

Prophets on the Bus? Women Religious's Self-Understanding since the Second Vatican Council*

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“The distinctive sign of consecrated life is prophecy.”¹ This recent pronouncement by Pope Francis echoes the way religious life for women has come more and more to be characterized—by the women themselves and by others.² Although the reorientation marked by this change in vocabulary has taken place largely in response to the Second Vatican Council's description of the church and its mission, none of the Council documents refers to religious women in that way. This essay will trace the emergence of the term “prophetic” in both official church pronouncements and statements by women religious. It will then be possible to explore how the use of that term has affected the self-understanding of women religious in the United States and in other parts of the world.

Lumen Gentium (LG), one of the two Council documents that treat religious life at some length, addresses the prophetic role in the church but attributes it to the whole people of God. In the fourth chapter the document mentions in passing that “religious give outstanding and striking testimony that the world cannot be transfigured and offered to God without the spirit of the beatitudes” but returns immediately to the primary focus of the chapter, the laity.³ However, the sixth chapter, which specifically addresses religious life, develops the notion of witness. LG insists that religious life belongs to the “life and holiness” of the church, though it is not part of its hierarchical structure. Its main contribution is “as a sign which can and should effectively inspire” the laity to “fulfill the duties of their Christian calling.” Specifically, this way of life foretells “the future resurrection and the glory of the heavenly kingdom” and manifests . . . “the transcendence of the kingdom of God and its requirements over all earthly things and the highest kind of bonds within it, bringing home to all men the immeasurable greatness of the power of Christ in his sovereignty and the infinite might of the Holy Spirit which works so marvelously in the Church.”⁴

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1 Francis, *Apostolic Letter of His Holiness Pope Francis to All Consecrated People on the Occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life*, November 21, 2014, https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_letters/documents/papa-francesco_lettera-ap_20141121_lettera-consacrati.html.

2 The term has also been appropriated by men religious, but it is beyond the scope of this essay to consider the extent to which they have done so.

3 Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium* (1964), in *Vatican Council II*, vol. 1, *The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery (Northport, NY: Costello, 1998), no. 31.

4 *Lumen Gentium*, no. 44.

The witness provided by religious life is never described here as prophetic, and this omission is even more striking in the other Council document that treats religious life. *Perfectae Caritatis* is primarily concerned with the changes that need to happen in the customs of religious life to make it responsive to the world around it, rather than considering the nature of that response. It never refers to the prophetic at all. Even one of the most influential progressive figures at the Council seems not to have understood religious life as prophetic. When in 1963 Cardinal Suenens published *The Nun in the World*, the Council was still considering how to address religious life, and Suenens wanted to prod its members, hoping to “cause a decisive step forward to be taken in the matter of the advancement of nuns.”⁵ Indeed, his insistence that women religious expand their “mission field” beyond classrooms and sick rooms served as a clarion call to large numbers of women religious. Yet, like *Lumen Gentium* and *Perfectae Caritatis*, he described their evangelizing potential primarily in terms of witness: “the permanent charismatic witness to the Gospel’s social message to humanity.”⁶

Six years after the Council, Pope Paul VI provided a fuller treatment of the mission of religious women and men in *Evangelica Testificatio*. In some ways this document provides a *raison d'être* for religious life that the Council documents had failed to provide, by making clearer the way that men and women religious are fulfilling the mission of the church as articulated at the Council: “you must give your full attention to the needs of men, their problems and their searching; you must give witness in their midst, through prayer and action, to the Good News of love, justice and peace.”⁷ He does not call this witness prophetic, however.

The first Vatican statement that does so is *Religious and Human Promotion (RHP)*, produced by the Sacred Congregation for Religious and for Secular Institutes (SCRIS). A report on a 1978 meeting with the leaders of men’s and women’s religious congregations, *RHP* reiterates many of the themes found in the texts already cited, but asserts, “Religious are called to give singular witness to this prophetic dimension” of the church’s mission of evangelization, and by their vows “religious are communally a prophetic sign of intimate union with God.”⁸ The document calls for “new attitudes which are attentive to the value of prophetic sign as a power for the conversion and transformation of the world, of its mode of thinking and of its relationship.”⁹ Here and elsewhere the footnote directs the reader not only to *Evangelica Testificatio*, but also to the so-called “Puebla document,” the lengthy final report of the third Conference of Latin American Bishops which took place in Puebla, Mexico, in 1979.¹⁰ Insisting that solidarity with the poor is central to the Gospel, the Puebla Document develops the notion of a prophetic religious life quite extensively. The references to Puebla may reflect the influence of the then-secretary of SCRIS, Edouardo Francisco Pironio, an Argentinian and former president of the Conference of Latin American Bishops.

If, as seems likely, the language of prophetic witness was forged in Latin America, then Sister Marian Ambrosio’s description of the evolution of religious life in Brazil is instructive. Noting that before the Council the form of religious life there was inherited from communities with European foundations, she states:

5 Leon Joseph Cardinal Suenens, *The Nun in the World: New Dimensions in the Modern Apostolate*, trans. Geoffrey Stevens (Westminster, MD: Newman, 1962), 164.

6 Suenens, *The Nun in the World*, 59. He borrows this phrase from Charpentier, *L’Episcopat et l’Eglise Universelle* (Paris: Cerf, 1962), 430.

7 Paul VI, *Apostolic Exhortation Evangelica Testificatio, On the Renewal of the Religious Life according to the Teaching of the Second Vatican Council* (Boston: Daughters of St. Paul, 1971), no. 52.

8 Plenaria of the Sacred Congregation for Religious and for Secular Institutes, *Religious and Human Promotion*, April 25–28, 1978, no. 24, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccsclife/documents/rc_con_ccsclife_doc_12081980_religious-and-human-promotion_en.html.

9 *Religious and Human Promotion*, no. 33.

10 “The Final Document,” in *Puebla and Beyond: Documentation and Commentary*, ed. John Eagleson and Philip Scharper, trans. John Drury (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979), 122–285. Since the meeting on which RHP is based took place nine months before the Puebla Conference began, it must be that the document was written or at least edited a good while after the SCRIS meeting took place.

The first sign of a breach from this model emerged in the Episcopal Conference of Medellin (1968) which, starting from the reality and aspirations, from the pains and the hopes of the continent, has applied to Latin America the Constitutions, Decrees and Declarations of Vatican Council II.

As a result, she continues, “we are heirs of a way of being Church, of a way of being religious, deeply rooted in the option for the poor and in the prayerful Reading of the Word of God.”¹¹ This experience of a new way of being church and being religious, which was the fruit of Medellin, then informed the Puebla Document and consequently *RHP*.

This approach did not, however, inform subsequent Vatican teaching on religious life for almost twenty years. In 1983, five years after *RHP*, SCRIS published *Essential Elements in the Church's Teaching on Religious Life*. The document's stated purpose is to aid religious institutes in evaluating the period of experimentation after the Council, experimentation that the document declares to be over. Here religious life is never called prophetic, although it is described as “a witness that should clearly manifest the primacy of the love of God and do so with a strength coming from the Holy Spirit.”¹² The document acknowledges that “[b]eing a voice for those who are unable to speak for themselves is a further mode of religious witness,” but only “when it is done in accordance with the directives of the local hierarchy and the proper law of the institute.”¹³ However, “[t]he distinguishing mark of the religious institute” is located not in this witness but in the three vows which express visibly the values of Christ.¹⁴

Not only does *Essential Elements* not adopt the language of prophetic witness, but according to Margaret Brennan, IHM, it “diminishes the prophetic character of religious communities.” In remarks at a US symposium on *Essential Elements* soon after its publication, she went on to critique its theology of consecration that “separates and stratifies religious from the other People of God” and “reflects a way of life that foretells what is to come hereafter rather than influencing the transformation of society today.” This she contrasts to “the experience of American women religious . . . which expresses a dynamic, non-hierarchical, prophetic view of religious life based on a theology of mission.”¹⁵

In *Vita Consecrata*, his 1996 treatise on religious life, Pope John Paul II tries to hold together a theology of consecration and a robust theology of “the prophetic dimension which belongs to the consecrated life,” manifested in the vows and but also in dedication to mission. He is conscious of further developing what *Lumen Gentium* had taught: “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.” John Paul describes prophetic witness as rooted in “friendship with God,” discernment, and “communion in the Church,” adding, “It is also expressed through the denunciation of all that is contrary to the divine will and through the exploration of new ways to apply the Gospel in history, in expectation of the coming of God's Kingdom.”¹⁶ At times, he acknowledges, some individuals within religious life play a prophetic role toward the hierarchy, but he-

11 Sr. Márian Ambrosio, “Religious Life in Brazil,” *Vidimus Dominum*, website of the International Union of Superiors General, Council of UISG Delegates, 2011, 1, http://vd.pcn.net/en/index.php?option=com_docman&Itemid=12.

12 Sacred Congregation for Religious and for Secular Institutes, *Essential Elements in the Church's Teaching on Religious Life as Applied to Institutes Dedicated to Works of the Apostolate* (Boston: Daughters of St. Paul, 1983), no. 32.

13 *Essential Elements in the Church's Teaching on Religious Life*, no. 36.

14 *Essential Elements in the Church's Teaching on Religious Life*, nos. 15–16.

15 Margaret Brennan, IHM, “Reflections of a Woman Religious,” in *Religious Life in the U.S. Church: The New Dialogue*, ed. Robert J. Daly, SJ, et al. (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 135–36.

16 John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata, On the Consecrated Life and Its Mission in the Church and in the World* (Boston: Daughters of St. Paul, 1996), no. 84.

maintains that “their apostolic activity . . . , in the context of the prophetic mission of all the baptized, is generally distinguished by special forms of cooperation with the Hierarchy.”¹⁷

Pope Francis, the first pope in over two centuries to be a member of a religious congregation—and that in Latin America—insists quite forcibly on the prophetic dimension of religious life. In a letter to religious in November of 2014 announcing the opening of the current Year of Consecrated Life, he declares, as has already been noted, “the distinctive sign of consecrated life is prophecy.”¹⁸ The implication, he suggests, is that religious need “the ability to scrutinize the times in which they live and to interpret events . . . , [as well as] to discern and denounce the evil of sin and injustice.” He appears to chart new territory in affirming, “Because they are free, they are beholden to no one but God, and they have no interest other than God.” This should not be interpreted as encouraging an individualistic approach, since he advocates collaboration among religious communities because “No one contributes to the future in isolation, by his or her efforts alone, but by seeing himself or herself as part of a true communion which is constantly open to encounter, dialogue, attentive listening and mutual assistance.” In keeping with his constant theme, he adds: “Prophets tend to be on the side of the poor and the powerless, for they know that God himself is on their side.”

The evidence suggests that many women religious adopted the language of prophetic witness and action well before its articulation in official church teaching. In the United States, as early as 1971 the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) dedicated its national assembly to the theme “The Church Is for the World,” and by 1982 conference president Bette Moslander, CSJ, could assert that what religious women are about is “the exploration into prophecy.” The following year, as has been noted, former LCWR president Brennan critiqued *Essential Elements* precisely in terms of its failure to affirm a prophetic role for religious.

When in 1989 LCWR met with the Conference of Major Superiors of Men to consider “Traditions and Transformation in Religious Life,” they developed a prioritized list of “transformative elements” they hoped would characterize religious life in twenty years. The first of these was prophetic witness in church and society, which would entail “critiquing societal and ecclesial values and structures, calling for systematic change and being converted by the marginalized with whom we serve.”¹⁹ At the same time David Nygren and Miriam Ukeritis undertook a massive study of religious life in the United States; the results were published in 1993. In the study’s first phase women and men religious recognized by their own congregations as “visionary” were asked to describe their hopes for the future. Although the question was open-ended, a large number included prophetic witness in some form.²⁰

One of the fruits of LCWR members’ reflection on their role in the world was the creation of Network. A Washington-based organization that lobbies the US Congress on a variety of issues that affect the poor, it was founded and has been for the most part led by US women religious.²¹ Over the last few years Network has sponsored Nuns on the Bus, in which rotating groups of women religious take to the highways, visiting countless cities across the country to challenge actual and proposed policies on immigration and the economy. In the eyes of many, their action seems to epitomize what being prophetic can mean for women religious.

17 *Vita Consecrata*, no. 46.

18 Francis, *Apostolic Letter to All Consecrated People*.

19 LCWR-CMSM, “Transformative Elements for Religious Life,” <http://shf.sitestreet.com/files/files/1518-religious%20life%20in%202010%20LCWR.pdf>.

20 David J. Nygren and Miriam D. Ukeritis, *The Future of Religious Orders in the United States: Transformation and Commitment* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1993), 20–24.

21 Carol Coston, OP, provides a helpful account of the origins of Network in “Women Religious Engage the Political Process: Working for Social Justice from the 1960s to the 1990s,” in *Journey in Faith and Fidelity: Women Shaping Religious Life for a Renewed Church*, ed. Nadine Foley (New York: Continuum, 1999), 198–217.

The stance of LCWR is largely reflected in the writings of Sandra Schneiders, IHM, although she makes no claim to speak for that organization and indeed invites criticism of what she proposes. Throughout her three-volume work *Religious Life in a New Millennium*, she argues that religious life is a “prophetic lifeform,” “a particular following of Jesus the prophet,” which not only stands outside the hierarchal order of the church, as *Lumen Gentium* had taught, but is necessarily in some tension with it.²² Those who accept this lifeform are “creating and living within an ‘alternate world’ which derives its coordinates exclusively from the Gospel.”²³ They do this by means of the three vows.

Given the fact that not all forms of celibacy, poverty, and especially obedience reflect what the vows intend, she qualifies them as “consecrated celibacy,” “evangelical poverty,” and “prophetic obedience” or “the politics of the reign of God.” This latter vow entails discernment: “a commitment to be continuously attentive to the claims of reality, general and personal, that must be heard and heeded as expressive of God’s will in one’s life.”²⁴ In ministry, discerned in this way and often exercised outside ecclesial settings, religious “live most publicly and even dangerously the critical face of prophecy.”²⁵ Schneiders implies that in the past women religious were more easily constrained from exercising obedience prophetically, and that now they must learn “to live as fallible, and even unwelcome, prophets in a sinful Church.”²⁶

Schneiders’s perspectives are by no means universally accepted by women religious in the United States, notably by many in the congregations that have joined the Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious, founded in 1992 as a more traditional alternative to LCWR. In 2009 the Council published a collection of essays, *The Foundations of Religious Life*, in part to refute the charge that more traditional congregations have not been renewed as called for by Vatican II. Those essays most often describe mission in terms of “sign and witness of eternal realities.”²⁷ Similarly, CMSWR’s current website eschews for the most part language about being prophetic, preferring to speak of “witness to a life of communion with Christ, the Church, and one another.”²⁸ However, their website also advertises a symposium “to provide ongoing formation for the faithful on the prophetic witness of religious life.” Moreover, the essays in *Foundations* include some references to prophetic witness, a call to be “a countercultural sign, . . . a memory and prophecy of the values of the Gospel.”²⁹ Of the three vows, it is noted several times that “the vow of poverty constitutes . . . the first cross of contradiction as the prophetic charism of the Church.”³⁰ However, nowhere are these references to prophecy developed.

The fact that prophetic language with regard to religious life was canonized, as it were, by *Vita Consecrata* and then by Pope Francis virtually guarantees that it will find some expression among most women religious. But clearly it is far more central to the self-understanding of some US sisters than others and, moreover, the nature of that call is understood in a variety of ways. It would be presumptuous to generalize about women religious in other areas of the world, but there are indications that many understand religious life to be prophetic. That women and men religious in Latin America have continued to understand themselves as called to prophetic witness is suggested by the theme for the Congress on Consecrated Life to take place in Honduras later this year: “Consecrated Life—Prophetic Presence Confronting the Challenges of Today.” And at a 2008 chapter the Sisters of St. Therese of the Child Jesus of Buea,

22 Sandra M. Schneiders, IHM, *Religious Life in a New Millennium*, vol. 3, *Buying the Field: Catholic Religious Life in Mission to the World* (New York: Paulist Press, 2013), 468.

23 Schneiders, *Buying the Field*, 68.

24 Schneiders, *Buying the Field*, 566.

25 Schneiders, *Buying the Field*, 469.

26 Schneiders, *Buying the Field*, 511.

27 Mother Agnes M. Donovan, SV and Sister Mary Elizabeth Wusinich, SV, “Religious Consecration—A Particular Form of Consecrated Life,” in *The Foundations of Religious Life: Revisiting the Vision* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria, 2009), 35.

28 “What Is Religious Life,” Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious website, <http://cmswr.org/religious-life/what-is-religious-life>

29 Sister M. Maximilia Um, FSGM, “Evangelical Mission,” in *The Foundations of Religious Life*, 172.

30 Sister Paula Jean Miller, FSE, “The Spousal Bond,” in *The Foundations of Religious Life*, 71.

a community native to Cameroon, proclaimed in their mission statement: “Our apostolates are an essential part of our response to God’s call and through them we bear prophetic witness in today’s world.”³¹ That assertion is echoed in some form in the mission statements and constitutions of countless women’s congregations throughout the world.

In reflecting on the role of women religious in Africa, Gloria Wirba Kenyuyfoon suggests that they “with their motherly qualities are challenged to be signs of hope through authentic witness to the Gospel values” as well as “instruments of peace, justice and reconciliation.”³² She sees them as “capable of evangelizing with the passion and vigour of the prophets.” At the same time they need to be “women of dialogue between their culture and the Gospel” because “prophetic witness does not consist fundamentally in proclamation. [It is] . . . not based principally on doing something, but rather on being for Jesus.”³³ A similar point has been made by M. Yvonne Reungoat, superior general of the international Institute of the Daughters of Mary Auxiliatrice, based in Italy: “Prophetic life doesn’t only manifest itself in large projects but also in greatness of heart through which we realize the project of God in the smallest signs we offer each day.”³⁴

At the first Ecclesia of Women in Asia in 2002, Vietnamese Sister Therese Pham Thi Bach Tuyet, OP,³⁵ and Sister Patricia Mary, OSM, of Myanmar both identified acting on behalf of the dignity of women as the prophetic task of women religious in cultures where that dignity is too often denied. The latter noted the need to “work with them for their upliftment and not for them in a condescending paternalistic manner.” She lamented that within the church, including among women, “the space and role of religious are restricted because they are not recognized as prophetic witnesses.”³⁶ Sr. Mary Sujita Kallupurakkathu, SND, of India agrees that “their greatly needed charismatic and prophetic presence . . . needs to be recognized and valued more within the church.” At the same time, she believes that they must witness to “the age-old Asian values of true holiness, contemplation, renunciation and asceticism, detachment and simplicity,” and she expresses concern that “[o]ur growing emphasis on professionalism and success” will lead to “a more comfortable and secure life that takes the prophetic and the mystic out of the seeker’s heart!”³⁷

The association of mysticism and prophecy has characterized many statements about religious life in recent years. Particularly notable is the vision statement for the recent three-year plan chosen by the Congress of Religious in Brazil: “we reaffirm our mystical-prophetic identity and we rekindle the passion for the Kingdom, defending and promoting life, taking up as our own the cause of the poor and building human relationships in fraternal solidarity.”³⁸ The reference to a “rekindling” of passion also bears highlighting. In an address to the International Union of Superiors General (UISG), Sr. Marian Ambrosio explained that the vision statement came from a process of self-questioning, during which the participants recognized “the cooling off of [our] passion for Jesus and for his Kingdom; [our ways of conforming] to the standards of the ‘world’; the weakening of [our] prophecy.”³⁹

31 Sisters of St. Therese of the Child Jesus, July 2008 Chapter, Document no. 4, 7.

32 Gloria Wirba Kenyuyfoon, “The Religious Women’s Contribution to Peace, Justice and Reconciliation in Africa,” *African Ecclesial Review* 51–52, no. 4-1 (2009): 520, 522.

33 Kenyuyfoon, “The Religious Women’s Contribution to Peace, Justice and Reconciliation in Africa,” 526.

34 Circular letter of M. Yvonne Reungoat, 9/4/2010 (translation mine).

35 Therese Pham Thi Bach Tuyet, OP, “Vietnamese Fisherwomen’s Charisms,” in *Ecclesia of Women in Asia*, ed. Evelyn Monteiro, SC, & Antoinette Gutzler, MM (Delhi : Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2005), 268–86.

36 Patricia Mary, OSM, “Myanmar Catholic Women and Their Struggles,” in *Ecclesia of Women in Asia*, 82.

37 Mary Sujita Kallupurakkathu, SND, “Opportunities and Challenges for Apostolic Consecrated Life and the Theology of Consecrated Life in Asia: Some Reflections,” *Vidimus Dominum*, website of the International Union of Superiors General, 2011 Theological Seminar, http://vd.pcn.net/en/index.php?option=com_docman&Itemid=37.

38 Ambrosio, “Religious Life in Brazil,” 9.

39 Ambrosio, “Religious Life in Brazil,” 2.

In the keynote address at the 2014 LCWR assembly, Nancy Schreck, OSF suggested that a similar process has been taking place among women religious in the United States.. As a result, she proposes a somewhat tempered understanding of prophetic identity that echoes reflections among women religious elsewhere as well: It “is not only in doing but being, seeing, telling about what has been learned in the night of faithfulness. It is about paying attention and speaking about what we have come to know.”⁴⁰

Conclusion

One observer of contemporary women’s monasticism has commented that as a result of the Second Vatican Council, “religious institutes of all kinds have taken to a new ‘sign’ language.”⁴¹ Clearly, this has been a change not simply in language, but also in self-understanding and orientation. More and more there is what Sr. Mary Maher has called a “justice-making, Kingdom-building emphasis” in religious women’s understanding of ministry, prayer, and community, with a particular concern for the poor and marginalized and, increasingly, the planet.⁴² In addition, many of those who embrace an understanding of religious life as prophetic have come to see themselves less as agents and products of the official church and more as individuals and communities called to discern where the Spirit is leading. However, a change in vocabulary does not guarantee a change of heart. In her 1990 follow-up study to the 1966 Sisters’ Survey, Sr. Marie Augusta Neil comments that a new emphasis on justice appeared to have affected chapter statements more than ministry choices for many sisters.⁴³ The same may be true of commitment to prophetic witness and action.

In societies like the United States, which values individualism so highly, moving from “sign” to “prophetic” as a way of characterizing religious life can be problematic, leading easily to an overemphasis on activity, particularly activity that is very public. The result is that ministries of a more pastoral nature can be devalued. In addition, viewing religious life as prophetic can promote emphasis on and glorification of heroic individuals. Nadine Foley, OP, offers a helpful corrective to those groups and individuals who have made the decision to become “more prophetic”:

Those who were called to be prophets, both in biblical times and in later history, did not seek or claim the role as a personal prerogative. They were called by God and they responded, some very reluctantly. But as people in later times looked back at what they said and did, they could say, “Indeed these were prophets.”⁴⁴

The recent stress on the intimate connection between prophecy and mysticism, as noted above, serves as a reminder that the initiative for prophecy is divine. Orthodox theologian Emmanuel Clapsis has articulated well why mysticism is essential: “Without mystical depth, it is impossible to discern between the products of one’s own inflated consciousness and the impulse of the divine spirit mediated through a prophet’s personality.”⁴⁵ In fact, Constance Fitzgerald, OCD, suggests that far from being chosen and planned for, prophecy emerges from the mystical experience of purification of memory:

40 Nancy Schreck, OSF, “However Long the Night: Holy Mystery Revealed in our Midst,” no. 10, https://lcvr.org/sites/default/files/calendar/attachments/however_long_the_night_-_nancy_schreck_osf_final_0.pdf.

41 Jason Zuidema, “The Laity, the World and the Legacy of Vatican II on the Consecrated Life,” *Cithara* 53, no. 1 (2013): 58.

42 Mary Maher, SSND, “Called and Sent: Reflections on a Theology of Apostolic Religious Life Today,” *Vidimus Dominum*, website of the International Union of Superiors General, 77th UISG Assembly, 2011, http://vd.pcn.net/en/index.php?option=com_docman&task=search_result&Itemid=12. In the UISG 2010 Plenary Address “Opening the Heart to Listen: Becoming Mystics and Prophets Today,” Judette Gallares, RC, sounds similar themes from an Asian perspective. http://vd.pcn.net/en/index.php?option=com_docman%20&Itemid=12&limitstart=20.

43 Marie Augusta Neal, SNDdeN, *Catholic Sisters in Transition: From the 1960s to the 1980s* (Wilmington, DE: Glazier, 1984), 27.

44 Nadine Foley, OP, “Religious Life as Charism,” in *Journey in Faith and Fidelity*, 75.

45 Emmanuel Clapsis, “Towards a Mystical and Prophetic Spiritual Life,” *The Ecumenical Review* 59, nos. 2–3 (April–July 2007): 204.

[This] profound and painful purification . . . really does change a person's memory. This dark passage does have an arrival point: prophecy. Obsession with the past gives way to a new undefinable sense of relatedness or intimacy, an experience of ultimate assurance, and this conversion releases creativity and most importantly freedom for the limitless possibilities of God, for hope. This freedom, this posture of hope, is really prophecy, for it enables a person to reveal the vision of a different kind of future than the one we want to construct from our limited capacities.⁴⁶

The experience of women religious in various parts of the world in the years since Vatican II has challenged them to reflect deeply on who they are and how they are to live and minister. From this has come a new perception of religious life as prophetic, but further experience has caused some to modify that understanding still further. More and more they seek to live with courage and in humility, with openness and attentiveness to the movement of the Spirit, with a willingness to suffer but remaining in a “posture of hope,” leaving to others to determine whether their life can be called prophetic.

Monsignor Pedro Ricardo Barreto Jimeno, the Jesuit archbishop of Huancayo, Peru, recently concluded an address on religious life as mystical–prophetic by offering two examples of persons who in his view embody this reality. The first is the well-known Jesuit superior general Pedro Arrupé; the second, a community of three sisters from Argentina, Canada, and Italy, who came to live in a very poor Peruvian village of about five hundred small farmers. Though initially suspicious and skeptical, the villagers marveled when the sisters offered to work in the farmers' fields. One commented, “No one comes to visit, much less stay with us, and never to work for us. So we, the poor, are important!” Barreto Jimeno declares this a sign that the Kingdom is present.⁴⁷

What of the Nuns on the Bus? The future may judge them to be prophetic, but if so, it will likely be not only or even primarily because of their speeches. After they get off the bus and the cameras are turned off, the sisters move into the crowd to meet some of those whose needs and suffering they have been describing and seeking to alleviate. In those encounters they hear them into speech through compassionate listening. The poor offer them the gospel.

Witness of a different kind has been offered by the women who have led LCWR in recent years. At the conclusion of the period of oversight mandated as a result of the Doctrinal Assessment, they expressed the hope that their experience would lead to increased dialogue between church leaders and members. But they recognized that the implications of what they had done reached beyond the limits of the church:

The collective exploration of the meaning and application of key theological, spiritual, social, moral, and ethical concepts must be an ongoing effort for all of us in the world today. . . . [I]n a world marked by polarities and intolerance of difference, perhaps no work is more important.⁴⁸

When women religious and others speak of prophets they seem often to have in mind Amos decrying empty worship or John the Baptist demanding repentance. But there is also Hosea whose prophecy was his continued fidelity to the wife who repeatedly betrayed him. This is a form of prophecy which is almost never deliberately chosen. Perhaps the future will judge the women who have led LCWR through the past tumultuous years to have been prophetic in the way Hosea was.

46 Constance Fitzgerald, OCD, “From Impasse to Prophetic Hope: Crisis of Memory,” *Catholic Theological Society of America Proceedings*, 64 (2009): 35, <http://www.ctsa-online.org/Convention%202009/0021-0042.pdf>.

47 Monseñor Pedro Ricardo Barreto Jimeno, SJ, “Hacia una Vida Religiosa místico-profética al servicio de la vida,” nos. 44–45, *La Confederación Caribeña y Latinoamericana de Religiosas/os*, <http://www.clar.org/clar/index.php?module=Contenido&type=file&func=get&tid=3&fid=descarga&pid=43> (translation mine).

48 “Statement of the LCWR Officers on the CDF Doctrinal Assessment and Conclusion of the Mandate,” LCWR website, <https://lcwr.org/media/statement-lcwr-officers-cdf-doctrinal-assessment-and-conclusion-mandate>.