NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (https://www.ncronline.org)

Call, response and task of prophetic action

Sandra Schneiders | Jan. 4, 2010

This is part two of a five-part essay by Immaculate Heart of Mary Sr. Sandra Schneiders on the meaning of religious life today. In this part Schneiders, professor of New Testament Studies and Christian Spirituality at the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley, describes Jesus as prophet and writes about the call and task of prophetic action in ?Religious Life as Prophetic Lifeform.? These installments run from Jan. 4 through Jan. 8.

In an article published by NCR last October I described ministerial religious life as it emerged in the Church in the 1600?s, was officially approved in 1900, and has finally become distinct, in the wake of Vatican II, from the semi-cloistered monastic-apostolic hybrid lifeform of the early 1900?s. I described it as a lifeform closely modeled on that of Jesus? original itinerant band of disciples, those women and men like Peter, Mary Magdalene, and others whom Jesus called to go about with him on a full-time basis in Palestine during his earthly ministry and, after his resurrection, to the ends of the earth. Like Jesus himself they were called to leave home, family, employment, personal belongings, life projects and to devote themselves full-time to the ministry of proclaiming the Reign of God in word and deed.

In this essay I want to go beyond the description of the itinerant lifestyle of these disciples into the theological nature of the prophetic lifeform that this lifestyle embodies. In such an investigation we need always to keep in mind that all believers, whatever their particular Christian vocation, are equally called to discipleship and to holiness. However, not all disciples are called to this particular lifeform which, as we will see, consists in a particular assimilation to Jesus? prophetic identity and mission.

John Paul II insisted at considerable length in Vita Consecrata (the post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation published in 1996, Part II, 84 ff.), following the lead of the Council, that Religious Life is a prophetic lifeform in the Church. Prophecy is not all there is to Religious Life, just as it did not exhaust the mission and ministry of Jesus. But our question here is: what does it mean to say that ministerial Religious Life is essentially a prophetic lifeform? Only from this basis can we address some of the questions about the life, and particularly about the role of obedience in this life, that are being raised by the current Vatican investigations.

The Pre-Paschal Jesus as Prophet: Model of Religious Life

The fact
Throughout his public ministry Jesus functioned as a prophet recognizably in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets, especially Moses, Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Hosea who are evoked explicitly and implicitly in the narrative of Jesus? life, death, and resurrection. People clearly regarded Jesus as a prophet (see Mt.14:5; 21:11, 46; Lk. 7:16; 7:39; Jn. 6:14) and he did not reject or refuse this identification as he did that of

king. On the contrary, Jesus spoke of himself as a prophet by comparing himself to the prophet Jonah (see Mt.12:39), identifying himself as the prophet not accepted in his own town or among his own people (see Lk.4:24), and predicting that he would suffer the fate of the prophets, namely, persecution by the religious authorities and finally execution in the Holy City (see Lk. 13:33).

In John?s Gospel there are two extraordinary scenes in which the pre-Easter Jesus? prophetic identity is progressively discerned by his textual interlocutors and clearly revealed to the readers. In John 4 the Samaritan Woman starts by seeing Jesus as a ?man? and a ?Jew,? and then recognizes that he is a ?patriarch? greater than Jacob, and finally exclaims, ?I perceive that you are a prophet? (Jn. 4:19). In John 9 the healed man-born-blind starts by referring to his healer as ?the man called Jesus,? and goes on to solemnly testify before the Jewish authorities (at the cost of excommunication) that Jesus ?is a prophet? (Jn. 9:17) come from God.

After the Resurrection, when the risen Jesus, unrecognized, joins the two disciples on the way to Emmaus and asks them what they are discussing as they walk, they reply that they are talking about ?Jesus of Nazareth, a prophet mighty in word and work before God and all the people? (Lk. 24:19) and whom their leaders had executed. Obviously, they were voicing the perception of Jesus? identity common among his followers.

The itinerant band of followers who accompanied Jesus during his public life and were commissioned by him after his Resurrection to continue his mission were initiated into Jesus? own prophetic ministry by Jesus himself. Many ministries of the Word, such as apostleship, evangelization, and teaching developed in the early Church and there was much overlapping among them. All of them had a prophetic dimension though each was specified by distinctive goals such as proclaiming the Gospel to people who had not yet heard it or catechizing converts. Religious Life, as the lifeform most closely modeled on that of Jesus? original itinerant band, also involves participation in these various forms of ministry of the Word. But I want to suggest that one of those ministries, prophecy, is central to and defining of the Religious lifeform as it was of Jesus? pre-Easter ministerial life.

Since I am interested here in the essentially prophetic character of ministerial Religious Life I will not attempt a comprehensive phenomenology or theology of prophecy in general. (I suggest the still inspiring work of Abraham Heschel, The Prophets [1962] as a resource for understanding Old Testament prophecy and Marcus Borg?s Jesus [2006], especially chapters 7-10, on Jesus as prophet, as well as Walter Brueggemann?s The Prophetic Imagination [rev. ed., 2001] on the spirituality of prophecy). Rather, I will examine the life of Jesus as prophet under three headings in order to show, in the next section, the parallel between Jesus? prophetic vocation and religious life as a prophetic lifeform in the Church. I will look at Jesus? mission and ministry in terms of his prophetic call, his task as prophet, and his life as prophet.

The Prophet?s Call

The first thing to say about biblical prophecy is that it is not about foretelling the future, predicting what will happen at a chronologically later date. Prophecy is about telling the absolute future of God, what Jesus called ?The Reign of God,? into the present. The prophet is immersed in the life of the people in a particular place and time and is commissioned by God to interpret that situation in the light of God?s dream for this people and the whole of humanity. Listening to the voice of God, reading the ?signs of the times? (see Mt. 16:13), and focusing the Word of God in the present is the defining feature of prophecy.

In Israel?s history, for example, Moses was called by God in his inaugural experience at the Burning Bush and commissioned by God to interpret the experience of the Hebrew people in the light of God?s plan for them: liberation, desert journey, covenant, entrance into and life in the Promised Land within their global vocation to be a ?light to the nations.? Jesus was sent by God, as a first century Palestinian Jew among Jews, to interpret their experience of oppression under the colluding domination systems of the Roman Empire and the Jerusalem Temple in light of God?s plan for them, a plan for shalom, universal well-being and flourishing as the People of

God.

The prophet is not a divine ?ambassador pleni-potentiary? from God, who alone has independent or absolute access to God?s plan. The prophet is part of the people to whom he or she is sent, nurtured from birth in the religious and social wisdom of that people, product of its history, participant in its prayer, inheritor of its dreams, victim of and sometimes even sharer in its sins and errors. It is because the prophet is one with the people that he or she can speak for this people to God and for God to this people.

But the prophet, one of and with the people, is also in a special relationship with God. Most of the great prophetic figures, like Moses, Jeremiah and Hosea, Mary and Jesus himself were called by God to their special mission in some kind of intense, transformative, revelatory religious experience that scripture presents as an ?inaugural vision? or a prophetic call. Jesus? baptism followed by the desert temptations are presented as such an experience. God takes possession of the prophet in a special way, more or less to the exclusion of any other major life commitment, and forms the prophet spiritually -- Marcus Borg says ?mystically? in Jesus? case -- to mediate the special interaction between God, this people, and the particular historical situation.

However, the prophet is not a puppet. Everything depends on the prophet?s obedience, the prophet?s ?yes.? Jesus? ?Be gone, Satan? and choice to serve God alone (Mt. 4:10) in response to God?s choice of him as ?Beloved Son,? or Mary?s ?Be it done to me according to [God?s] word? (Lk. 1:36) in response to her call to be mother of the messiah, exemplify the partnership of God and the prophets in the great work to which God calls them.

Luke underlines the continuity between Jesus and his prophetic forebears by constructing a dramatic scene of Jesus? emergence into public ministry. Jesus, in the synagogue of his home town, quotes Isaiah in reference to himself to express his self-understanding of his mission:

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."....Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Lk. 4:16-21).

It is not surprising that many ministerial Religious Congregations cite this passage in their Constitutions or supplementary literature. Religious recognize this description of Jesus the prophet as their own ministerial magna carta.t

Finally, the prophet?s mission takes place in and is directed to a particular historical situation. This helps account for the ambiguity of the prophet?s mission which is always open to more than one interpretation, at least by the community and its neighbors, if not, often enough, by the prophet him or herself. Prophetic speaking and acting does not have the advantage of hindsight precisely because it is addressed to ?what is happening? right now.

This is the cause of one of the major points of contention between ministerial Religious and some ecclesiastical officials today as well as in the past. Are Religious a general ecclesiastical ?work force? to be deployed by the hierarchy according to institutional needs or are they called to respond to particular, actual challenges in a variety of particular places and settings among particular groups and people of all kinds (some of whom are rejected by the religious institution itself) whose needs cry out for ministerial attention? The theology of ?charism? in relation to Religious Life itself and the variety of Congregations, as we will see, suggests the latter.

If this is the case, religious are, by vocation, much less ?controllable,? less predictable and readily submissive than some officials would like.

The Prophet?s Task
The task of the prophet is to bear witness to God, by word and work, to God?s people in a particular context or historical situation. Let us look first at the word and work of Jesus within which God and the new dispensation that God is inaugurating in Israel emerge into clarity.

Because prophecy is concrete and particular rather than abstract and general the prophet tends to use a particular ?genre? or type of speech. The pre-Easter Jesus (more accurately pictured by the Synoptic than by John in this regard) did not usually teach formally in the sense of expounding scriptural texts or official ecclesiastical positions, giving long theological or moral discourses, or explaining difficult concepts. His discourse was metaphorical and participative.

First, the prophet?s message is not about ?the world beyond? or outside this one. Jesus tended to teach metaphorically, by parable (?likeness? stories) or aphorism (pithy ?one-liners?). His stories and aphorisms were about everyday realities in this world: about farming and baking, shepherding or tax collecting; about parents and children, guests and strangers, traveling and building, borrowing and lending, marrying, giving birth, dying. They functioned to subvert the conventional wisdom associated with these everyday realities and thereby shed new light on the more important realities that they symbolized.

Second, Jesus? prophetic discourse was not simply expository. He often taught participatively, explicitly or implicitly asking his hearers, ?What do you think?? Who showed himself neighbor to the one who fell among robbers? Would you, if you were the older son, go in to the celebration for your renegade brother? Was the father of the prodigal a naïve chump or a God figure? Which is the greatest commandment? What would that vineyard owner do to those wicked tenants? Would you have stoned her? Should the last shift workers have gotten as much as the first shift ones? The question, inviting the hearer to moral responsibililty, rather than the prescribed answer, is characteristic of prophetic engagement.

The other major device of the prophets, besides their particular metaphorical and participative rhetoric, was their works, their symbolic actions, sometimes explained and sometimes left for the viewer to interpret. Jesus revealed God through acts of healing, exorcism, and other works of power. But one of Jesus? most striking symbolic actions, repeated again and again in numerous settings, as expression of the new dispensation God was establishing, was crossing social and religious boundaries, subverting the purity rules of Israel.

Jesus did this in myriad ways but the most striking was his open table fellowship. A major charge against Jesus was, ?He welcomes sinners and tax-collectors and eats with them? (Lk. 15:2). He also touched or let himself be touched by ?unclean? people like lepers (see Mk. 1:41), or a hemorrhaging woman (Mt. 9:20), or a corpse (Lk. 7:14). He ate with unpurified hands out of unkosher dishes (see Mk. 7:2-20). He let sinners touch him, intimately (see. Lk. 7:39). He interacted with women in public and private without the presence of male family members (see Jn. 4). He spoke with, learned from, and even marveled at the faith of non-Jews (e.g., Mt. 15:22-28; Lk. 7:1-9).

Lest we think the Jews were finicky legalists completely unlike our own religious selves we might think about some of our own rules and regulations. Who are the ?sinners? we excommunicate or exclude from our sacramental table, the ?unclean? we regard as ?intrinsically disordered,? the religious ?others? whose faith we regard as ?gravely defective??

Finally, Jesus did highly provocative symbolic acts. He broke the Sabbath for the sake of people in need (e.g., Mk. 3:1-6). He even drove licensed functionaries out of the temple during a major feast, an unmistakably anti-temple act (Mt. 21:12-14). And he meekly rode a donkey into the Holy City through one gate just as the

Emperor?s representative, Pilate, was riding into it in royal splendor through the opposite gate, a deliberately anti-imperial gesture (see Mk. 11:1-10 and Mt. 21:1-10). Such prophetic actions could hardly be taken lightly.

But what is this prophetic speaking and acting all about? To what, or better to whom, was Jesus? bearing witness? Marcus Borg (Jesus, ch. 7) captures this well in two words: to God as compassion, and to justice as God?s dream for humanity. Jesus as we will discuss below, was a mystic or a contemplative, a man in deep experiential communion with God. God, for Jesus, was not an object of theological belief, much less a moral enforcer presiding over humanity from ?heaven.? The God Jesus had come to know intimately was not like the God in which many of his contemporaries, including many of the religious authorities, believed. Jesus? God is also not like the God in which many Christians, especially the self-righteous guardians of public morality we all can be at times, believe.

The God of Jesus was not only compassionate but compassion itself. In God there was no wrath, no violence, no vengeance or retaliation. Jesus? God drew no boundaries between those on the inside and those on the outside, the good sheep and the lost, the sinners and the upright, the clean and the unclean (except perhaps that Jesus seemed to prefer the less acceptable!). God had no purity requirements. The God of Jesus sent rain and sun on just and unjust alike (see Mt. 5:45). Jesus? Abba was the parent of the prodigal, a God who was inconceivable in a legalistic framework where good and evil were rigorously defined and rewards and punishments stringently applied. The infinite compassion of God filled the heart of Jesus and poured out of him in his practice of total inclusivity and boundless free forgiveness.

Probably the most stunning story in the Gospel expressing this God-image of Jesus is not a parable but a narrated event. It is ?housed? now in John?s Gospel (Jn. 7:53-8:11) where it obviously does not ?belong.? This text, often titled ?A Woman Taken in Adultery,? was an orphan text that appeared at various times in the history of the transmission of the New Testament in different Gospels and in different places in the Gospels. It has been hypothesized, not implausibly, that its checkered textual career testifies to the fact that it was too shocking to Church officials to be easily admitted as Scripture and too cherished by the people to be successfully suppressed. It was finally included in the Catholic canon but it remains a not easily domesticated narrative.

The religious officials drag before Jesus a woman taken in the very act of adultery. She is, without doubt, guilty of breaking one of the most serious commandments of the Law. Adultery was a capital offense (see Dt. 22:23-24) and the scribes and Pharisees (the clerical caste and spiritual elite) test Jesus by asking him what he says about the stoning prescribed by the Law of Moses. ?Are you for it or against it?? If you say to stone her you agree that God is as we represent Him, a just but harsh judge who is unrelenting toward sinners (not the wishy-washy parent of the prodigal that Jesus had been preaching!). If you oppose her execution you oppose the Law of Moses (and thereby prove that you do not come from God or speak for God). Or, at least, you oppose our administering the Law, thereby showing that you accept Rome?s denial to the Jews of the power to execute (which proves your allegiance is to the Empire rather than to God). The three-way trap is set with this woman as bait.

Jesus does not enter into an argument about the nature of God or sexual morality, about the validity of the Law or about the authority of the hierarchy, or even about the reach of Roman jurisdiction. He simply turns the focus from the woman to the religious officials themselves. He does not say adultery is all right. He does not say the woman is innocent. He does not dispute the legitimacy of capital punishment. He does not ask where her accomplice is or who was eye-witness to the offense. He does not even ask if she is repentant. He says in effect, ?The case may be exactly as you say. The problem is, where can we find someone who is qualified to apply the penalty? Is there one among you who is sinless and is therefore qualified to punish a sinner??

When they all quietly disappear the woman is left facing the one person who is indeed qualified to execute her, the one person who is without sin. But he refuses to enter into the dynamics of the case. He just asks, ?Has no

one condemned you?? Obviously, the answer is ?no.? Then, he says, ?Neither do I.?

If the one who is qualified to condemn simply declines to do so, what becomes of dominant power, of condemnation and punishment, as a way of handling evil and maintaining moral order? The enormity of this question is quite probably the reason this text had trouble getting into the canon. What would happen to good order in society or the Church if this suspension of condemnation became common practice? Jesus tells the woman to ?sin no more,? indicating that he knows and names as sin what she has done. He is not declaring a moral free-for-all among humans. But he also, shockingly, does not indicate that this woman is a one-time exception, a useful pedagogical tool but the only person God will ever treat this way.

Jesus? symbolic act seems to say something about God that is inconceivable, and totally unacceptable, in a framework of law, sin, judgment, retribution, punishment -- in the human program of how to run a tight moral ship in a religious institution. He seems to be suggesting by this prophetic act, as he did with the parable of the Prodigal Son, that God is operating in a framework that is radically different from ours, that makes no appeal to coercive power. Indeed, he seems to be saying that God is radically different from us and that our image of God says more about us than about God.

If God?s nature is boundless compassion, total inclusivity, absolute free forgiveness, what does this imply for us? Borg says that if compassion is God?s nature then justice is God?s passion. Justice, however, is not divine retribution carried out by humans, but right relations among humans who are all equally sinners and between humans who are all sinful and God who is infinite compassion. Justice is not ?an eye for an eye? but the definitive eradication of all that is contrary to compassion, namely, anger, violence, vengeance, oppression, domination, and all their kin. Many of Jesus? parables and sayings bear directly on the issues of justice such as the equitable distribution of material necessities, generosity, peaceful reconciliation of differences, non-violence, inclusiveness, forgiveness of enemies, the equality of persons including women, children, the lower class, slaves, the poor and the sick, and even foreigners. In other words, justice is compassion in action.

Jesus the prophet was not preaching generalities about God or God?s desire for the people. As a prophet he was addressing a very particular historico-religious situation. He was preaching an alternate reality from that of first century official Judaism under Roman occupation. Jesus was describing, ?parabling? into the imagination of his hearers, a new ?world.? He called it the ?Kingdom of God.?

While many contemporary Christians prefer ?reign of God? because it is less patriarchal than ?kingdom,? Jesus used ?kingdom? for a reason. By calling the reality he had been sent to inaugurate a kingdom -- since there could not be two different kingdoms in operation in the same place at the same time, -- he was invalidating the violent imperium of the Romans. He was inviting his hearers to live in a new kingdom structured by inclusive, compassionate love and justice, a kingdom in which only God is sovereign. Such a kingdom is indeed a reign, but not a domination system, not a two-tiered world in which a small minority controls almost all resources, economic and political, while the vast majority teeters on the edge of destitution.

But it was not only Roman imperial rule, the economic and political domination system of the Empire, that Jesus was calling into question. By presenting a socio-religious order that was radically different from that supported by the Temple authorities he was also calling that regime, the religious domination system, into question. By his inclusivity, his transgressing of purity boundaries, his reimagining of sin and forgiveness, he was dismantling a kind of carefully structured religious world based on law and inaugurating a new way of relating to God with implications for a new way of relating to one another.

Jesus? Sermon on the Mount, with his resounding prophetic, ?but I say to you,? interiorized the Law without invalidating its external observance. His symbolic action in the Temple interiorized worship without declaring public worship invalid. But when all was said and done there remained only the double law of total love of God and total love of neighbor. For Jesus this was ?the whole law and the prophets? (see Mt. 22:35-40). Anything

that could not fit under that rubric was peripheral and relative and could be put aside if necessary to further the agenda of love.

We know well that Jesus, like the prophets of Israel before him, did not ?succeed? in his prophetic mission. He suffered the fate of the prophet that he himself had described (see Mt. 23:29-36). He died as the victim of the Empire in collusion with the Temple authorities. If the story had ended there we would have proof that his prophetic mission was a fool?s errand rather than a divine commission, a quixotic dream that could not come true in the ?real world? where evil can only be handled by force. But the story did not end there. God raised Jesus from the dead and Jesus committed his prophetic mission to his followers.

In summary, Jesus is the embodiment of the prophetic mission and his ministry is the expression in action, in word and work, of that mission. His mission was to ?tell into the present,? by word and deed, the absolute future of God which is what the Synoptics call the ?Reign of God,? John calls ?eternal life,? and Paul usually calls ?life in the Spirit.? That reality is a new dispensation in which all are called to share, here and now. It is the dispensation of shalom which is the earthly realization of the love of God in the community of love of neighbor. It is God?s compassion expressed in human justice. This, not institutional or ecclesiastical projects, and certainly not a religious domination system, is what Religious are called to serve. Jesus, in prophetic word and work, not institution maintenance, is the model of ministry for Religious.

Wednesday: ?Life of Jesus and the prophetic ministry that flows from it.?

The essay in five parts:

Part One: Religious Life as Prophetic Life Form [1], Jan. 4

Part Two: Call, Response and Task of Prophetic Action [2], Jan. 5

Part Three: What Jesus taught us about his prophetic ministry [3], Jan. 6

Part Four: Tasks of those who choose the prophetic life style [4], Jan. 7

Part Five: Religious life: sharing Jesus' passion, resurrection [5], Jan. 8

Read NCR's coverage of the apostolic visitation of U.S. women religious here: Index of stories [6]

Read an interview with Sr. Schneiders. She explains why she wrote this essay: Schneiders to explore meaning of religious life today [7]

Source URL (retrieved on *07/23/2016 - 08:58*): https://www.ncronline.org/news/women-religious/call-response-and-task-prophetic-action

Links:
[1] http://ncronline.org/node/16441
[2] http://ncronline.org/node/16463
[3] http://ncronline.org/node/16464
[4] http://ncronline.org/node/16465
[5] http://ncronline.org/node/16466
[6] http://ncronline.org/apostolicvisitation
[7] http://ncronline.org/node/16404