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Prophetic words from a prophet for our time

Morna Murray | Jan. 22, 2013 NCR Today

Franciscan Fr. Joe Nangle is a member of the leadership of the Franciscan Holy Name Province [1] and currently ministers to the Hispanic population at Our Lady Queen of Peace Parish [2] in Arlington, Va. On Sunday, he was the guest homilist at the Province's special Mass in honor of Martin Luther King Jr. at St. Anthony's in Boston. I have known Joe Nangle for many years and am fortunate and blessed to call him my dear friend -- I am a far better person for it. He is one of the most prophetic church voices of our time. With his permission, I have included the full text of his powerful homily here.

Seasonal Reflection: Celebrating Martin Luther King Jr.
by Joseph Nangle, OFM

The coincidence of the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. holiday and the 2013 inauguration of America's first African-American president for a second term must be seen as truly historic. Just 150 years ago, another president issued the Emancipation Proclamation, freeing all people of African descent from slavery, and 91 years later in 1954, the courts finally decided that segregating black children from others in America's schools was against the law.

Our country has come a long, long way in overcoming our national original sin of racism. It has also taken a long, long time for the day to dawn when a black man has the privilege and the right to take the oath of office as our country's chief executive, swearing to "preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States" -- the same Constitution which for 74 years allowed for his people to be bought and sold as property.

With that reason we celebrate today that long, and as of yet, unfinished journey toward "liberty and justice FOR ALL." We celebrate, too, the towering influence that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. had on that process during his short 39 years of life. In the midst of "Hail To the Chief" and the "Star Spangled Banner" on this inauguration weekend, we shall hear echoes of Dr. King's "I Have a Dream" speech given at the Lincoln Memorial 50 years ago this August. And we shall rightfully rejoice and marvel at how far we have come as a nation.

And yet -- and yet ...

Pushing Nonviolence. Many, including myself, say that this wonderful coincidence of Barack Obama's second inauguration and the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday on the same weekend must serve to push us still further in the great cause of equality and nonviolence which Dr. King spoke about, lived out and, yes, died for. They say that we need more than "I have a dream" rhetoric. In a word, they insist, we need today the same kind of prophetic voice which the black pastor from Atlanta, Ga., hurled at the powerful in his day. We need the words that this black clergyman would say to this black president.

So for a moment this weekend, let us move beyond the familiar and soothing words of "I Have A Dream" and listen to other prophetic utterances of Dr. King, applying them to our time and place in history:

· "The curse of poverty has no justification in our age. It is socially cruel and blind as the practice of cannibalism at the dawn of civilization, when men ate each other because they had not yet learned to take food

from the soil or to consume the abundant animal life around them. The time has come for us to civilize ourselves by the total, direct and immediate abolition of poverty" [Where Do We Go From Here -- Chaos or Community? 1967]

· "A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than of programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death." [Ibid.]?

· "If America's soul becomes totally poisoned, part of the autopsy must read Vietnam [Iraq, Afghanistan]. It can never be saved so long as it destroys the hopes of people the world over." ["Beyond Vietnam" 1968]

In preparing this research, I spoke with an African-American Jesuit theologian and asked him what Dr. King might say to Barack Obama today. His answer was immediate and clear: "This president needs the kind of prophet speaking to him that President Lyndon Johnson had in Martin Luther King Jr." The priest went on to detail several areas which Dr. King would point out to Mr. Obama as needing urgent and radical attention: immigration, Afghanistan, torture, poverty and bombing civilian populations with drones.

Hearing the Prophet. Taking our brother Jesuit's observations a few steps further, I believe that our Catholic church -- and other Christian churches, as well as synagogues and mosques in this country -- also need to hear the prophet Martin Luther King today. Listen to his words directed at the churches 50 years ago and again apply them to the church of our time and place:

· "So often the contemporary Church is a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. So often it is an archdefender of the status quo." ["Letter from a Birmingham Jail" 1963]?

· "The Church must be reminded that it is not the master or the slave of the State, but rather the conscience of the State. It must be the guide and the critic of the State, and never its tool." ["Strength To Love" 1963]

· "Called to be the moral guardian of the community, the Church at times has preserved that which is immoral and unethical. Called to combat social evils, it has remained silent behind stained glass windows." [Ibid.]

Our Catholic church in America has become what Dr. King called a "weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound." We are known primarily for our opposition to abortion, stem-cell research and same-sex marriage. At the same time, the enormous issues of national and global poverty, war-making and the destruction of our planet go unnoticed or surely unaddressed by most of our bishops, especially in the exercise of their diocesan pastoral ministries. We are known as a church that identifies with the Republican Party when we should stand over all political parties as their conscience.

I believe that the Catholic church -- that is, all of us who are the church in the United States -- together with our Protestant, Jewish and Muslim sisters and brothers are called at this time in history to be the kind of prophetic presence we celebrate on this inauguration and Martin Luther King Jr. holiday weekend. Let us pray fervently that we might bring to life, as Dr. King did in his life, the words of the great New Testament hymn, the Benedictus: "You shall be called the prophet of the Most High to go before the Lord to prepare his ways."

We can be no less at this moment in our national life if we wish to receive a favorable judgment from history and, ever more importantly, a merciful judgment from God.

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