite direction will appear to be running away." Insightfully, it captures both an intrinsic aspect of religious life and a popular misconception. First, religious should not be absolutely invisible in a moving crowd; if not by dress, then surely by demeanor and orientation (our only significant orientation being our radical turn to the God of Jesus and the needs of God's poor), we should be identifiable by our commitment to a particular course of action and to a direction that is palpably different from that of the crowd. Second, it must be clear we are not running away, but joyfully, energetically, and audaciously running toward a goal so worth living for as to be actually worth dying for. Our direct influence on the crowd may seem minimal, but subliminally who can say? Yet our fierce loyalty to God, expressed in our dedication to God's needy ones, should be in absolutely no doubt. Our apostolic witness must be unambiguously clear; illegible writing or faded signs are of neither use nor ornament.

Were we better religious when our numbers were high and our median age was low? Then why should our integrity be compromised if we are fewer and our median age closer to 80? Numbers and age are of little consequence. The only question worth asking—if we believe that

God calls and will not be without witnesses in the future as in the past—is whether we are running, standing still, twitching nervously, or just waiting for death. Assuming we are not just twitching deathwards—and we must look deep within for honest answers—the corollary is this: where do we find, or seek, the energy and focus to give glory to God and to pour out our lives as a libation until we draw our last breath in trusting peace?

Another conference but the challenges are the same: 50 years ago we were far more religious but fewer conferences, with more uncritical and untested assumptions but fewer concerns. But the past is a foreign country. Today's world cries out for signs of hope but often confuses hope's rare currency with the counterfeit coin of naïve optimism. Optimism and nostalgia are not Christian virtues, but hope certainly is: a non-negotiable Christian hallmark, founded on God's indefectible faithfulness. So we come here with hope already in our hearts but looking to redirect it and focus it more tightly, not on institutions—ecclesial or congregational—or on our own survival, but on God's Mission and God's Realm. Where there's hope, there's life; without hope, bleak despair. What ultimately matters, as Thomas Merton reminded us, is not survival but prophecy, and authentic and sustained prophecy grows only in the fertile ground of hope. Hope and prophecy are weighty words to crush the careless user. Hope that loses its luster corrodes to desolation and despair, and false or vainglorious prophecy

becomes the sound of self-indulgent bombast. As bearers of hope, we must be steadfast and single-minded champions of God's vision and God's justice. Solutions will not be plucked like rabbits from hats or fashioned from the thin and rarified air of wishful thinking. Answers, and indeed problems, must be sought and found at times like this and in our lives, individually and corporately. But introspection is neither the only nor the best form of discernment; we must stand tall in order to look beyond the horizon.

### **Wellspring of hope, sustainer of prophecy**

Every Sunday we affirm our belief that "God has spoken through the prophets"; and the Fourth Eucharistic Prayer says that "through the prophets [God] taught us to hope for salvation." Again: prophecy and hope; so where exactly are these prophets, or are they just assorted dead heroes? And where is the hope, or has it been diluted by optimism or curdled by nostalgia? If we are what we claim to be, Christ's body on Earth, prophets should be, must be, here; but we can muzzle or kill them as effectively as our ancestors did. The death of a thousand snide remarks, slow death by cynicism, or social death by shunning are equally effective, if not actually to kill, then surely to maim, mute and marginalize the irksome or threatening in our Church. Then comfortable and complacent people sleep more easily, while silently and stealthily, necrotic tissue invades and debilitates the Body of Christ.

But lest talk of prophecy give us inflated ideas, we should know that the prophet was no sacred figure like the priest. Prophets are profane—*pro fanum*, meaning outside the temple—not protected by privilege or law but subject to abuse and ridicule. They are in an invidious position, caught in a dilemma: prophets should not draw attention to themselves, lest self-interest or self-delusion block the disclosure of God's righteousness; yet God's word must find a voice in every tongue and tribe and nation, because God's Spirit is faithful, and God will not be without a witness. So prophets must speak up and act decisively, yet pay dearly. So who will speak now, with courageous humility and inspired boldness? The question before us ("If not now, when?") implies others that are uncomfortably pertinent: "If not here, where?"; "If not me, who?" They all sound a note of urgency. But would-be—or called-to-be—prophets tend to resent and resist initially. Recall Jeremiah's anguish:

O Lord, you deceived me; you overpowered me and you prevailed. I am ridiculed all day long; everyone mocks me. The word of the LORD has brought me insult and reproach all day long. But if I say, "I will not mention God or speak any more in God's name," this word is in my heart like a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed I cannot. All my friends are waiting for me to slip ... (Jer 20:7-10).

That cannot justify grandiose ideas about how like Jeremiah we are! Yet his experience is a warning to all who aspire to becoming genuine disciples of Jesus. Just as Jesus said, "I did not come to do my own will, but the will of the one who sent me," so with us; otherwise we are simply walking by sight and not by faith. The same Spirit who sent Jesus sends us, through Baptism and Confirmation; so if we are to face the urgent challenge to prophetic action, it is imperative that we begin by discerning the Holy Spirit. Historically, the Church and religious communities fall into deep trouble when propelled by hard reason rather than imagination, or by pragmatism rather than faith. So let's call down the Spirit, here and now!

The true voice of authentic prophecy is the Holy Spirit. So, if we take seriously Jesus' final discourse in John's Gospel, and his words, "when the time comes, it will not be you speaking, but the Holy Spirit" (Mark 13:11), we must believe that the prophets spoken of in the Creed and EP IV are not just a litany of the dead, but living women and men, some of whom should be here today. Yet—shocking though it is—the institution continues figuratively to kill them (Bourgeois, Callahan, Day, Gebara, Haight, Johnson, and the list goes on). This flagrant fact stands as both warning and challenge to all of us who still seek to deny the false self, to take up the cross, and to follow Jesus daily.

Scholars who encourage "reading against the grain" say the history of Christianity can best be understood as the defeats of the Holy Spirit. The Advocate, the Comforter did not inspire triumphalism or imperialism, did not underwrite the Roman Empire or its trappings, did not endorse coercion, fear, or anathema (a curse or execration), and did not canonize patriarchy or pomp. These are palpable evidence of institutional resistance to the Spirit whose charism includes Understanding, Counsel, Mildness, and Charity, and who strives to renew all humanity and creation. The

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challenge for us—not just for ecclesiastical potentates—is to remain faithful by discerning and responding courageously and creatively to the Spirit, like a bishop at the 1998 Asian Synod. Addressing his peers, he asked: “Did you ever stop to think that distrust of the laity might also be distrust of the Holy Spirit?”<sup>1</sup>

Some people would love to be caressed by the Consoler, while the less passive, once their initial resistance yields, strive to be seized by the Spirit’s creativity. Such seekers are then led and inspired by a Spirit that disturbs and displaces, shakes and shifts, ruffles and rocks all their perceptions, certainties, and procedures. And that, of course, is why the prophet evokes such resistance from those who uphold tradition and the status quo, and why prophets rarely die quietly in their beds.

We also claim to believe that the Spirit who speaks through prophets is “Giver of Life.” So how are today’s prophetic voices life-giving for actual people—people near despair, in penitentiaries, stigmatized as enemy or ostracized from the Christian community? Who is the Spirit’s voice today? Who are the Advocates, Comforters, Life-Givers? If they are not among us then we should be deeply ashamed: religious life is meant to be prophetic. José Comblin said in 2000: “My hope is in the Holy Spirit; the third millennium will be the era of the Spirit who is very active now; but there is increasing conflict between the institutional Church and the presence of God in the people.” His was a Godly, prophetic voice. But the past decade simply underscored his fear and endorsed his hope. A Church that acknowledges its own privilege but fails to be prophetic by speaking truth to power is still some way from its own conversion. More than ever, we must be people of hope and action.

### Spirit-led religious: four signs

What signs mark Spirit-led people? Four suggestions.

- 1) Like Jesus, they literally go out of their way looking for trouble.** Trouble is always found in people, in the human condition, and Jesus is constantly found in the company of troubled people and the troubled circumstances of their lives.
- 2) They seek greater awareness,** truer engagement, deeper empathy (the expansion of my world to recognize another’s story, and the expansion of my self so as to embrace it and her or him), lest they be deaf to the cries of the poor and impervious to sinful structures: they actually want to be disturbed.
- 3) They are convinced they can help change the world** and will be morally guilty unless they try.
- 4) Their lives are full, worthwhile,** and never boring; they have an intuition for the Holy Spirit in the pulse of daily experience, not just in mountaintop epiphanies but in the suffering of the Valley of Tears. That requires honest commitment to ordinary events and ordinary people. But the ordinary is often disordered and tedious, and many

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of us have carefully created ordered little worlds and do all we can to escape the inconvenient and uncomfortable. We do not like our well-laid plans to be interrupted by the subtle urgings or gentle breathings of the Spirit, and we may already be unresponsive to the clamor and chaos at our gates. It’s easy to put on the headphones and turn up the volume, so how can God’s Spirit renew the face of the earth and us with it if we are obstacles rather than instruments?

Certain words have become shibboleths—“in-house jargon”—among religious: we talk easily of being prophetic, liminal, and *communitas*-oriented (i.e., people of high-energy, generosity, selflessness and purposefulness). This can smack of hubris, quite out of touch with reality. But, rather than jettison this language, we should rehabilitate it by exploring its deeper implications. Our first task is to discover experientially whether the people of God—especially our poor sisters and brothers—see in us the virtues we may too easily claim to possess. A great test of our integrity was proposed by Ken Untener of Saginaw, MI. Faced with frequent, lengthy, and often stultifying meetings, he once blurted out, “What does all this have to do with the poor?” To the spontaneous and ingenuous answer, “Nothing, really,” he immediately responded that therefore, and in the future, every diocesan agenda would be headed by the question: “What does this have to do with the poor?” It created a sea-change in the diocese and in people’s attitudes.

And Jesus’ deep question to Bartimeus, “What do you want me to do for you?” exposes a ministry of risk, trust, and mutuality, alien to those who are more controlling. They indeed give, tell, and expect others to be grateful; but Jesus models true ministry, small stuff—the “mini” of ministerium. Dispensers of goods are more familiar with big stuff, the important things; they are superior, in control;

they put the “maxi/magi” in “magisterium.”

People who are truly liminal (“betwixt and between,” lacking status and marginal to established social structure) would hardly recognize most religious as remotely so; we are deluded if we think otherwise. Despite the terrible scandal of sexual abuse, we still mix socially with ease: credit cards, drivers’ licenses, health coverage, accommodation, good food, we have it all. We are not mired by degradation, deprivation, isolation, and ignorance; nor are we obviously striving toward transformation while believing we can change the world. But that is classical liminality: being stripped of social distinction and privilege, in transition for an unknown length of time, but consciously helping to create something new and life-giving for the benefit of the wider group. Yet liminality is not social isolation; its purpose and outcome is the deepest kind of integration, not just personal self-actualization; it simply cannot flourish in a world of individualism, but requires subordinating individual ambition to the community’s real, discerned needs. It partly feeds self-interest, but only in a socio-centric world; liminality has absolutely no place or purpose in an ego-centric world. This brings us back to its connection to the prophetic role. As O’Murchu has it: “Only when religious address the world, sensitive to its needs, by responding in a manner eminently appropriate to the present, can they hope to be liminal once more.”<sup>2</sup> Until then, our banners will remain gaudy but confusing, our signs indecipherable or tarnished, our public witness invisible, and our many voices and our beautiful words lost on the wind. Unless we choose, seek, and embrace true liminality, we are morally bankrupt: we have nothing to meet people’s deepest needs.

Of course we are “good” people but far too individualistic and insufficiently anti-structure or *communitas*-fired, which are the essential corollaries of liminality. *Communitas* is to a community as flame to coal, as wind to sails, or as fuel to a great engine. Or perhaps it is like wine; but as wine needs a decanter or fine crystal, so a powerful engine

without fuel will lie silent, coals without a fire are cold and dead, and windless sails flap limply on the mast. *Communitas* is the energy created by a liminal group living God’s dream. But like nuclear fuel, its energy is volatile and rare, difficult to handle, and dangerously powerful. It is the inspired, creative energy of the Holy Spirit channeled through dedicated and zealous human instruments, giving a people direction and purpose. It sustains faith-filled risk-takers and those called on behalf of a community that, perversely, often resists and sometimes destroys its own prophets. But without *communitas*-energy, every community slowly dies, and yet without a supportive, sustaining, committed community, every *communitas*-group burns up or burns out. *Communitas* generates great commitment, imagination, and energy, but not by numbers, power, or authority. Its constituents are vulnerable people with few material resources or endorsements but great faith and commitment; they are not self-important, and they face a daunting task. But there are such tasks; there are certainly such people, and there is an urgent need. Comes the hour then, comes the prophet?

For sure, no carefully crafted keynote can generate and sustain the energy God’s people need. That can only come from a conscious commitment to our own continuing conversion. So, we don’t need more words, in rhetoric or in writing; we are bombarded by noise and swamped by verbiage. But when the words fall silent, the voices of the poor can become more audible and their cries for justice will grow louder—because the Suffering Servant of Isaiah “did not raise his voice or make it heard in the street,” he was able to hear the cries. As a result, he “will faithfully bring forth justice; he will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established [God’s] justice on earth” (Isa 42:2-3). This is the prophetic task: radical (from the roots) dedication to God’s justice. Actions speak louder and more persuasively than words; people crave example more than theory, so unless we are embodying a Jesus response and not just telling people what to do, we are “whited sepulchers,” devoid of life. Religious are especially and urgently called to the margins to encounter the people who struggle to subsist there. But we are friends of God and prophets only if we have a wrenching hunger and raging thirst for God’s justice, and for putting our lives on the line, as Jesus did. We may not change the world dramatically, but we can help mend it, one day, one action, at a time. This is *tikkun olam* in Hebrew, something we all do differently but each of us must urgently do.

Once we put our hand to the plow, we cannot look back. Prophets are God’s instrument and God’s choice: not insignificant, but certainly not God. Yet it is God, not the prophet, who controls and assures the outcome. Nobody was less likely than Abraham and Sarah, as good as dead, both of them, to produce nations. The idea was preposterous, their reaction predictable, and their fertility only in their dreams. But if God’s promises were sure then, what about today? God will neither abandon this people nor simply fit in with our plans, but God does call and send disciples from age to age. So the question is not difficult: will we—specifically, will I—stand up and be sent? Or do we, like Sarah, find the idea rather laughable?

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## Recognizing the prophets

One of J.D. Salinger's characters makes this critically insightful statement (albeit spoken with a British accent):

If it's the religious life you want, you ought to know right now you're missing out on every single religious action that's going on around [here]. You don't even have sense enough to drink when somebody brings you a cup of consecrated chicken soup—which is the only kind Bessie ever brings to anybody around this madhouse. So just tell me, buddy. Even if you went out and searched the whole world for a master—some guru, some holy person—to tell you how to say your Jesus Prayer properly, what good would it do you? How in hell are you going to recognize a legitimate holy one if you don't even know a cup of consecrated chicken soup in front of your nose? Can you tell me that?<sup>3</sup>

And how will we recognize the prophets; or do they have to be dead first, like Dorothy or Oscar? How will we hear the call if we don't listen carefully? Salinger was right: if we can't recognize consecrated chicken soup, or passion for God's justice, or advocacy for God's marginalized and muted, how on God's Earth will we recognize Jesus in faces we see every day? Dorothy was right too: "We only love God as much as we love the person we love the least." Let's not get suckered by self-importance but at least commit to reading the signs of the times and acting differently, and now.

Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Isaiah knew exile, as do we; many of us certainly feel exiled from a once-familiar Church but are not quite sure why or who else feels as we do. Prophets, says Walter Brueggemann, tried "to help people enter into exile, to be in exile, and to depart out of it"<sup>4</sup>; and they are urgently needed here and now. They sense that precisely through such exile, God is doing something new: discontinuity and dismantling are in the air; old answers no longer help, and imagination is urgently needed. Jeremiah risked his life by claiming that God's will is profoundly at odds with the dominant cultural values: politics, priesthood, and power combined in a lethal mix, but prophets call God's dispirited, disillusioned, exhausted people to stand fast and remain faithful and ready for action, and they courageously commit themselves to that, undeterred by the

cost. But what needs to be born struggles in the womb until the old and barren has died and made space for the new life. Those who hold tight only to what they know will be white-knuckled, and it is impossible to embrace with closed hands. Unless clenched fists become open hands, our stance is hostile and we can receive nothing.

Jeremiah's world is not so far from our own: liberation movements thrived, creating massive social upheaval; moral authority was compromised; cherished institutions were tarnished, and trusted people were exposed as hypocrites. We are only too familiar with this broken world. Today the dispossessed still struggle for justice and refuse to be silenced, and if we cannot see God's finger pointing to myriad opportunities for our own collaboration and generous service, we must be willfully blind. So who are the advocates, the comforters, the paracletes among us?

Jeremiah addressed a people whose stable world had gone forever. In exile and unable to face reality, they engaged in denial, self-deception, and wishful thinking<sup>5</sup>—like so many today. The false prophet Hananiah promised a return to past glories where God would meet people's expectations—a kind of Prosperity Gospel—but instead Jeremiah calls them to accountability, conversion, and commitment to creating a new future that most of the people simply find too demanding and impossible to visualize. Instead of certainty, he calls for hope; but without certainty they can only imagine despair. Not only do they resist God who is dismantling the old world, but they vent their frustration and fear on anyone who speaks God's truth. How familiar is this! False prophets betray themselves by uncritically supporting establishment and status quo; true prophets are always an embarrassment, especially to the power-holders.<sup>6</sup> Jeremiah's bold language frightens some, but his passionate pastoral care energizes him and offers comfort to people of faith. As during the Exile, so today: part of a great edifice that overreached itself like the Tower of Babel is imploding; the patriarchal, gerontocratic, autocratic institutional Church is deeply flawed yet remains largely impervious and unrepentant. It has suffered a massive loss of trust by failing to model the radical inclusion and compassion of Jesus. Refusing to be transparent or accountable, it hides behind secrecy, privilege, and double standards. Built on Constantinian privilege, massively buttressed since Trent,

renovated by Vatican II, but massively modified since then, it is staffed by legions of restorationists and stands astride a dangerously widening fault-line.

Religious life is a historically proven alternative to such posturing; but unless real religious—you and I—put our lives on the line like Jeremiah, the institutional Church will continue to seek cover behind denial. This is neither cynical nor disloyal talk, and it takes no prophet to see it; but it will take more than one prophet to respond appropriately. Now is the moment for religious to stand up and stand fast. Today, the call to religious life is not only countercultural but a direct challenge to ecclesiastical bombast and masquerade. Restorationism is an obstacle to authentic—Spirit-led—renewal; but true reform, radical refounding, and refusal to fade away are imperatives for religious as much today as they ever were.

In order to receive and to let God grow in us, we must first let go and diminish. But we may not realize what God is offering: new life, new models of religious life. And we may have forgotten that religious life is an instrument and not an end; a servant of God's Realm and God's poor, so that the pastoral focus and articulation of religious life must shape its social organization, and not vice versa: new things cannot be wrought with the old tools and methods, any more than we can return to the typewriter and chalkboard as primary means of communication. Unless pastoral ministry is revitalized by our re-commitment to the example of Jesus through direct encounter, inclusive table-fellowship, reconciling foot-washing, and bold outreach beyond our comfort zone, our witness, far from being prophetic, will only be pathetic posturing and pretence. The institutional Church, currently compromised, is concerned with censure and control, denial and displacement activity. This is not new, but is part of a cycle of contrition and triumphalism, penance and pomp, humility and hubris. And religious are supposed to provide a counterbalance to excess by showing the way of true piety.

Historically, the Church has struggled to find a single, authentic face, offering now the stern face of power and then the gentle face of poverty or piety. The Church of Power is a top-down operation that tries to control both people and theology, while the Church of Poverty,<sup>7</sup> flourishes at the bottom and the edges, generating practical theology or holiness and attracting a small but rich harvest of disciples. This is also the Church of Prophecy, radical discipleship and mission, and it will always live in tension with the forces of secularism, ambition, and hegemonic power. The early, Spirit-led Church of the fragile, faithful few gradually developed another, less charismatic personality as it evolved into a powerful, papal, patriarchal institution in grave danger of forgetting its accountability and moral responsibility. As Christendom drove ahead like a gathering wave, it inundated Europe like a tsunami with the waters of baptism, growing in influence by "flattery and battery."<sup>8</sup> The distinction between Church and world might have been obliterated without reform movements and religious orders to keep Jesus' vision alive.

But there remains a serious danger that the Church of Poverty or Prayer will withdraw, turn inward, and lose its

centrifugal missionary momentum, whether due to intimidation by the Church of power, internal corruption and cover-up, or loss of confidence in times of decline: all these scenarios are historically attested. This would be a fundamental betrayal of the prophetic religious vocation, which is to offer—from a marginal and relatively powerless position—a moral alternative both to the secular world and the Church of pomp; religious life should be a "high-intensity movement" and a "contrast society," as one theologian puts it.<sup>9</sup> We must not lose confidence in God's abiding faithfulness—not to our institutions as such, but to God's own promise of surprising renewal. But we must keep faith.

### **Imaginative hope: a scarce ecclesial resource**

Prophets are "inspired": the Holy Spirit (God's imagination in action?) breathes through them, expanding their imagination, which is the ability to recombine past experience with deep reflection and so to create new images and strategies to face novel and unusual crises. It is rarely found in cautious, pragmatic people but widely among those who ask new questions, make new demands of themselves, and will not take no for an answer. Prophets seem to channel God's imagination and speak of what still might be, in God's time and God's way. They neither foresee nor foretell the future, but they do, says Brueggemann, "offer the present as a shockingly open and ambiguous matter, out of which various futures may yet emerge."<sup>10</sup> They call God's dispirited, exhausted ones to open their tight fists and hard hearts in order to relinquish and to receive, but with imagination and deep knowledge of the authentic tradition.<sup>11</sup> Urgently needed now, this resource must be here in this room today, if we believe God is faithful to God's own. One writer put it this way: "The day came when the risk to remain tight in the bud was more painful than the risk it took to blossom."<sup>12</sup> Well, "now is the acceptable time: this is the day of salvation" (2 Cor 6:2). Unless we first blossom, we can produce no new fruit.

Fiscal constraints and lack of numbers too often dictate pastoral planning and action; they also compromise prophetic witness. Imaginative people ask, of themselves and each other: "Why not?" and "What if?" What if I examine whether, or how, my daily life actually impacts God's poor and promotes God's justice? Why don't I think and act differently by simply asking people how I can better help? What if I were to change one single component of my daily schedule? Why do I not take a calculated risk for the sake of the mission I serve? We take vows "for life", but for whose life? Whose life actually benefits from my vows? Unless they are generative, they are sterile or simply self-serving. So how has my life really helped my sisters and brothers, and how might it still do so before it's too late? Unless a theology of detachment from things is also a theology of attachment to people, it is barren and a betrayal of the incarnational, embodied, earthy ministry of the Jesus we follow. We are so constrained and imprisoned by our own narrow and biased understanding.

Without imagination, constantly pushing beyond what is to what could and might still be, our fidelity will be

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only to our present insights, and that is a kind of idolatry: worshipping our own ideas or images of God (or Justice or Virtue) rather than Godself. Prophets called people away from such idolatry, to witness to the One, True God. Walter Hollenweger spoke of authentic witness as evangelical *martyria*, or readiness to “gamble with our understanding of God, of our faith, and of Church.”<sup>13</sup> If we “gamble” in this sense, our understanding of God, faith, and Church will not escape unscathed. In fact, we might be astonished at how different God is from our carefully constructed and preserved version and how demanding yet enabling God really is. The biggest obstacle to our conversion might be our failure to understand that God has actually chosen us to do something before we die. There is time, but the clock ticks on.

Why are we so reluctant to take the prophetic leap, to risk all for God’s vision? Is it because, lacking imagination, we do not see the opportunities within the problems we do see? Because “authority” does not support us? Or because we have lost our nerve, we are “past it,” and we just want a quiet life? “A life of equilibrium is out of touch with reality,” says Brueggemann.<sup>14</sup> To be alive is to be in tension. Alexander Schmemmann says one reason for our prophetic failures is simply sloth—a very uncomfortable word. The basic disease is sloth. It is that strange laziness and passivity of our entire being that pushes us “down” rather than “up”—that constantly convinces us that no change is possible and therefore desirable. It is a deeply rooted cynicism that, to every spiritual challenge, responds, “what for?” [not “what if?”] and makes our life one tremendous spiritual waste. It is the root of all sin because it poisons the spiritual energy at its very source.<sup>15</sup>

The antidote to sloth, and the spur to imagination, is real hope. Says Jonathan Sacks, “it takes no courage to be an optimist, but it takes a great deal of courage to hope. Those who hope survive; those who are disillusioned, accept.”<sup>16</sup> Or, as Gutierrez said, because the Christian is not

looking for hope but is a bearer of hope, wherever there is a Christian, there too is hope. Far from a breezy disposition, hope is a theological virtue, a gift of God; and whoever bears that kind of prophetic witness, *martyria*, can change the world. Jeremiah articulates passionate hope; he was a prophet of hope.<sup>17</sup> Without hope our vitality withers. With Jeremiah we can believe there is more and better to come (Jer 29:5-9).

### Living God’s dream: seven suggestions

“Hope is the dream of the waker.”<sup>18</sup> Not a daydream, but actively imagining God’s idea of justice and remaining faithful to God’s faithfulness. It requires discernment and willingness to commit. Torpor, depression, and fear can paralyze imagination. When people can think of nothing to do, they either do nothing or wait for certainty or orders. But those who walk by faith cannot expect certainty: the challenge is to live amid ambiguity-with-possibilities. We can neither be shielded from risk nor gifted with complete clarity; vulnerability, risk, and abiding hope will accompany us.

So now is the time for a little recapitulation and seven (the perfect number!) practical suggestions.

**1** My response to the question, “If not now, when?” is quite simply: “It’s now—or never” at least for most of us above the equator. Many communities have merged in recent years. If necessity is the mother of invention, what inventions will these mergers produce? Two possible sequels to merging are emerging and/or submerging. Some communities appear to be sounding the klaxon and preparing to submerge forever in one final, deep dive. Others, like butterflies, might still emerge from the chrysalis and sing for as long as there is voice to give God praise. Recall the story of the noble and stately bamboo: cut down, stripped bare and split in two, it became a channel of water into parched fields. Not what the bamboo expected, but certainly what the rice fields needed. In its dying, bamboo gave life to the community. Today many lives depend on others’ selfless assistance. Where are the dedicated religious prophets—the bamboo, willing to be stripped and cut for the sake of a new harvest?

**2** We must break new ground and actively seek liminality by encountering God’s poor and marginalized people: the margin is always the center of mission, just as it was for Jesus; and it is quite inadequate to create outreach ministry for those in formation unless leadership and all able-bodied members actually know God’s poor. Unless we are walking with the poor, we will be (at best) walking by them and (at worst) walking on them. Jesus did not just tell others what to do: he did it. So must we, urgently, intentionally, compassionately.

**3** Numbers are almost inconsequential: our vitality, weighed by the gold-standard of our zeal, is the only adequate measure of our prophetic commitment. James Dunn<sup>19</sup> said bluntly: “there is a disturbing quality about the urgency of Jesus’ call—a shaking of the foundations—that

those who want a quiet life are bound to resent and resist.” Our religious profession is a statement that we do not seek a quiet life. Now we must test that claim, for God’s glory and God’s people. But there is a de facto two tiered religious life operating today: mission and risk, or maintenance and stability. If the latter offers respectability; the former is the way to life. Remember Margaret Mead: “Never doubt that a small group of people can change the world: it’s all that ever has.”

But Jesus said it first. Before inventing the light bulb, Thomas Edison did 18,000 experiments: that’s one a day for 49 and three-quarters years! That’s no quiet life; that’s perseverance, commitment! Rudy Wiebe said “you repent, not by feeling bad but by thinking (and acting) differently.” It’s not too late to repent, but this is surely no time to feel bad. The challenge is to think and act with imaginative courage, together, and now. What do you have to lose? What do others have to gain? What if you went to the edge? Why not launch into the deep?

**4** A small group with *communitas*-energy can generate prophecy when it has: a long and noble common memory; acknowledged experience of pain; real hope-in-action; effective communication; some tension with the broader community; and when it is perceived as an irritant. But it can never do so if it yields to despondency; suffocates individual imagination and commitment; fails to acknowledge past pain; suffers burnout weariness; has weak leadership; and lacks conviction.

**5** Both profiles—of authentic piety and legitimate power—have their place. But, says Brueggemann, “What would happen to ministry if in the Church there were talk of the newness of God in the midst of a shambles of a failed [institution], diseased society, and troubled faith?” What if mutual support replaced suspicion? Are we really a resurrection people? Resurrection faith is not only for funerals or for Easter<sup>20</sup>; it is for Ordinary Time and lasts until the parousia.

**6** Jesus’ ministry has four acts: encounter, table-fellowship; foot-washing, and boundary-crossing. He calls us to the same prophetic practice. Whom do we encounter—

and whom have we never met? With whom do we gather at table, and who has never been our guest? Whom do we expect to wash our feet, and whose feet have we never seen? And what boundaries do we cross—boundaries of privilege and exclusion, boundaries of status and comfort? “As I have done, so you must do.”

**7** Finally, for God’s sake and our own, I urge each one as seriously and passionately as I am able: go from this place, seek, find, and encounter the marginalized and muted people within and on the fringes of your community, and dare to ask them what they need, what they seek, what gives them hope and brings them close to despair. Listen carefully to them, repent, and think and act differently. Try to recognize consecrated chicken soup when you see it. That could change your life and save theirs. It’s prophetic religious living. It’s the Way of Jesus and the Way of the Cross. Above all, it’s the Way to Life. ■

## Endnotes

1. *The Tablet*, May 2, 1998: 565.
2. Diarmuid O’Murchu, *Religious Life: A Prophetic Vision*. (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1991):40-41.
3. J.D. Salinger, *Franny and Zooey* (1961), Brown Little Co., 1991.
4. Walter Brueggemann. *Hopeful Imagination: Prophetic Voices in Exile* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986) 1.
5. *Ibid.* 12.
6. *Ibid.* 21.
7. Including the monk-popes of the 11th century Gregorian Reform, and other significant figures, including marginalized women.
8. Ramsey McMullen. *Christianizing the Roman Empire*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984) 119.
9. T.J. Gorringer. *Furthering Humanity. A Theology of Culture*. (UK, Ashgate, 2004)145.
10. Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination*, 24.
11. Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination*, 2-3.
12. Anais Nin. The quotation can easily be found on any search engine, but the citation is not given.
13. Walter Hollenweger. “Evangelization in the World Today.” *Concilium*, 114. (New York, Seabury Press, 1979)40-1.
14. Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination*, 23.
15. Alexander Schmemmann, *Great Lent*, 1969.
16. Jonathan Sacks, *To Heal a Fractured World*. (Shocken Books, 2005)165.
17. Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination*, 10, 29.
18. Cameroonian theologian Eboussi Boulaga—but perhaps borrowed from Socrates.
19. James D.G. Dunn is professor of New Testament at Durham, England, and the author of a massive, three-volume study of Jesus and discipleship.
20. Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination*, 30.

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