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Prophecy 'out of the struggles and laments of the faithful'

by Thomas C. Fox

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Bradford Hinze, professor of theology at Fordham University,

speaking at the Catholic Theological Society of America June 12, whose 2010 convention theme is prophecy in the church, explored suffering and lamentations as ways to hear the Spirit.

He began by noting that the prophetic character and mission of the church has been of interest within the church, especially among religious congregations, since the Second Vatican Council.

He then turned his attention to a several dimensions of the prophetic character of Catholic ecclesiology.

?There is a need to complement the primary framework for construing prophecy and the prophetic character of the church (as Word or message received and witness given), with a transverse proposal that highlights the equally important work of the Spirit in the aspirations and laments of the people of God. ?

The primary framework or schema for understanding prophecy, he said, has been in terms of individuals

who receive a word from God about the present or the future and who deliver this message.

“The prophetic call to witness in word and deed is the correlative to the message received,” he said. “The message is often specified as critical judgment, prophetic denunciation, and life-giving announcement—the good news.”

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Then he offered another “alternative framework” for looking at the prophetic character: “Heeding the Spirit in the Laments of the People of God.”

“An alternative proposal to this primary schema can be described as transverse in that it cuts across or intersects at an oblique angle with the primary schema. I am suggesting that there is an equally basic and interdependent (equiprimordial) and often times prior summons received by the prophet: to heed the laments of suffering people of God and the groans of a chaotic and damaged world.”

“Biblical scholars often attend to lamentations in prophetic literature, and in other biblical genres, but I am not convinced that the repercussions of these studies have been sufficiently pursued by theologians and their implications drawn out,” he said.

In this alternative schema, he went on, communication is not initially by means of a word received, but reverberates through the wail of the Spirit heard in grieving people in pain, and the grumbling of a created world in chaos and abused by the ravages of sin.

He then suggested that laments are not only correlated with “a saving message given to address suffering people and the futility of creation, damaged by human sin or not, but that laments can also disclose the struggle among the people of God to authentically articulate and witness to the faith in the work of reception.

“In other words, the struggles of individuals and communities with the very substance of the faith can also be a part of the prophetic legacy working itself out in history,” he said.

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“To be quite concrete, consider the laments of the faithful surrounding *Humane Vitae*, or the teaching authority of the U.S. bishops on health care, or the pope and the curia on homosexuality, women’s ordination, and religious pluralism, to name but a few. The cacophony in the church on these issues needs to be understood in terms of the exercise of the prophetic office in the church, not only as message faithfully received and witness given, but also in terms of the crucible of lamentations in the messy transmission of the living faith of the church. This is why the two prophetic frameworks must work in tandem in ecclesiology and in the pastoral practices of the church.

He asks: What is prophetic obedience?

Answering himself, he says that it cannot be reduced simply to majority rule “or even consensus associated with “group think.” The prophetic obedience of individuals and communities issues forth in prophetic witness that heeds, receives, and responds to the Word by receiving the living Word of God and the cry of the Spirit especially in the voices of the marginalized, the outsiders, the poor, and the people who raise critical issues in the church and the world. In the final analysis prophetic obedience must stand the test of discernment.”

He said the ongoing process of striving for prophetic obedience through discernment characterizes the maturation of faith. This discernment takes place amidst the many voices in the self and outside the self in the church and the world. The prophet is summoned by the Spirit of God to take a stand as an individual before God in the community of faith and in the world, with a humility that brings with it an awareness that the demonic spirit, destructive powers, can be at work in the self, in the community of faith, and in the world.

In this process of discernment the judgment of the prophet may coincide with the judgments of the hierarchy on the one hand, or of the majority and consensus, on the other, or both simultaneously. ?

The sense of the faithful (*sensus fidelium*), he said, is often inchoate, not explicit, in the life of the church. However, it can become explicit by means of communal processes of discernment and the formation of authentic consensus.?

He went on: Further developing the prophetic office as it pertains to the doctrine of sense of the faithful offers the theological basis for synodal and conciliar modes of discernment and decision making at every level of the church.

I would for the sake of argument suggest that the prophetic office and prophetic obedience in collective discernment applies not only to the ministry of teaching, but also to the ministry of governing. At the parish level this means that priests, religious, and the faithful all actively participate through collaboration and collective discernment. And at every level of the church bishops, theologians, and the faithful are to have an active role in teaching and by extension governing.

He said these are the requirements of living out prophetic obedience in a dialogical church. ?

Hinze ended his talk noting that based on this approach to the *sensus fidelium* and the prophetic character of the church, one could hypothesize that the bishops do not fulfill their distinctive prophetic office unless they actively engage theologians and the faithful in communal dialogue and discernment. This, he concluded, is at the basis of the credibility and legitimization crisis of episcopal authority in the church today.

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