

“The almond branch and the boiling pot”
(Jer. 1, 11-13)
What is the future for our mystical-prophetic heritage?

Bruno Secondin, Ocarm.

Mysticism and prophecy belong to the genetic codes of our ecclesial identity and our mission for the Kingdom of God: this was repeated by all the other speakers and I join them on this. True prophets arise and remain authentic through a special mystical experience of God which marks, sustains, and consoles them in moments of crisis. An authentic mysticism, as an encounter with the living God, lover of life, cannot but nourish and express itself in bold and liberating prophetic action.

Thus, our religious families were born out of a mystical intuition which nourished and provoked an evangelical response within a historical situation. They have always been guided by an operative action for the good of suffering and humiliated men and women. This intuition and passion are nourished in a heart-to-heart dialogue with the God of life and hope and in familiarity with their contemporaries.

PART I: A look at the horizons

At the conclusion of the IX Assembly of Bishops dedicated to consecrated life, the Synod Fathers wrote: “*Throughout the history of the Church, Consecrated Life has been a living presence of the action of the Spirit, a privileged space of the absolute love for God and others, a witnessing of the divine plan to gather all of humanity within the civilization of love, the great family of the children of God.*” (*Concluding Message*, October 27, 1994).

John Paul II in his post synodal exhortation *Vita Consecrata* recognized “The prophetic character of consecrated life was strongly emphasized by the Synod Fathers. It takes the shape of a special form of sharing in Christ’s prophetic office, which the Holy Spirit communicates to the whole People of God. There is a prophetic dimension which belongs to the consecrated life as such, resulting from the radical nature of the following of Christ and of the subsequent dedication to the mission characteristic of the consecrated life.” (VC 84)¹.

1. An easy evaluation, but with caution

If we analyse the birth and the periodic rebirth of consecrated life, or if we try to look within each religious family to understand the spiritual, ecclesial and historical unfolding of the founders/findresses, we will always find these two elements. Where do the creativity, inventiveness, audacity of initiatives and service of our religious families, fidelity up to the point of martyrdom come from if not from an unexplainable mysticism and a most incandescent prophecy?

We have spoken of *mysticism and prophecy* not to go beyond our real problems nor to navigate in the virtual world of essential principles and unbounded horizons. On the contrary, it is to find the hermeneutics in these two dynamics which render the inherited charism a true trans-generational impetus. This will be the premise and the source of a new history still to be invented and lived.

We would like to understand how to go on in an authentic *sequela Christi* and for the sake of the Kingdom to entrust ourselves to the workings of the Spirit, the support and guide of our charisms. Jesus assured us that the work of the Spirit is to be the hermeneutic of memory and guide “towards the whole truth” (cfr. Jn 16,13).

We have to open a pathway towards the future, in company with this humanity, just as, at one time, they made some clearings in the forests to start new civilizations. There are seeds of the future which can still sprout from our roots, no matter how old they are. There is a creativity which we have and which has to be found and expressed in a new charismatic and prophetic way (VC 37). There are

¹ . Sul profetismo nel Sinodo e nell’esortazione postsinodale rimandiamo a: *Per una fedeltà creativa. La vita consacrata dopo il Sinodo*, Paoline, Milano 2005, 349-373 e *Il profumo di Betania. La vita consacrata come mistica, profezia e terapia*, Dehoniane, Bologna 2007, 94-106.

urgencies and opportunities which question us and challenge us within our current history and its anguishes. There are hopes and utopias which we must grasp and evangelize, thanks to the orienting and therapeutic wisdom of our charisms. (VC 103).

Fecundity and creativity cannot be invented by sociological theorem nor by religious discontent. They come from a higher level of God's plan to redeem and fructify our historical phase, thus transforming it. God works in our present to lead it beyond every paralysis and fatalism, towards a universal brotherhood. We are called to be interpreters and servants empowered by the utopia of God.

2. Learning from the experience of the prophet Jeremiah

Jeremiah was a prophet in difficult times, during a great catastrophe concerning the destiny of his people. His language is full of participation, ardor, strength, of images and symbols. Jeremiah's own person, his suffering, his frequent crises are the living elements of his prophecy.²

The two symbols of "the almond branch and the boiling pot" are found in the opening of his oracles. It is the memory of his vocation (about 627 A.C.). This page was written around 604 A.C., that is, by a 40 year-old man more than twenty years after the original experience. For twenty three years that experience remained unexpressed, but certainly vivid and the source of his courage. Now, it comes back to light before a sacrilegious gesture of King Joachim who, in total disregard, chopped up and burned the scroll that contained all that Jeremiah, with the help of Baruch the scribe, had written of what the Lord had said (Jer 36,1-32).

Therefore, it was written not by a "young man full of enthusiasm for an encounter with the Word, full of visions for the missions which must be carried out, but by a deluded man who had gone through many failures and yet remained faithful to his initial vocation."³ The memory of the initial grace, we can say of the original prophetic charism, served to give him strength to acknowledge that notwithstanding everything, he had simply obeyed God. Jeremiah clung to that original moment to remain faithful, in order to overcome that shocking profanation.

Let us keep in mind the first chapter of Jeremiah in its entirety. The first part (vv. 4-10), is fundamental to a constitutive vocation: there is dialogue between God who has made His choice and the young Jeremiah who proclaims his own unpreparedness. It is the awareness of a choice which comes from the free and absolute will of God: "I am with you" (vv. 8.19); "I will put my words in your mouth" (v. 9). The prophet does not only possess the word in its incandescent state, he has to take it with his bare hands. It will be fire and terror, but also poetry and intuition, song and mourning the loudest of all. Four images then followed. Let us stop and take a look at the first two images: they are not images suggested by God, but visions of Jeremiah. They question him and must be explained. God himself offers His explanation.

- a. ***The almond branch:*** it does not speak of a tree, but of a flowering branch (*maqqēl*). It is an agrarian image, a vital productivity which God guarantees and which signals the arrival of a new season. The almond is the first to bloom at springtime. The word *almond* (*šāqēd*) is similar to the word "*vigilant guard*" (*šōqēd*), and therefore we have a play on words here by God explaining the image seen. "I will keep watch over my word to realize it" (v. 12).

It will be like the flowering of the almond: the word of God signals in advance the action of God, and the prophet is the announcer, acting as the sentinel. Jeremiah announces a springtime of disaster, of condemnation and destruction for the infidelity of the people. But he does this not with the desire to witness that all may go into ruin, to assist helplessly at the destruction of hope. God watches over the realization of His Word: one cannot make fun of God.

The prophet must be custodian of this vigilance of God, of this exacting presence, of this purification which is medicinal but not vengeful. In this situation, Jeremiah also becomes a prophet of intercession: he puts himself in their midst confessing his own delusions and fatigue, but also his trust in God. In the midst of tragic situations the questioning voice of Jeremiah and his confessions are a testimony that there is still hope, there is still fertile dew on earth.

² . Per una interpretazione esegetica, ma aperta a significati suggestivi: L. ALONSO SCHÖKEL-J.L. SICRE DIAZ, *I profeti*, Edizione italiana a cura di G. Ravasi, Borla, Roma 1996, 451-746. Una proposta di *lectio divina*: C.M. MARTINI, *Una voce profetica nella città. Meditazioni sul profeta Geremia*, Centro Ambrosiano- Edizioni Piemme, Casale Monferrato 1993.

³ . C.M. MARTINI, *Una voce profetica*, 81.

- b. **The boiling pot:** represents a household imagery. Some of the boiling liquid spills out of the pot that overturns. It is the “breaking forth of evil” (v. 14) that spreads from the historical valley of the North – this is the sense of the pot “with its mouth tilting from the north” – sweeping away everything. It is not God who brings disasters, and it is not even the people who are the real destroyers, but the people, guided by incompetent leaders bring down the disaster upon themselves with their perverse idolatry. This people will lose its identity and autonomy forever because it has forgotten its roots and covenant with God, looking for other masters to serve. Even if seemingly everything is a catastrophe, the season of hope buds forth together with the disaster and it bursts forth from within, thanks to the “watchfulness” of God, thanks to the tenacious resistance of the Prophet. The prophet is “watchful” together with God over the truth of the Word, but he also witnesses the effort of the people to believe in a better future and to act for a better future. The prophet must know how to discern the footprints of God and of His fruitful and efficacious Word in complex, chaotic and global situations, pointing out new pathways. But he has a timid character, he often falls into depression, and feels violated by God himself, more than protected by Him.(cfr. Jer 20,7).

3. Considering our heritage

We said that this page was written in the context of a deep crisis of the prophet Jeremiah. He is rethinking his vocation. The choice was God's, and God's alone, and it is consecration and mission, tenderness and fire together, delusion and violence. It is easy to apply this perspective to our own situation when the illusions disappear.

Like Jeremiah, we can also multiply the desperate confessions, full of bitterness and helpless rebellion. Or else, precisely like the resistant Jeremiah, we can think over the roots of our own adventure, the founding experience that gave a start to everything. Yes, it was not we who invented our charism, nor the mission to build and uproot, to destroy and to plant, to cry out and to intercede.

The Lord gave and consecrated right from the start, first to the founding Fathers and mothers and then to each one of us, this identity, this mission, this adventure full of risks. He asked us to invest everything we have in this. His Word and His presence, His unswerving fidelity and our own fragility, the boiling pots of planetary evil and the fragile signs of his invisible yet trustworthy Presence. Even if some Religious Institutes are experiencing the difficulty of survival or the fragility of a springtime not yet established, we cannot lose hope.

Certainly, we have also experienced delusions. We were deluded that our sacred temples, our strategic covenants, our filled granaries, our progressive statistics were blessings from God, acquired and comforting rewards. And today we can see well that it was not like this. In its turn, post - modern society has already dismantled the heritage of inherited values and lives irresponsibly dancing on the brink of an ecological, financial, cultural and anthropological abyss⁴. Let us not fall together into this catastrophic black hole. Let us rediscover the reasons for a theological hope which belongs to us and is still inspiring.

We must rediscover the radiance of the original experience, when we were fragile like the flowering almond branch, but also audacious like the boiling pot. Only thus can we again become wise, and not carefree interlocutors, audacious and not paralyzed, trusting in God in a new and mystical way.

But we can also be explorers of just glimpsed and abruptly interrupted pathways, solid intercessors and critical protagonists.

We open new pathways of diaconia and trust in a Church which seems to be afraid of prophecy and lacks the courage to pass through the dark nights of a post-modernity of unhappy passions⁵. Let us give a new language and a new form to our symbolic, critical, transforming function in the Church and in society.⁶

Let us not reduce our identity to a fetish, to a miracle-performing sanctuary. The actual crisis is similar to the boiling pot that destroys everything. Let us commit ourselves to become like that

⁴ . Cf. H. JONAS, *Sull'orlo dell'abisso. Conversazioni sul rapporto tra uomo e natura*, Einaudi, Torino 2000.

⁵ Cf. il felice titolo del libro: M. BENASAYAG-G. SCHMIT, *L'epoca delle passioni tristi*, Feltrinelli, Milano 2005.

⁶ . Una panoramica della situazione attuale: AA.VV., *Dio oggi. Con lui o senza di lui cambia tutto*, Cantagalli, Siena 2010.

blossoming almond branch announcing a new season. We have to inhabit the horizons, to love the horizons, to tread new horizons and not live behind the bush!⁷

PART II: Gather the precious pearls

The relationships, which up to this point have given rhythm to our days, showed us the white heat of unitive and illuminative mysticism, which takes us to the higher and mysterious pathways of the living God, "To Be," as Rabbi Arthur Green has well explained to us – which we approach with empathy and wonder.

But in these days, there has also been the consuming fire of prophecy, which like a bursting fire sweeps everything away, animating everything, just like the restless and liberating force of the Word. The talks of Sr. Judette Gallares and of Sr. Liliane Sweko were actually this fire which makes our hearts explode (Jer 4,19; 20,9). The *ouverture* of Fr. Ciro Garcia offered the serene and wise clarification of the guiding concepts and possible applications.

1. The pathways of empathy and a listening heart

Rabbi Arthur Green introduced us to a mysterious "inner garden" with an argumentation typical of the most genuine rabbinic tradition made alive with chassidic tradition viewed with an experience open to new "sparks of holiness". The proposal to translate the well known tetragram (YHWH) as "To Be" brought us nearer to the ineffable mystery of "the One", "the Holy One" of whom we are all likeness, to be acknowledged and safeguarded with empathy, inclusion and vigilance.

Mysticism is not an object of assault nor of vertiginous ascent but above all a gift and an encounter to be acknowledged and to be loved also through times of struggle and of terror. The discovery of monotheism by Abraham is beautiful – in the acclamation "Ah!" – after having crushed the idols of the father Terach! Transcendence resides within the immanence... transcendence means "*God is here*", we are approaching the great Christian mysticism, the tradition of the pervasive immensity of the presence of God. This is mysticism.

With her intense and challenging comments on the icon of Lydia of Tiatira (Acts 16,11-15), Sr. Judette Gallares exposed us to the risk and the surprise of a Word with mysterious resonance, capable of accompanying a journey of conversion according to the paradigm proposed by Lonergan. She gave the theme "conversion" a new explorative and liberating dynamic that resembles the breathtaking pathways of mystical adventures and also shows the incandescent spring from which prophecy is born.

The process of conversion makes us discover its true dynamics, one that knows moments of darkness, passages of re-awakening, explosions of overwhelming enthusiasm, warm and soothing sharing of these new convictions. And yes, it is finally completed by a movement of transforming integration in oneness with the environment.

We know that Paul had a particular predilection for the domestic community of Philippi. He kept it in his memory full of concern and dedication, occupying himself with its development and progress. In fact, it is precisely in his letter to the Church of Philippi that Paul gave us the jewel of his precious Christological Hymn (Phil 2,5-11). Paul the Apostle read the simplicity of those beginnings and the weakness of the situation in the light of the icon of the Son of God, who made Himself a servant, humbling Himself till death, but who reigns glorious and sovereign over the cosmos.

2. Like sparks of prophecy

I will compare the role of Sr. Liliane Sweko to that of a diviner of a lost spark, to cite a Hebrew legend on the incompleteness of creation. She dug deep into the womb of our present history to meet and point out these sparks of prophecy that "run through the stubbles" (cfr. Ws 3,7) of our fears and set them afire. She quoted names of men and women familiar to all – from Msgr. Romero to Mother Teresa di Calcutta, from Etty Hillesum to Dorothy Stang, from Madeleine Delbrêl to Bishop Munzihirwa, to hundreds of assassinated African Sisters – and from these figures she drew out many sparks, always unique and original, which must remain alive and capable of drawing out of us a "host of ministers like flames of fire" (Heb 1,7).

⁷ Una prospettiva generale, ma che ci interessa: J.J. TAMAYO-ACOSTA, *Nuevo paradigma teológico*, Trotta, Madrid 2003.

Their memory must remain like that *blossoming almond branch*, like a fragile but efficacious sign that illuminates the night. They can also be similar to the *boiling pot*, like unending prophecy, like an impetuous torrent of charity and generosity that reveals how much a life totally dedicated and exposed to risks in the following of Christ is capable of doing (cfr. VC 86).

Sr. Liliane added the inspiring function of brotherhood to the three great prophetic categories of denouncing, announcing and renouncing, and made appeal for a new formation in a process that renders one capable of discernment and objectivity with competence and adequate strategy. There is always a need for intelligent strategy side by side with a generous prophecy.

3. An orienting wisdom

The dense and concise conference of Fr. Ciro Garcia at the opening may also be taken up now in a wider working space for reflection to serve as scheme and crucible. It anticipated the clarifying orientation which was good to follow and gave useful premise to gather and put together the horizons now open. He warned us at once that there is a need to put our discourse on mysticism and prophecy in the context of the evident re-awakening (even if wild and confused) of the cultural and religious type, which in turn nourishes a hoard of nostalgia and consoling escapes within which there might be some legitimate longings.

With many references to important sources, Fr. Ciro made us understand that it is up to us to be wise and patient interlocutors of hopes and expectations. Only a conscious, critical and transforming presence will trace out new pathways. We have to be mystics and prophets, with renewed and passionate hearts, with penetrating eyes and a strong intuition of where the sun rises, while all the rest are saddened by the fact that the evening lights have gone out. We have inherited a high level of mysticism and prophecy: it is up to us to know how to put this heritage back in play. This is the time for heirs!

The school of prophecy lies in an obedient and assiduous listening to the Word. From there will spring forth both the encounter with the heart of God who attracts us to Himself in an embrace of close transforming unity and the ardour of a prophecy that becomes an instrument of consolation and liberation. We have to open new wells to quench this new thirst for clean and generous values. We have to open new construction sites to repair the breaches (Is 58,12) of rundown houses so we may once more inhabit them together as experts open to hospitality and communion. Once again we have to give the splendour of gratuitousness and gift, to rediscover the value of poor resources and small signs: The "*city of man*" is promoted not only by rights and duties but even more and above all by relationships of gratuitousness, mercy and communion (Benedetto XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, 6).

PART III: Prophets, poets, pragmatists

What has to be done then? How can we remain like the blossoming almond branch announcing the new season, and how can we preserve the incandescence, the impetuosity and the creativity of our origins? Let us look for some indications that may help us to inhabit these open horizons and allow and foster new pathways and a direct, effective and critical impact to our charisms that is transforming at the same time.

Prophecy is a fluid and versatile word with numerous meanings. The word *mysticism* is just as evasive, intangible, indefinable, unclassified, and today it is even sumptuous. Neither of the two was born in a pure state. They came out already shabby with meanings according to places and cultures. Therefore, in using them, we have to pay attention not to use them as innocent and bare instruments. We have to pay attention to the symantics with which they have been covered for so long⁸. Fr. Ciro reminded us about this and so did Rabbi Arthur. From the start Sr. Judette invited us, with a quote from M. Buber, to acknowledge that religious experience is real when it implies a transforming message, a

⁸ . Fra la letteratura infinita che c'è, rimando alle indicazioni date da C. Garcia. Aggiungo: R. ZAS FRIZ DE COL, *Teologia della vita cristiana. Contemplazione, vissuto teologale e trasformazione interiore*, San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo 2010; AA.VV., *The esperienze of God today and Carmelite Mysticism. Mystagogy and Inter-Religious and Cultural Dialog*. Acts of the International Seminar, Zidine, sept. 2007, KIZ, Zagreb 2009. E segnalo anche una rilettura dell'eredità in queste due chiavi: B. SECONDIN (ed.), *Profeti di fraternità. Per una visione rinnovata della spiritualità carmelitana*, Dehoniane, Bologna 1985.

prophetic audacity coming from within a mysterious encounter with God. Sr. Liliane exemplified the plurality of the original and meaningful experiences even in different ecclesial and social contexts.

In considering our theme, we must not begin very far from here. Notwithstanding fatigue and nightmares, "*the lamp of God has not yet gone out*"(1Sam 3,3). Under certain aspects maybe there is only a little oil left, perhaps there is too little vigour (cfr. Rv 3,2), particularly in some Institutes of the northern hemisphere, which certainly record a reduced number of members and weakening of forces. But history and memory still have a hidden, but burning vigour, like embers under the ashes⁹. And God knows this secret fire: "In fact, God, would not be so unjust as to forget all you have done, the love that you have for His name or the services you have done and are still doing for the holy people of God" (Heb 6,10). And therefore, we speak because "we only wish that each one of you show the same zeal, that your hope may find its fulfilment in the end, that you may not become lazy but be imitators of those who, with faith and perseverance, become heirs of the promises"(Heb 6,12).

1. Starting from the Spirit of Prophecy

We are all heirs and active beneficiaries of a foundational experience we call charism: every charism has in its initial phase both the peculiarity of mysticism and that of prophecy. The charism of consecrated life has the Holy Spirit in its generating and directing protagonist. It is the Spirit who made possible the vital encounter with salvation through Jesus Christ. To pick up the analogy with the episode of Lydia (Acts 16,11-17), the Lord (who in this case is the Spirit) has marked and planned us for an evangelical adventure that was to be received as a gratuitous gift of kindness and lived as mission/commitment that consecrates and transfigures values and goals, orienting life in a clear and determined way.

To speak of prophecy is to speak above all of the specialty of the Spirit who "has spoken through the prophets" as we say in the "Creed". And the Spirit continues to speak through the prophets. This "speaking through the prophets", as prophetic vocations teach us, happened at the beginning through a strong, mystical, overwhelming experience which left no room for escape, or refusal. "You have seduced me, oh Lord, and I let myself be seduced: You have overpowered me: You were the stronger" (Jer 20,7). And from that day, in the heart of the Founder and Foundress, "there seemed to be a fire burning in my heart imprisoned in my bones" (Jer 20,9). And this is the experience that is transmitted to us so we may know and safeguard it, live and develop it attuned to the Body of Christ which is in perennial growth (*Mutuae Relationes* 11).

Charism is precisely a gift of *prophecy* which, however, comes forth from an awareness of being called to accept the gift of salvation and to contribute to its historical impact as a commitment and challenge, and not like a closed storage bin. There is no union and fusion with the living God other than through the grace of the Spirit who opens the doors of faith and of love. In the same way, there is no prophecy if not in the horizons of the same Spirit. He knows the "designs of the Father" (Rom 8,27) and intervenes so that we may be aware of them and responsible for them. He interprets them by calling us to a responsible choice so that we may put ourselves on the line and allow ourselves to be led toward their full realization.

Charism cannot be dragged along with fatigue nor interpreted with sadness. It was given and transmitted with an ardour that burned down obstacles and resistances. It cannot be transmitted only as maintenance of the daily routine of a sterile and sham faith, a charity of appearances, a vague and measly sense of church. Charism will be fruitful only if we possess a "heavy heart" (Etty Hillesum) that is in love, and if we bring our charism back to its generating motivation for which it was given to us. Without a creative re-reading and re-foundation, charisms become sterile. Their fruitfulness is measured in the multiplication of innovative interpretations and not in rigid literalism. This is the experience that is encountered, and generates wonder and surprise, when our charisms are communicated to the youth of cultures different from those of the West. They find in them meaningful, colours, flavours and significance that seemed non-existent to us. They offer to live and renew them as protagonists. This is the surprise that we have many times in our dialogue with the youth from Africa,

⁹ . Più volte è stato citato il bel libro di J.D. CHITTISTER, *Il fuoco sotto la cenere. Spiritualità della vita religiosa qui e adesso*, San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo 1998.

Latin America, Asia: they are not only young people in age, but they have a new regenerating approach to the charisms which we had catalogued in sacred schemes and forms.

2. In Christ and with Christ, our mystical and prophetic heritage

"To remain faithful to Christ and the coming Reign of God, the Church, which often adapted to things of this world, needs communities which follow Jesus radically and express the freedom of Christ¹⁰. In this radical Christocentrism, passion for Christ and passion for human history find their meaning and fecundity. The Spirit works in us, through every means we know, for a conformative and total adhesion to the "sentiments of love and compassion" which were in Christ Jesus. (Phil 2,1.5). The activity of the Spirit has no scope or model other than that of "forming Christ in us" (Gal 4,19). "Consecrated Life constitutes a living memory of Jesus' way of existing and acting as Incarnate Word before the Father and the brethren" (VC 22).

At the conclusion of the Great Jubilee, *Starting Afresh with Christ* was the synthetic and efficacious proposal of John Paul II to contemplate the face of the Son of God, the face of the Suffering One, the face of the Risen One. But it was also a proposal to follow Him in a life of holiness and of service, of dedication to the Kingdom and in solidarity with the poor and the least.¹¹

Refocusing on Christ must be a ever open challenge for ourselves if we wish to approach the threshold of mysticism and holiness and trace out pathways of prophecy. "There is no doubt that this primacy of holiness and of prayer cannot be conceived from any other than a renewed listening to the Word of God" (NMI 39).

Charism, prophecy and mysticism pass through this door. Charism is nothing but an abbreviated evangelical word, but it embraces the entire richness of Revelation, and, so to say, pinpoints the dynamism which orients the entire spectrum of human and Christian existence towards a "style" that speaks and influences, as the theologian Christoph Theobald said. The themes of harmony between content and form in the current culture generated a totally different "*modus vivendi*" which is a true motley of fragmented experiences. The sociologist Z. Bauman observes: "Short-term projects and juxtaposed episodes do not allow for vertical (i.e. stable) orientation but only for lateral ones, that is, for escapes and diversions (*divertissement* of Paschal), strategic moves in order to avoid and panic accelerations so as not to remain stuck¹².

In our *sequela Christi* we must introduce the new Christologies in a consistent and viable way. They can offer much impetus to our charism, regenerate it and enrich it in praxis. The Christology that is reflected in the theologies of religious life at times appears far from the current progress of a "pneumatological" re-reading of Christ's identity and mission, from the contextualization in the experience of the victims of violence and of new feminine consciousness, from faithful dialogue with the great religious traditions of Africa and Asia. Ours is a season of original theological reflection on Christ and of innovative praxis. We can compare it to the great season of the Fathers (IV-V century). How much more efficacious and meaningful would be a *sequela Christi* in African, Asiatic and Latin American categories and symbols! In all these contexts ecclesial experiences and theologians' works have opened up new models and new mystical doctrines. Often they deal with experiences which are guided and chosen by religious men and women. And often behind all these, there is a prophetic ability that comes from a real mystical history which does not lack the test of martyr. It is actually this mystical, prophetic martyr character that makes these ways worth welcoming and accepting. Luther admonished: "*Non legendo vel studendo, sed patendo immo et moriendo fit theologus*".

This does not deal with something that must remain relegated to a particular continent or cultural context. It can and must be offered (and must be assumed) even in other continents and contexts. It may be introduced in the universal language, in the great theological synthesis, in the practical form of living and witnessing, of formation and governance, of prayer and discernment. Why should the language or the mental and cultural framework of the European tradition always prevail? I think we will truly be able to weave together these new richesses if we work more for living together while

¹⁰ . J. MOLTmann, *La Chiesa nella forza dello Spirito*, Brescia 1975, 420.

¹¹ . Mi riferisco alla nota enciclica *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, di Giovanni Paolo II, 2001. Ma si tenga presente anche l'Istruzione della Congregazione per gli Istituti di Vita Consacrata e le Società di Vita Apostolica, *Ripartire da Cristo. Un rinnovato impegno nella vita consacrata nel terzo millennio*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana 2002.

¹² . Cf. Z. BAUMANN, *Modernità liquida*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 2006; ID., *La società dell'incertezza*, Il Mulino, Bologna 1999.

accepting our differences, as an exchange of gifts. Then we would rediscover a new and original ecclesial role which is both constructive and inspiring. After all, everything is fruit of the Spirit and "Who are we to satand in God' way?" (Acts 11,17).

3. Journeying with the people

Today we are much more aware of the ecclesial dimension of our consecration. In the past, more emphasis was given to individual and isolated religious effort. The Church was like some sort of external backdrop or a depository of useful and sacred things. And the people were not first of all protagonists of God's project and journeying with the whole of humanity towards horizons of justice and freedom, of brotherhood and fullness of redemption. Theology has warned us, with more clarity than in the past, that not only the Church but Jesus Christ Himself is at the service of the Kingdom and is committed to give it a definite form. In His parables He pointed out exigencies and urgencies for the coming of the Kingdom, not already fixed implementations.

To have this awareness of a relative Church tending towards the Kingdom, with Christ as first fruit and servant of the Kingdom, implies also to bring over to this threshold, all the other previously treated aspects, beginning from the prophetic function that is not our monopoly nor exclusiveness, but an intrinsic quality of Christ and communicated to all the people of God through the Spirit. (cfr. Jl 3,1-5 and Acts 2,17-18). Consecrated Life has its peculiar way of living this common role through the special consecration and profession of the Evangelical Counsels. It is a matter of "totalizing tension" (VC 6), which is not simply elevated vertically, but is the fermenting yeast, the restless and subversive memory agitating the very foundation of humanity, the typical resource with which it lives among the people and puts any other expectations and plans into crisis.

Our life must be credible and trustworthy not only by the honesty with which we consistently live the commitments we have publically made, but also by our ability to be witnesses of this desire for salvation and happiness, especially for those who have experienced violence and wrongdoing and also for those who have inflicted them. Here, it is opportune to recall the heart of prophecy, the prophetic "*rib*". It deals with a particular "juridical biblical procedure" of the bilateral type¹³, in which the one who experienced being wronged and has been a victim of a crime, directly confronts the perpetrator accusing him/her of the wrong done. But this accusation is done not with the intention of punishing or humiliating but rather so that the guilty one may see, become aware and experience that "to do harm" is "harmful" and therefore, he/she might set out towards what is good, and allow himself/herself to be led towards friendship.

Applied to salvation history, we see very well that this is really God's attitude towards our guilt. He accuses us and calls us to re-establish the covenant in fidelity. At the service of the divine *rib*, the prophet uses different linguistic expressions and styles of appeal and denunciation to touch the conscience of the people and to break down the barriers and defensive alibis. In this, our quarrelsome and terrorized, fanatical and fearful, judgemental and vindictive society, the prophecy of religious could really be at the service of the divine *rib* not like a threatening denunciation as an end in itself, but like an "interpellation", a healing therapy, an "inter-cession" that awakens consciences. This is exercised in non-violence, with the choice of gestures of mercy and gratuity, of justice intertwined with solidarity, compassion and empathy¹⁴.

The examples of prophecy which have been presented in the conferences have precisely this "empathic" quality. And we could still add to these the many other mystics of dialogue and hospitality, of non-violence and reconciliation, of care for the integrity of creation and saving of oppressed and endangered cultures, of displaced communities.

The Northern hemisphere, of course, is not without prophets and mystics, even if at times their testimony seems to be the only one that exists. In some places the shortage of vocations and the preoccupying aging of members is provoking some movements for survival which leave one perplexed.

¹³. Cf. P. BOVATI, *Ristabilire la giustizia. Procedure, vocabolario, orientamenti*, Analecta Biblica 110, PIB, Roma 1986, 21-148. Vedere anche B. COSTACURTA, "Ti farò profeta tra le genti" (Ger 1,5). *I profeti nella Bibbia*, in J.M. ALDAY, *I religiosi sono ancora profeti?*, 28-32; sulla chiave del pathos e dell'ethos si sviluppa il libro di A. HESCHEL, *Il messaggio dei profeti*, Borla, Roma 1981.

¹⁴. Offre spiegazioni concrete J. RIFKIN, *La civiltà dell'empatia*, Mondadori, Milano 2010. Vedi anche L. HUNT, *La forza dell'empatia. Una storia dei diritti dell'uomo*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 2010.

The somewhat sudden grafting of vocations coming from other cultures and sensitivities is not without its problems and uncertainties. Why not believe also in the prophetic value of "*ars carismatica moriendi*"? It does not mean to die in peace without disturbance, but to die still giving out some sparks, "without allowing the fire to burn out" (cfr. Zp 3,16). It means sparks of sweet and meek wisdom as all elderly persons give off; transparent faith that recognizes God alone as the value and the substance of one's life; humble testimony made up of works and daily grinds that took definite shape and form only in God and are deposited only in the womb of God. There is also gratitude for being considered worthy to love Him and to serve Him together with many other generous persons full of charity.

It would be great if instead of embarking on new pseudomissionary adventures with the aim of "importing" vocations to continue our works and lifestyles which, perhaps, may not be the icon of the "Kingdom of God", we were to give witness to a serenity that does not co-exist with the neurosis of perpetuating ourselves. In transmitting the feeling that life still makes sense, that the outcome does not obstruct the source of fidelity to God and abandonment to Him after having lived and fought for Him, would we not be giving a prophetic message and profession of faith in God who alone is what counts? Were we really able to feel the truth of this song: "*I know full well the fountain that springs forth and flows.... although it is night.*" And were we able to sing it in spite of everything in a society that holds the myth of youthfulness, of efficiency, of vigour at all cost, even if with viagra and futile care. This, too, would be a prophetic message and a hope that opens other horizons¹⁵.

4. Mysticism in the daily round

It seems that our religious epoch no longer has great mystical writers and also lacks prophets carrying out great undertakings. Rather, we encounter mystics and prophets who in the daily round know how to perceive and inhabit the "sacred spaces", rendering it possible to sow the seeds of reconciliation and transformative liberation. We encounter men and above all women who are able to remain in touch with the opaque and poor reality, giving out sparks of compassion and solidarity, of gratuitousness and liberation, with a tenacity which challenges the more hardened resistance, with a patient trust that is able to break through the most obstinate prejudices, with a gratuitousness which disarms and baffles every commercial and highly efficient intention. It is here that many consecrated women encounter one another, those who want to be sign and leaven of that "Kingdom" for which we are consecrated in chastity, poverty and obedience for the well being of the world.

When our life does not come in close contact with those who move about without a goal and without roots, or those without hope and with features deformed by violence and injustice, prophecy is only ideology and mysticism is plastic. This "daily round" is the rich experience of our Institutes as always, but today it becomes more risky and also dangerous because the daily in many situations is truly dangerous, the daily bread is mixed with violence and humiliations, the dreams of human rights for dignity and freedom are trampled upon with scandalous impunity. I believe that to remain there, to continue to share fears and tears, hoping and struggling, there is need for an inner strength which is not sold in the market place but obtained in the silence of supplication and mutual support.

These are the communities, exposed and uncertain about their future and not only about the present, that are like the great flowering of the almond tree, signs which are fragile and gratuitous, an indication of a springtime which many implore but only a few know how to anticipate. They are almond branches that keep watch and maintain the light of hope and expectation, and they proclaim, at times right in the midst of a mess of boiling pots spewing out ruin and devastation on peoples and nations, that the sap still flows from the roots and a newness is still possible even where everything is destruction. Surely, compared to the great works of the past, compared to the efficient modernity and the substantial budget of other situations and churches, these resources seem very small and short lived, which could disappear at any moment. But their strength lies precisely there in the local rootedness that makes them loved by all, respected even by the domineering, hospitable and trusting, free and capable of audacity. Examples can easily be added and all of you could bring some of them forth.

¹⁵. Ho cercato di allargare il discorso in B. SECONDIN, *Abitare gli orizzonti. Simboli, modelli e sfide della vita consacrata*, Paoline, Milano 2002.

Meekness and strength, brokenness and resistance, dreams and realism mix together and nourish each another. These are the realities that give true strength to our Institutes, the secret lifeblood that makes our charism bloom and does not allow it to be overcome by false idols. These are the places where, close to the ground, authentic and confident dialogue with God is cultivated and where bonds with the least and the scourged are forged by bringing together the darkness of Calvary and the certainty of the Resurrection. Their lives have no defences or pretexts compared to the lives of others, only communion and sharing, serene sobriety and immediate reaching out. Maybe because of the "sacred" concept of religious life and the detached attitude of our lifestyle this does not go well. We are more interested in the form than in the substance of values, the differences rather than the similarities, the mistrust rather than the living together. I believe, however, that God has His own way of keeping account of things as the Gospel tells us (cfr. Mc 12,41-44).

OPEN CONCLUSION

We need others to liberate us from the imprisonment of our cultural stereotypes and to acknowledge our own woundedness, but also to invest all our resources. The thousand new forms of involvement in the most different contexts helped us to discover new features and to widen the horizons of our charism. It will not be possible to maintain this newness if we do not search for the face of the Lord in a heart to heart dialogue. But any mysticism that does not open up to prophecy, to solidarity and gratuituousness only becomes a dangerous escape.

I end with a final challenge. When it is a matter of prophetic responses to difficult situations, does our prophetic ability not suffer a shortfall at times? Why on earth are we not able to become convincing witnesses of mystical fidelity, of a transfigured and yet affectively healthy and empathetic existence?

In these past few months, the scandal of pedophiles among priests has disturbed the Church. The ecclesial reaction consisted of reminders of rules and laws and public disapproval. Our consecration in virginity and chastity could have contributed to show the mystical roots of a joyous and limpid fidelity and help to implement a more empathetic and healing acceptance of the victims. The sufferings and the hardships caused by the "Apostolic Visitation" to the women religious in the United States or in other difficult and complex situations, should not deprive us of prophetic *parresia* in the name of a matured experience, of a faith that liberates energies and new diaconates. It is easier to make our prophetic voice heard during natural disasters than in problems concerning Church and society: Haiti and Chile, Darfur and the Great Lakes Region, Israel and Pakistan and many other places, some of which have been Areopagus of inventiveness and solidarity which we have exercised in full autonomy and creativity.

These different crises are a *Kairos* of purification, but they can also be occasions to express feminine creativity and genius. At times, what is lacking is an empathetic and compassionate reading of the reality, but they are supported by the *parresia* of words and works which are fruits of a transfiguration brought about by grace. The consecrated woman has this special grace: she has to cultivate it in intimacy, but also she also has to offer it prophetically with feminine rhythm, precisely in less limpid moments and in most serious human tragedies.

If women, and in particular consecrated women, will learn how to participate as protagonist not only in the collective catharsis of mistakes and scandals, but also in the challenge for a new logic of service and gratuituousness, we will be able to return to singing the Canticle of Canticles with a heavy heart, but also with limpid eyes and at a dancing pace. For love and tenderness, dreams and expectations, tears and songs, mysticism and prophecy must be intertwined for a renewed Church and for the benefit of all humanity.