

Mysticism and Prophecy

A style of life and new areopagus

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- **“I know full well the fountain that springs forth and flows...”**

The greatest gift, the most precious gift which the Lord can give to consecrated life and to every religious is to reveal (and make us enjoy) this secret spring of living water – “such a beautiful thing that heaven and earth drink from it” – to drink and sing of its overflowing richness - “its overflowing currents irrigate heaven and hell, and the people - and quench the thirst of all creation – “it is here, calling all creatures, that are quenched from this water, though it is night”. This is what happened in the life of John of the Cross, mystic, poet and prophet who had the joy of knowing the mysteries of faith (the fountain) that burst into history like a torrent (Christ) and flood the entire life (heaven and earth). This coming forth is similar to the river announced by the prophet that runs through the desert (cfr. Is 43,19), and makes all the earth verdant bringing forth abundant fruits. (cf. Ez 47,8-9).

John of the Cross experienced and sang his faith in God in this way while he was persecuted, marginalized, locked in the most dismal cell of the Toledo jail (November 1577 – August 1578). Here, in this dark and fearful place, the poem of the Fountain was born, full of life, light, and colors, that sings of the experience of his knowledge of God in faith that overcomes hostility, darkness and death itself. I believe it is like a parable for consecrated life, rooted in the fountains of salvation, like the hidden fountain, like the secret spring whose abundant waters are called to fructify our dry earth and sterile deserts. And this, even though it is night and darkness thickens and difficulties increase.

This is the meaning enclosed in the mystical and prophetic experience of consecrated life. It is the joyous discovery of the fountains of salvation, the finding of the hidden treasure, the encounter with Christ and the prophetic announcement of his reign. Mysticism and prophecy are, above all, an experience that tries to describe not so much theologically but essentially.

In this sense, we approach the new fields of witness (Areopagus) of mysticism and prophecy:

- a) It deals with an experience based on faith, nourished by the Word that discovers God in life and feels the need to witness to God (areopagus of mysticism)
- b) It is also the announcement born in a situation of exile that creates communion, that humanizes through small signs and the service of charity (areopagus of prophecy).

All these break forth in a song of praise that makes its own “the joys and the hopes” of the human family and prophetically recreates consecrated life.

- ***Called to be mystics and prophets***

All our Founders and Foundresses were mystics and prophets. We are called to recreate their mystical-prophetic charism in the Church. Without mystics and prophets consecrated life does not have a future.

Mysticism and prophecy are two essential, closely connected dimensions of every religious identity, of Christian life and of consecrated life. The first is more directly projected towards union with God, the second is more immediately oriented to the fulfillment of his will here and now. Only a wise combination of both of them will forge an authentic religious identity of God and of the human person. There is no authentic mysticism if it does not flow out of an ethical and prophetic commitment, nor is it possible to think of a prophecy which is not nourished by a deep union with the divine¹.

¹ Ultimamente si è scritto molto su questo argomento. Di seguito alcuni titoli consultati: AA. VV., *Profetismo*, en *Dizionario degli Istituti di Perfezione*, vol. VII, Edizioni Paoline, Roma 1983, 972-993; ENZO BIANCHI, *La vida religiosa, ¿signo profético creíble?* Confer 40 (2001) 43-56; JESÚS CASTELLANO CERVERA, *Esigenze odierne di spiritualità: memoria e profecía*, en Aa. Vv., *Impegni e testimonianza di spiritualità alla luce della lettera apostolica “Novo millennio ineunte”*, Teresianum, Roma 2001, p. 75-197; CARLOS DOMÍNGUEZ MORANO, *Místicos y profetas: dos entidades religiosas*, Proyección 48 (2001) 307-328; JOSÉ MARÍA ARNÁIZ, *Místicos y profetas. Necesarios e*

All people and all consecrated men and women are called to be mystics and prophets, which means to experience God and his Word that they must transmit. Everyone is also called to commit oneself to the history of the Church and one's time. The true path then, is found in the union of these two identities. It is not so much a matter of being a mystic "OR" of being a prophet, but of being both a mystic "AND" a prophet.

From this perspective, and from our personal experience:

- 1) we shall develop each of these two religious identities as two fundamental identities of the Christian experience, indicating at the same time, the dynamic relationship between them;
- 2) we shall briefly describe the mystical and prophetic rebirth of contemporary spirituality;
- 3) we shall point out their impact on religious life in its dual mystical and prophetic dimension, recalling the urgency of mystical and prophetic witnessing in the Church today;
- 4) finally, we shall indicate some new areopagus of mysticism and prophecy that are currently appearing in the scenario of consecrated life.

1. Two fundamental dynamic identities of the Christian experience

Mysticism and prophecy are not static religious identities. They are dynamic. This means that they exist within a religious process of maturation and purification of the person (the nights of St. John of the Cross); they are results of the transforming action of divine grace and a complex history of identifications characterized by the personal commitment to bring to fullness the meaning of one's existence. The mystical horizon of this fullness is reached in the encounter with God (mystical union), which is the deepest yearning of every human being (cfr. GS 19). If the soul is searching for God, how much more her beloved is searching for her (cfr. *Living Flame of Love* 3,28).

It is said that we all have within us a mystic (and a prophet), just as there is a "little Buddha", who incarnates our deepest needs and desires, searching for the meaning of life, aspiring for a future of change and newness and for the realization of the final utopia. If this is true, anthropologically and religiously, it is even more so from the point of view of Christian faith and consecrated life. In effect, Christianity is originally a mysticism, not ethics or a moral code; it is the mysticism of following Christ and baptismal conformation to Him. In the same way, consecrated life is mysticism and prophecy; it is essentially consecration to Christ (mysticism) and proclamation of the Good News (prophecy)

1.1. The mystical experience

inseparables hoy, PPC, Madrid 2004; JOSÉ MARÍA GONZÁLEZ RUIZ, *Profetismo*, en *Nuevo Diccionario de Pastoral*, San Pablo, Madrid 2002, p. 1208-1214; JOSÉ LUIS BARRIOCANAL, *Diccionario del profetismo bíblico*, Monte Carmelo, Burgos, 2004, p. 558-590 ("Profetismo/profetas, hoy"); MONS. JESÚS SANZ MONTES, *Mística y profecía. El hilo de Ariadna de nuestra fidelidad* (Editorial), Tabor 3 (2007) 8-11; JOSÉ CRISTO REY GARCÍA PAREDES, *Profecía cultural de la vida religiosa hoy. Nuevos caminos, fuentes y oportunidades*, Vida Religiosa 102 (2007) 222-234; A. ARVALLI, *Vita religiosa come profecía? Le lacrime di una difficile transizione incompiuta*, Credere Oggi 27 (2007) 131-144; AA. VV., *Palabra y profecía*, Vida Religiosa 104 (2008) 85-160 ("Profecía y mística en una sociedad secularizada", p. 149-160); JESÚS ÁLVAREZ GÓMEZ, *El profetismo de los fundadores y el ministerio profético de sus discípulos*, Vida Religiosa 106 (2009) 469-479; M^a CARMEN MARIÑAS, *La Consagración contemplativa desde una mística de "ojos abiertos"*, Vida Religiosa 107 (2009) 375-379; ALBERT NOLAN, *Esperanza en una época de desesperanza*, Sal Terrae, Santander 2010 (original inglés: *Hope in an Age of Despair*, Orbis Books, 2009); capitoli da evidenziare ("Teología de carácter profético", p. 99-111; "El espíritu de los profetas", p. 113-124; "La vida consagrada como un testimonio profético", p. 139-147).

The mystical experience, whatever its expression may be, seems to have for its main objective the search for a union that breaks through the confines of the “ego”. In this way, it immerses itself in a lived reality, which is mystical union. The mystical experience is essentially a divine pathos (divine passion) which means “*experiri*” (to experience) the presence of God and to suffer, to feel, to accept His transforming action in us, and thus, it is a bond, a relationship, “a loving glance”, a loving contact with a reality which is immensely appreciated and conceived as the secret, most intimate center of one’s existence and as its permanent source which causes the mystic to exclaim: “O living flame of love that tenderly wounds my soul in its deepest center!” (St. John of the Cross, “*Living Flame of Love*”)

Mystical experience goes beyond intellectual knowledge, it is not grasped through reading or thinking but rather through living and experiencing. Saint John of the Cross speaks of “knowledge by experience” as opposed to “scientific knowledge” (*Spiritual Canticle*, prol. 3). Its fundamental reality is the experience of the love of God, which John of the Cross calls “nursing mother”². The first pre-occupation of a mother for her child are its “necessities”, not her “duties”. Before all of these, God is love, and the only proper and mature response is to allow oneself to be loved and be healed by His wounds.

This attitude is manifested in a particular state of awareness, of trust and of surrender to God Who is believed and loved. Here, not only grace, but also the personal psychology of each person and his/her condition as woman or man play a fundamental role. It is said that women have a greater predisposition for mysticism while men have for prophecy. “The mother brings forth life, the father, history” (G. Van der Leeuw). Even if the mystical-prophetic components are present both in the feminine and masculine, historically prophetic attitudes and behavior are more associated to the male components of the person: law, requirement, condemnation, punishment....

1.2. The prophetic experience

Just as mystical life is characterized by the experience of the overwhelming presence of the “Other”, prophetic life is characterized by listening to the Word that comes from the divine and which the prophet feels constrained to transmit, often against his will. The prophet is spokesperson of a divine message, divinity breaks through not so much to make some intimate communication to him, but more to make him an announcer of His saving Word. The Word, listened to and transmitted, always entails the need for a transforming action in history.

The symbolic space of the prophetic identity is not the intimate and recollected space of the cell, as in the case of the mystical experience. Its paradigmatic space is the public square, there where social life unfolds in this drama of interpersonal relationships intertwined with political, economic and cultural life.

In this sense we see how biblical prophecy unfolds in the interpretation of enigmas at the discovery of a mission and of a historical responsibility, engaged in the community. The preoccupation for justice, for the coming of a society worthy of God and of His children, becomes the center of Judaic prophecy.

1.3. The bursting forth of “The Other” and the experience of “otherness”

Mystics and prophets even in their diversity have something in common: both are witnesses to the bursting forth of “The Other” who transcends them and in whose name they are transformed, changing their personal identity.

² “*In this interior union God communicates himself to the soul with such genuine love that neither the affection of a mother, with which she so tenderly caresses her child, nor a brother's love, nor any friendship is comparable to it*”. (*Spiritual Canticle* 27,1).

Mystics experience “The Other” breaking forth within themselves from the deepest part of their being. The prophet instead describes this bursting forth of “The Other” not so much as something emerging from within but rather as a voice that comes from outside – an unexpected, startling and, in general, disturbing voice that calls to a difficult mission. “Woe to me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips... “ (Is 6,5). “Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a child!” (Jer 1,6). “Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel!” (1Cor 9,16).

2. The mystical and prophetic reawakening of our contemporary time

The twentieth century notwithstanding its process of secularization and religious crisis, at least in the occidental world, is characterized by a growing interest for both the study and experience of mysticism. This amply documented³ renewal movement tends to promote mystical life as fullness of Christian life and as prophetic denunciation of the secularized and materialistic culture.

We have all been and we are protagonists, to a greater or lesser degree, of the religious situation in the past century and in this our century characterized by a series of rapid and profound changes which marked our life: laicism, modernity, post-modernity, together with clamorous situations of injustice and marginalization. In facing these situations and great changes, we have had to re-adjust the parameters of our consecrated life following the Council orientation of a “constant return to the sources of all Christian life and to the original spirit of the Institutes and their adaptation to the changed conditions of our times” (PC 2).

Personally, I have closely followed the evolution of the contemporary religious situation through the study of the trends in spirituality and through my pastoral commitments. Because of this, I will speak more from my experience than from theoretical, theological or pastoral programs.

My experience has been deeply marked by these two poles: the return to the sources of revelation and the openness to the needs of the contemporary world with its conditions of poverty, marginalization, violence and injustice. The link between them has been my interest for mysticism and more specifically, for Carmelite mysticism. This interest offered me the vital-existential synthesis of my theology and my religious consecration and launched me with a renewed awareness of the situations of lack of faith (of the first world) and of poverty (of the third world).

From these points, I tried to give a response to the problems that faith and its preaching present today. At the same time, I tried to respond to the challenges of consecration and mission of religious life in the Church, being sensitive to the situations of poverty and the exclusion of wide sectors of humanity.

On this point, I wish to present some convictions:

1st Christian life and, in particular, consecrated life cannot live along the sidelines of the contemporary situation that today challenges faith and spirituality in general. It is essential to know this situation in order to respond prophetically both to the deepest yearnings and questionings of the human being and to the dramatic situations of marginalization and poverty.

³ Permettetemi di far riferimento ai nostri studi, dove il lettore potrà trovare un’abbondante documentazione: CIRO GARCÍA, *Corrientes nuevas de teología espiritual*, Studium, Madrid 1971; ID., *Teología espiritual contemporánea. Corrientes y perspectivas*, Editorial Monte Carmelo, Burgos 2002; ID., *La mística del Carmelo*, Editorial Monte Carmelo, Burgos 2002; ; ID., *Mística, misterio y teología*, Lección inaugural del curso académico 2003-2004, Facultad de Teología del Norte de España, Burgos 2003; ; ID., *Mística en diálogo. Congreso Internacional de Mística. Selección y Síntesis*, Editorial Monte Carmelo, Burgos 2004.

2nd In addition, Christian life must be founded on biblical and liturgical sources as also on serious theological reflection that helps us enter into the revealed mystery of our faith, thus overcoming the divergence between theology and spirituality. Sometimes we speak of a spiritual inadequacy of religious life, but, should we not also speak in some way of the inadequacy of theological formation?

3rd Finally, consecrated life must be based on a dual mystical and prophetic openness, as we have said earlier. The mystical experience represents the fullness of Christian life. It is the experience lived not only in the silence of prayer but also in the daily existence, in a theological dynamic.

4th Prophetic experience, which is nourished in mystical experience, thrusts us towards ethical and social commitment and is translated not so much in the great causes of humanity as in small humanizing gestures: attention to the poor, to the infirm and the marginalized. The experience of God cannot be realized in isolation, indifference and lack of attention towards human suffering.

3. The mystical and prophetic vocation of consecrated life

We all know and have experienced the changes in consecrated life with its lights and shadows, its strengths and weaknesses, its success and limitations. Without attempting to take an account, today we have a better understanding of what consecrated life is, of its fundamental values, its theology, its spirituality and its mission in the Church. We also have a better understanding of the specific charism of our Founders.

Presupposing all this, we now ask ourselves in what sense religious life feels it is being called to respond today in its dual mystical and prophetic dimension. Everyone knows the text of *Vita Consecrata* on the prophecy of consecrated life (cfr. VC 84-85). Let us focus our reflection on the value of consecration and on the meaning of mission⁴, making reference to the International Congress on Consecrated Life of 2004.

3.1. The mysticism of consecration

Religious consecration cannot be understood outside the mysticism of “*sequela Christi*” and conformation to Him. The “*sequela Christi*” is a *memoria Iesu*, which makes Jesus present in His way of living and acting by virtue of the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. This includes a union and familiarity with Him like that of His disciples, which deeply mark religious life. This is founded on the encounter, contact, familiarity with His life and His person, on the imitation of His lifestyle, His personal, free, chosen and beloved practice of poverty, chastity and obedience. It is the true, solid and unequivocal foundation of our consecrated life (cfr. VC 88-90).

Obviously, consecrated life is more than the vows, even though the vows continue to be an essential and meaningful part of this lifestyle which is called to live the vows in an integrated manner, as an element of personal identity, as a place for encountering God and as missionary dimension of existence, as part of prophecy, which it is. If this does not identify us and its effects are not felt in daily life, if we embrace middle-class values and minimize the evangelical meaning of the vows, we are definitely hiding the talent we received for fear of putting it to use.

3.2. The prophecy of mission

Consecration does not exist without mission. Consecrated life is for mission. The same consecration, lived as surrender to God, as love for Jesus and as service to the people of God is already in itself mission: the mission par excellence of announcing Christ, of making Him present, repeating

⁴ Esistono buoni studi sulla teologia della vita consacrata. Qui riportiamo l'opera di Gabino Urbarri, *Portar las marcas de Jesús. Teología y espiritualidad de la vida consagrada*, Comillas, Madrid 2008⁴.

the existential gestures of His life through the evangelical counsels (cfr. VC 72-75). This is the prophetic dimension of consecrated life.

Today, prophecy is understood above all in its affirmative meaning, as was the life of Jesus, that is to say, in announcing the Good News. The mission of consecrated life is that of being converted in prophetic anticipation of the Kingdom, through community life, through its form of governance, its simplicity of life, its missionary, educative, charitable and contemplative works. This way, it becomes an eloquent sign of the Gospel, both for the society where it lives and for the Church where it flourishes. As regards vocations, this affirmative prophecy, which proposes visible evangelical alternatives to the evils of society, seems more necessary than a negative prophecy⁵.

During the Synod on Consecrated Life, Cardinal Ratzinger offered a magisterial contribution on the genuine meaning of prophecy as contained in *Proposition n. 39*. The values of prophecy are necessarily rooted in the experience of God and of His Word, in friendship with God that develops through dialogue in prayer, in passion for His holiness and His glory, in passionate search for His will and in a witnessing to truth. It is a prophetic action that requires the courage of proclamation and condemnation, a consistency in life to the point of sealing God's message with one's own blood. It is a prophetic action that also exacts a passionate search for new paths for building of the Kingdom of God, the ecclesial communion. Because of this, true prophecy is nourished with the Word of God and the contemplation of His presence and action in history.

3.3. Mysticism and prophecy in “Passion for Christ and passion for humanity”

In November 2004, the International Congress on Consecrated Life was celebrated in Rome with the theme: “Passion for Christ and passion for humanity”. In it, the mystical and prophetic dimensions were tackled in the light of two biblical icons: Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well (Jn 4, 1-42) and the parable of the good Samaritan (Lk 10,29-37). The two images wanted to harmonize mysticism and prophecy, contemplation and action, experience and mission in a fruitful way. In fact, in the encounter with God, consecrated life discovers the source of a love which becomes gift and service to others especially the least and the weakest. From here, one feels propelled towards the often disregarded dignity of the person and towards the God of love and mercy.

In the light of the two biblical icons just mentioned, “mysticism and prophecy” acquire a profound evangelical meaning and represent an impetus toward the renewal of consecrated life for the third millennium. The first icon – that of the Samaritan woman – emphasizes love and passion for Christ. The intimate conversation of the Samaritan woman with Christ is concretely “adoration”. The second icon – that of the good Samaritan – highlights “compassion”, the love and attention for the wounded along the roads of life. However, it does not deal with juxtaposed elements or separate moments, but the roots of the encounter with the God of life, with the Lord of mercy. This is the criterion with which the Lord is teaching us to express adoration thanks to the Mystery fused with a committed compassion for wounded humanity, as we will try to see in the next paragraph.

4. The new Areopagus (fields of witness) of mysticism and prophecy

The Apostolic Exhortation “*Vita Consecrata*”, speaking of the mission of consecrated life (“*Servitium caritatis*”) indicates the following fields: the *ad gentes* mission, inculturation, option for the poor, care for the sick (cfr. VC. 77-83). But the apostolic and missionary horizon of the Church extends to include new “fields” in which consecrated life must be present. It must be present in the world of education and means of communication (VC 96-99) and also the involvement in ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue (100-103). These Areopagus, these fields, retain all of their relevance and

⁵ G. URIBARRI, *o.c.*, p. 305.

we can say they are more urgent now than ever. But to be truly an evangelizing presence, they are called to put on a prophetic force that renders the mission truly meaningful.

When we speak here of new Areopagus, however, we do it starting from the double perspective of mysticism and prophecy. This means that we are not treating them like fields of action or apostolate but rather like a style or form of life, like fundamental attitudes called to permeate all our apostolic activities. Because of this, even if they are presented separately, they form one undivided reality, as emerges from our previous presentation. The mystical and prophetic identities are two perspectives of consecrated life which are fused in one reality and which, therefore, cannot be lived and cultivated separately. If they were separated, their true meaning could be radically changed. Only the mystic is a prophet and all prophets must be mystics. The unity in the lived experience also brings about unity in pursuing the pathways which, today, represent the new Areopagus.

These are fundamental attitudes which apply to all the fields, even if obviously it is possible to cultivate one more than the other according to the charism and mission of each Institute. Here, we shall indicate those that seem fundamental to us.

4.1. The Areopagus of mysticism

We indicate the following: personal life of faith, listening to the Word, the experience of God “in the daily life”, the urgency of witnesses.

a) Personal life of faith

In a world – especially a European one - in which we are called to live our faith “in inclement weather”, without socio-cultural or religious support, consecrated people – together with Christians on the journey – feel the need to renew their personal faith beginning from the question of Jesus to His disciples: “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” (Mk 4, 40) “Do you also wish to go away?” (Jn 6, 67).

It seems something obvious that we normally take for granted, but we must not forget this: Consecrated life is born and nourished in faith. Its center is Jesus Christ, alive in our midst and sends us generously in mission in a world athirst for spirituality; He fills us with His Spirit so that we may be a song of praise to God the Father of every creature and an expression of His compassion. We have to affirm once again that the fecundity and the joy of our life come from a familiarity with God through an encounter with Christ, through the mystical experience of faith.

In this context, the words of Karl Rahner acquire a meaning: “The Christian of the future will either be a mystic – which means a person who has experienced something – or he/she will not be a Christian at all. The spirituality of the future will no longer depend on a conviction which is unanimous, evident and public, nor on a generalized religious environment but rather on experience and personal decision⁶.

The motivation suggested by Rahner appears much more radical today. It is not only an environment contrary to Christian faith that necessitates a personal experience of God, but it is the very nature of Christian faith, which is not only a doctrinal formula but an lived experience, a full adherence to God, a relationship of personal encounter with Him, the response to His loving invitation (cfr. DV 2.5).

The personal experience of faith, as the great theologian De Lubac emphasized “is not a deepening of oneself, it is the deepening of faith; it is not an attempt to escape into the inner life; it is Christianity itself”. The novelty in Christian mysticism resides in the distinctiveness of adherence to God through faith. Outside of mysticism, the Mystery is externalized and runs the risk of getting lost in pure formula”⁷.

⁶ K. RAHNER, *Espiritualidad antigua y actual*, en *Escritos de Teología*, VII, p. 25.

⁷ H. DE LUBAC, en prólogo a RAVIER (ed.), *La mystique et les mystiques*, DDB, Paris 1964, p. 24-27.

b) Listening to the Word

The essential nourishment of faith is the Word of God, entrusted in the Sacred Scripture, primary source of Christian mysticism. Furthermore, in it, we are offered the history of salvation in the form of a covenant which is incarnated in the typology of Christian mysticism. Because of this, the Word of God as source of life cannot be wanting in the life of consecrated persons nor in their communities and congregations. The two icons – that of the Good Samaritan (Jesus Christ) and that of the Samaritan woman (us) – speak to us of an encounter with Him as Master and spring of living water, as so wonderfully described by St. Teresa of Jesus (*Vida*, 30, 19). A renewal process places Scripture at the center of life, prays it, mediates it, shares it, celebrates it, listens to it (cfr. VC 94). The last Synod on the “*Word of God in the life and mission of the Church*” (cfr. Synod of Bishops, Rome, October 2008) left us some precious suggestions regarding this.

c) *The experience of God "in daily life"*

Today, we speak of a mystical experience “in the daily life”⁸. Its anthropological foundation is “this fundamental experience of a call (attraction) towards God” present in all men and women and which Karl Rahner defines as “supernatural-existential”⁹. According to a historical-existential perspective, the human person is constitutively open to transcendence.

Such an experience is not something exceptional, on the contrary, it happens every time that the human person clearly perceives the events of his/her daily life with its interior repugnance of evil, its irrevocable love towards the unforeseen “You”, its passion for well done works, its protest against injustice, its commitment for an effective brotherhood, for a living together... All these experiences, the most human and humanizing are always experiences of grace.

These experiences always bring us to the deeper aspect of life, to the better part which we as human beings possess. In our society however, there is a scarcity of deep and authentic experiences of different realities, not only of God. We live so many sensations and emotions but we do not live certain experiences in particular, not only of God and neither do we have a deep experience of life itself.

One goes through these experiences through contemplation and from an outlook of theological faith: “Far from claiming extraordinary charisms and spectacular moments of grace, the Christian must be rather accustomed to contemplate the daily reality with the eyes of faith. In this way, he/she will be capable of searching for and detecting the presence of God”¹⁰. The experience of God is not an experience outside daily life, but is – Zubiri affirms – a way of experiencing in it “the divine condition in which the person exists”¹¹.

We will not have any future neither as Congregation nor as Church if we do not nourish the experience of God. We need persons who have made an interior experience of God, men and women of the Spirit capable of responding to the question which John of the Cross continues to address to us all: “Tell me if He passed amongst you”.

⁸ Gli studi degli ultimi anni, di fronte al cambiamento culturale e socio-religioso del nostro tempo, hanno prestato un’attenzione speciale ai nuovi cammini di esperienza di Dio, aiutando a discernere la sua presenza in questa situazione di cambiamento. Costituiscono una vera *mistagogia* o iniziazione al Mistero. Rimandiamo alla bibliografia specifica.

⁹ K. RAHNER, *Naturaleza y gracia*, en *Escritos de Teología*, IV, pp. 215-243.

¹⁰ J. L. RUIZ DE LA PEÑA, *El don de Dios. Antropología especial*, Sal Terrae, Santander 1991, p. 400.

¹¹ “La experiencia subsistente de Dios no es una experiencia al margen de lo que es la vida cotidiana..., sino la manera de experimentar en toda ella la condición divina en que el hombre subsiste” (X. ZUBIRI, *El hombre y Dios*, Fax, Madrid 1984, p. 333).

It is the experience of God in the human and the real, living in the world not “as if God did not exist” (*etsi Deus non daretur*), as the theologians of secularization and the death of God affirm, but rather “as if God does exist” (*etsi Deus daretur*)¹². This is the God who manifests Himself in the flesh, in human weakness, in the suffering on the cross, who continues to be present in human pain and who has redeemed the world through His apparent helplessness, through the power of the Spirit who has raised Jesus from the dead (Rm 1, 4).

d) *The ecclesial urgency of witnesses*

Our current world needs witnesses. Paul VI already reminded us that the people today are tired of listening, annoyed by discourses and almost immune to words and, because of this, prefer witnesses to teachers to the point of listening only to those teachers who are witnesses at the same time. Today’s people understand better the language of facts and of life rather than the language of words (cfr. EN 41-42). “And I would add: for the Church, the first means of evangelization is witnessing” (EN 41).

John Paul II echoing these words affirmed in his encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*: “The contemporary man believes more in witnesses than in teachers, more in experience than in doctrine, in life and in facts more than theories. The testimony of Christian life is the first and irreplaceable form of mission: Christ, whose mission we continue, is the “Witness” par excellence and the model of Christian witnessing. The Holy Spirit accompanies the journey of the Church and associates her with the testimony he gives about Christ. The first form of testimony is the life of the missionary itself” (RM 42).

True testimony is not detached from life itself when lived intensely. It radiates outwardly its interior fullness. It is a true testimony when you live what you announce, that is, when you begin from your own experience. Benedict XVI, in one of his first pronouncements on consecrated life (Rome, December 10, 2005), proposed to religious women to be “witnesses of the transfiguring presence of God” and launched the challenge to be “prophetic pioneers”, like their respective Founders (Discourse at the Plenary Assembly, Rome, May 7, 2007).

4.2. The Areopagus of prophecy

a) *In an exile situation*

We live in a time that some have compared to an exile. Like Israel who finds himself deprived of all his securities (the temple, place of God’s presence), in consecrated life also, especially in the west, we have lost many of our points of reference and steps have been embarked upon in the search. Exile is also a spiritual experience: “Crying out, I have searched for you and you were gone” (John of the Cross). It is an opportunity to resume the journey of consecration and mission with renewed hope.

Many voices describe it like this: “To evangelize from the sidelines”¹³, others describe the new situation as a paschal experience: the passage from the green house to the “inclement weather”, from the cloister to the streets along which we find our wounded neighbors. It is also a transition from “waiting for them to come” to “going in search of them”, etc.¹⁴. Finally, others speak of God’s concealment in the face of human suffering. Where is God in a world that is suffering His absence because of the many situations of pain, of injustice, of poverty?¹⁵

¹² SANTIAGO DEL CURA ELENA, *A tiempo y a destiempo. Elogio del Dios (in)tempestivo*, Facultad de Teología del Norte de España, Burgos 2001.

¹³ Cf. PHILIP L. WICKERI, *Mision from the margins. The Missio Dei in the crisis of World Christianity*, International Review of Mission 93 (2004) 182-198.

¹⁴ Cf. AMELIA BELTRÁN, *Radicalidad y tolerancia en la vida religiosa femenina*, Pastoral misionera 192 (1994) 20-24.

¹⁵ Cf. AA. VV., *¿Dónde está Dios? Un clamor en la noche oscura*, Concilium 242 (1992) 571-697.

b) *Create a family (home-hearth), communion*

We live in a world in which home and family are experiencing an enormous intercontinental and intercultural crisis. The traditional model of family is experiencing a crisis on all the continents. Anxiety and the need of a home, of acceptance, of being listened to, are increasing everywhere. Because of this, one of the great signs that every consecrated life can offer, as a poor and humble evangelical sign is simply the home: that wherever consecrated people live, there is a house that is open, welcoming, caring as a sign of communion in the Church (cfr. VC 41ss.).

The home, the hearth (the community), is also the place of a shared reading of our personal and communitarian history, where we encounter the Lord Jesus as healer, in our wants, in our divisions, in our failures and in our justifications. This shared reading of our personal, communitarian and congregational history is a source of joy, of encountering God, of prophetic and missionary capacity.

Seen in this light, one of the great calls in religious life is to know how to listen. Listen to God, listen to His Word. But also to listen to the world, the society, listen especially to the poor with their problems and their joys, with their conditions in life and their dignity. Listen within the Church; listen to the bishops, the lay people of whom we spoke so much, the diocesan priests. Listen within our communities, to the young and the old, to those from other generations, to those who think differently. This listening presupposes receptivity and humility, patience and acceptance, openness of heart to allow others to dwell therein. In this way, the encyclical *Ecclesiam suam* of Paul VI (1964) retains all its validity: It offers us the whole theology of listening and dialogue as a requirement for renewal.

In a fragmented world that desires a hearth, communion, and brotherhood, consecrated life can offer a magnificent evangelical sign. From this, an identity will strongly come forth that is strongly established as “being with”: being with Jesus Christ, being with the Church, being with companions in the community and the congregation, being with the poor. Being signs of communion is one of the evangelizing challenges which *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (n. 43) presents.

c) *Humanize*

Another prophetic role of the consecrated life today is to humanize in the face of the slaveries of this world, by demonizing the idols of our culture. Some of these are easily recognizable: short term rewards, immediate pleasures, excessive and irresponsible consumerism, individualism, exaltation of a fragmented personal identity, etc. Others appear to be hidden under an appearance of well being: the “ego” as the defining centre of ultimate aims under the ideal of self realization.

Consecrated life will be capable of humanizing our culture and our society only if it becomes the “humanizer” of its own members. Here, a great challenge is offered to us. Here the encounter or lack of encounter of faith with the culture is at risk. How do we define the quality of our institutions or the results of our apostolic undertakings? If we adopt the culture of *marketing* and *management*, we will end up falling into the web of their values and idols: efficiency, efficacy, realized objectives, marketing quota. All this scheme completely ignores the wisdom of the Beatitudes. It follows the logic of production and not of fecundity.

d) *The wisdom of little signs*

The world bleeds copiously, internet connects us with everything and leaves us alone in front of the screen. What do we do? How do we react? During the International Congress the wisdom of small steps and humble but real signs was emphasized. In facing the enormous breadth of evils that confront us, we run the risk of disregarding what is small, of wanting to find a global solution. But this is not the pathway of the Father of mercies. Besides, what we discover in the history of salvation is that God acts through small things, He chooses a small people: Israel (Dt

7,7); he trusts in a still smaller remnant of this people. We are invited to take small but real steps and give humble but expressive signs. Miracles are signs of the Kingdom. Jesus did not organize some sort of “Social Security” for the whole Palestine, but rather he manifested, through some eloquent signs, that the Reign of God was being realized in His person.

The salvation of God burst in through the victory of Jesus over Satan, over infirmity and death, as concomitant manifestations of God’s remoteness and the absence of salvation.

Following this line of thought, consecrated life is called to offer signs of the Reign of God, to be, in its very being and life, a sign of God’s Reign, of the breaking through of the grace that generates brotherhood, affiliation, joy, acceptance, generosity, adoration, courage, gratuitousness.

e) The service of charity: “a heart that sees”

“Faith that works through charity” (Gal 5,6). “The program of the Christian – the program of the good Samaritan, the program of Jesus – is “a heart that sees”. This heart sees where there is need for love and acts accordingly” (*Deus caritas est*, 31b).

“Human beings always need something more than a technically correct cure. They need humanity. They need attention of the heart. Those who work in charitable Institutions of the Church must distinguish themselves by the fact that they do not limit themselves only to perform what is asked of them at the moment, but that they dedicate themselves to the other with attention coming from the heart in a way that those whom they serve may experience the richness of their humanity. In addition to professional preparation, these workers need a “formation of the heart”. It is necessary to lead them to an encounter with God in Christ who may stir forth love in them and open their soul to others such that for them, love of neighbour is no longer only a commandment imposed from outside but a consequence of their faith which becomes operative in love. (cfr *Gal 5, 6*)” (*Deus caritas est*, 31 a).

Conclusion: A song of praise

- **Prayer of a soul in love**

The poem of the *Fountain* and the *Spiritual Canticle* of St. John of the Cross end with a doxology, with a hymn of praise. It is a praise that embraces the whole of creation: “Mine are heaven and Earth; mine are the people, the righteous are mine and mine are the sinners; the angels are mine, and the Mother of God and all things are mine; and God is mine and for me, because Christ is mine and everything for me. “ (*Prayer of a soul in love*, 27).

It is the enamoured praise that comes from fullness of life, in which the natural world is integrated in divine beauty and breaks forth in a song of joy and hope. This is the great mystical-prophetic testimony that is expected today from consecrated life. This making ones own “the joys and the hopes” of the human family must be a “song”, a life of “beauty”, of rejoicing, to praise the Lord. It is like a corollary to faith, to believe in and follow Jesus. A sad and dejected religious life has no future.

- **Experience of feast: interior joy and openness to the other**

The mystical experience is an experience of feast. God communicates Himself in the joys of life, in happiness, in rejoicing, in enjoying the new wine (cf. Mt 9,17). The experience of feast, of happiness, of joy and of interior serenity are fundamental experiences. The joy of living is at the foundation of the experience made by St. John of the Cross. This joy is transmitted not only through his poetry in which he expresses this, but also in his spiritual journey defined in his works.

His centre is not a mysticism of pain, of sacrifice or detachment (even if they are part of the journey). It is the mysticism of joyful spousal union in which the dark night, which illuminates our darkness, breaks forth: “Happy night” (N 2, 9,1). The “night” is “the loving presence of God in the soul” (N 2,5,1), which gives start to a process of liberation and healing, to a deep transformation. It is a journey towards a new, incredible experience of joy and freedom.

- The mysticism of a presence that becomes prophecy

Consecrated life in the future will be joyous and humble, if it is lived with the illuminating and transforming presence of the Lord of which St. John of the Cross sings; “*Pouring out a thousand graces, he passed these groves in haste; and having looked at them, with his image alone, clothed them in beauty*” (*Spiritual Canticle*, stanza 5). It is the presence of God in creation and in history, it is God’s living and personal presence, the sacramental presence especially in the Eucharist, in the poor, in the mission, in the brothers and sisters of the congregation, in the Church, in prayer and in the reading of the Word of God, in the human family.

The mystical experience of this presence has a “performative” character which means it produces certain effects and sustainable attitudes related to real life; a certain interior joy, a positive sentiment full of hope in the face of what is happening, but above all the experience of radical detachment and the openness to the other. This is the experience which confirms the authenticity of a mysticism which is lived. It is then and only then that mystical experience translates itself to “sustainable sentiments” of positive character, always nourished by joy and love¹⁶. It is then and only then, that mystical experience becomes meaningful, that is, it becomes prophetic.

May the mystical experience of this Presence illuminate the face of our hope and make our prophetic mission creatively dynamic.

*Plenary Assembly of UISG
Rome, May 7, 2010*

Mysticism and Prophecy

Questions

1. Do you think of mysticism and prophecy as essential realities of consecrated life? How can they be incarnated in the cultural and religious reality where you live?
2. To what degree are mysticism and prophecy an ecclesial urgency that challenges consecrated life? How do you evaluate this urgency in the particular Church where you have been sent?
3. According to you, what are the new fields of mysticism and prophecy, keeping in mind, on the one hand the situation of religious life in your country, and on the other the Charism of your Institute? Please list them in order of your preference.
4. What characteristics define the mystical prophet today and with what figures do you identify them?

¹⁶ “Andar interior y exteriormente como de fiesta y traer un júbilo de Dios grande, como un cantar nuevo, envuelto en alegría y amor” (*Llama de amor viva* 2,26).

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