

More than a Clanging Cymbal: Nurturing the Prophetic Task

by Jessica Joy V. Candelario

St. Paul could not have said it any better. There is nothing worse than the empty, broken sound of an instrument. Coming from a predominantly Catholic country, I have witnessed how Church influence, especially in the area of morality and political issues, has steadily declined through the years. Ministries have become routine, unable to make a difference and to transform lives. At the same time, people have turned to modern preachers and self-help books in their search for meaning. Indeed, the prophetic voice seems to have lost its power.

Old Testament prophets accompanied the people of Israel in their quest for a full life. Through trials and tribulations, war and conflict, exile and homecoming, the prophets who were attuned to the divine mystery but also skilled in listening to the realities of their people articulated God's judgment and God's undying covenant of salvation. As a person of dialogue, a prophet "speaks forth" God's words and courageously "speaks out" against society's evils.¹ For Brueggemann, prophets "nurture, nourish and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us."² Heschel points to the person of the prophet beyond the revealed message. He emphasizes the prophet's "communion with the divine consciousness" that makes the prophet "live not only his personal life but the life of God."³

As a Church, we are not only called to be prophets; our mission is prophetic dialogue and dialogical prophecy.⁴

At the outbreak of the 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris, a father and son were interviewed by a journalist.⁵ Their conversation illumines elements to an effective prophetic ministry.

1 Steve Bevans and Roger Shroeder, *Prophetic Dialogue; Reflections on Christian Mission Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 42.

2 Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), 13.

3 Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 26.

4 Bevans and Shroeder, *Prophetic Dialogue*, 55. The term "prophetic dialogue" was coined by the authors as they explored the development of mission theology from Vatican Council II. See also 11–112.

5 "They Might Have Guns but We Have Flowers: French Father to Kid after Paris Terror," *Le Petit Journal*, as featured in USA Today (November 15, 2015), <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation-now/2015/11/18/french-dad-explains-paris-terror-attacks-son-touching-video/75990360/>.

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Journalist: “Do you understand what happened? Do you understand why those people did that?”

Boy: “Yes, because they’re really, really mean. Bad guys are not very nice. And ... we really have to be careful because we have to change homes.”

Father: “Oh, no, don’t worry, we don’t need to move out. France is our home.”

Boy: “But there’s bad guys, daddy!”

Father: “Yes, but there are bad guys everywhere.”

Boy: “They have guns, they can shoot us because they’re really, really mean.”

Father: “It’s OK, they might have guns, but we have flowers.”

Boy: “But flowers don’t do anything, They’re for, they’re for ...”

Father: “See all the flowers? It’s to fight against the guns.”

Boy: “It’s to protect?”

Father: “Exactly.”

Boy: “And the candles too?”

Father: “There you go. It’s to not forget those who are gone yesterday.”

Boy: “The flowers and the candles are there to protect us.”

Journalist: “Do you feel better now?”

Boy: “Yes, I’m feeling better.”

Do you understand what happened? Instead of merely providing answers, prophetic ministry enables people to ask questions. Prophetic ministers lead people towards a deeper and more global awareness of their realities; this includes understanding their history and culture. While they can read the present challenges from their particular standpoint, prophets facilitate a re-reading and true listening of people’s stories. Like Isaiah, who sensed that the people “listen carefully but do not understand and look intently but do not perceive (Is 6:9),” prophetic ministers are aware of the blocks that hinder people from coming home to the truth that will set them free. People need to grow in their ability to discern (Hos 14:9; Is 44:18), reopening their eyes, ears, and hearts to the past.

But there are bad guys. They have guns. Prophetic ministers can identify what represents evil in the world. They speak the truth in their outright denouncement of oppression and injustice. In their humanity, they could speak of their fear but could also speak of evil fearlessly. They know that evil can appear among the rich and the poor, men or women, powerful and powerless. While they give voice to God’s anger over sin, they also show God’s face of compassion for the oppressed. They are like Yahweh, who will roar like a lion in defense of God’s people (Hos 11:10; Joel 4:16).

France is our home. Prophetic ministers lead people towards a greater love for their identity and heritage as a people. When people can own their past and honor their present, they discover the gifts that can propel them towards victory. At the same time, prophetic ministry believes that the place for change is where people are. One cannot fight a battle from a distance. Change happens when people can discover what breaks and makes them—socially, culturally, and spiritually. In fact, “prophesy becomes effective if it reorganizes knowledge already part of the culture.”⁶

See all those flowers? It is to fight against guns. “The anthropology of prophetic dialogue is an anthropology of hope.”⁷ Because they know of a world beyond the present, prophets embody possibilities. As mystics and poets rooted in the divine source, prophets could articulate God’s reign even amidst hopelessness. Like Ezekiel and his vision of dry bones (Ezek 37:1-14), prophetic ministers can see beyond death and destruction. Their power of imagination and belief propels them to proclaim and live the vision. Prophets also lead people to the source of endless opportunities. However, they do so first by enabling people to disarm themselves of pride and arrogance and to learn humility by accepting their limitations (Amos 4:6; Jon 3:8; Hag 12:17)

Do you feel better now? Prophets are aware that salvation is an everyday goal. While there are problems that may be too insurmountable to be solved in a day, grace is a gift that can be experienced every minute. Prophetic ministry enables people to encounter the face of God that they need where they are. Because prophets are immersed in the context of their people, they are aware what fulfills them. They know that the face of salvation varies from person to person. God can be a teacher for those who need to find their way (Is 30:20-21), a potter for those who need to be shaped and formed (Jer 18:6), or a wonderful stream flowing from the temple for those who need nourishment and purification (Ezek 47).

Just like the alternative community of Moses that became victorious against the Pharaoh and the dominant culture, we become prophets as we live our communion.⁸ Pope Francis exhorted the need for evangelizers to “take the smell of the sheep” and the church to “get its shoes soiled by the mud of the street.”⁹ At the same time, he called the Church to “adopt a pastoral goal and missionary style that can reach everyone” without diluting the “depth and truth of the Gospel.”¹⁰

The Church loses its prophetic voice when it fails to acknowledge divine absence within and among its members. When the sex scandal cast a mantle of suspicion and doubt over the Catholic Church, the silence of its leaders was deafening. On the other hand, when bishops and priests admitted their fault and took responsibility for the faults of their brothers, people began to listen and were also willing to forgive.

Prophets are born and nourished in basic ecclesial communities. In my home country, the Philippines, super typhoon Haiyan destroyed many villages and provinces, but it became a showcase of the prophetic presence of the small Christian communities. Despite losing their loved ones, their properties, and source of livelihood, these communities remained united in their journey from despair to hope. Instead of having every reason to be dependent and helpless, or to be angry and resentful, they held on to their faith as a source of strength for the present and

6 Jonny Baker, “Prophetic Dialogue and Contemporary Culture,” in *Mission on the Road to Emmaus: Constants, Contexts, and Prophetic Dialogue*, ed. Cathy Ross and Stephen Bevans (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2015), 211.

7 Maria Cimperman, “An Anthropology of Prophetic Dialogue: Rooted in Hope,” in *Mission on the Road to Emmaus: Constants, Contexts, and Prophetic Dialogue*, ed. Cathy Ross and Stephen Bevans (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2015), 168.

8 Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 26–27.

9 Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium: The Joy of the Gospel*, no. 24, 45, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.

10 Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium: The Joy of the Gospel*, no. 35, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.

vision for the future. While they were vocal regarding government failure to address basic needs, they also admitted their negligence towards the care of nature. They realize their need to repent and to reform so that the life they still believe is theirs can be possible. Their faith has made them resilient and hopeful as a community.

Like the father and son and the journalist, our cymbals and gongs can only resound beautifully in dialogue. Our lived communion can bring life in the wilderness. United in the Trinity, rooted in life, our prophetic voice can be heard.