

The Prophetic Dimension of Monastic Life Today

By Marcelo Barros, monk of Goiás

“My brothers, The way you live is an excellent way to prophesy. What is this way of prophesying? The apostle says: 'not seeing what is visible, but that which is invisible. That surely is to prophesy.' To walk in the Spirit, to live on faith alone, to seek after loftier things, to lean towards what lies ahead, is to prophesy in a still partial, yet important way. It was like this, that for some time the prophets yearned to witness the Day of the Lord, and in seeing it they rejoiced.”

(Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermoni Diversi*, 37,6)

In the Monastic life officially emerged in the Christian Church at the same time that, in the 4th Century, the Church moved toward a deeper accommodation to the Roman Empire. The monastic life of the first fathers and mothers was called *bios prophetikós*, an alternative lifestyle where the traces of the ancient prophets were still noticeable. The first monks were called “heirs of biblical prophets.”¹

biblical sense, prophecy means neither divining the future nor living a utopia. It presupposes a break with the conformism of the world, but it does not mean to live in hiding. It means, rather, to become an alternative way without becoming some sort of sect. It is then a life of resistance, and not a revolt or exit from the church community.

In the Bible, the prophet is a spokesperson, i.e., one who speaks in the name of someone or before someone else. Therefore, the first thing that the word *prophet* indicates is a person who lives continually in relationship. The prophet depends on another: on the one who speaks or sends the message to be passed on to others.



Brother Marcelo; at left, Sister Maria del Carmen Cruz, OSB, from Cobán.

There is no prophecy if there is no intimate relationship between the prophet and the one who sends the prophet. And also there would be no prophecy if there were not a relationship of closeness and trust between the prophet and the person or community to whom the prophet is sent. There is only prophecy in the context of a God who speaks and a community that listens and welcomes. If there is no obedient listening, there is no prophecy. Or at least the prophecy does not fulfill its function totally. It is true that Jesus said that the prophets are never accepted in their own house, and the Bible tells of several prophets who were not welcomed. Nevertheless a basic relationship had to exist.

I share with you some of my own intuitions about the way monastic prophecy is to be exercised today, and the main challenges that I perceive.

1. Monastic Life, the Church, and the World

Prophecy is a vocation for the whole Church. Monastic life is prophetic because it belongs to the whole of the People of God. Any vocation in the Church is only prophetic if it exists as a gift to the

whole of humanity. This is also the vocation of the Church, to be a sign and a witness of the love of God to all humankind.

What does this mean? In many religions, God is understood as a force of nature; or as the beginning and source of everything, or of all goodness that there is. But, in these religions, God does not communicate directly with humankind. The God of the strongly prophetic religions — which is the case of the God of the Bible — is characterized by God's desire to communicate with humanity. And this communication is God's own loving self-revelation: loving, because it reveals God's self, and God's vision of life and love for all human beings. Therefore prophecy is linked to a way of living, of witnessing and of working, so that this project may truly become a reality.

Prophecy, in the first place, is a *rehearsal*. A group of performers, before singing at a concert, or before presenting a play in a theater, have to prepare themselves; for this reason they have rehearsals. The Reign of God deserves a rehearsal. Each Church, and each community, is a rehearsal of the Reign of God.

This means that, while the prophetic vocation can have personal elements that express themselves in the way of being of each person, the prophetic vocation is essentially *communitarian*. From biblical times on, prophecy has been lived out in communities of prophets, “the sons and daughters of prophets” (cf. 2 Kings 2).

In the Bible and in ancient popular religion, prophecy began as a rehearsal of the Reign of God, expressed in an ability to have visions, and even to concretely foresee the future. Little by little, however, biblical prophecy became a capacity to listen and carry out the Word of God, to which the prophet (1) listens on behalf of others, and (2) then proclaims to them not just verbally, but by example. The prophetic call became more communitarian, linked more to the Word than to visions. But in actual practice, this Word presents the prophet as someone who is able to perform miracles, or who is perceived as holier or more powerful than others. (We can here recall the itinerary of the prophet Elijah. He started out with great power, announcing a severe drought, and curing the son of a poor woman [1 Kings 17]; yet he ended up poor, persecuted, and a fugitive, running away to save his life. Finally he found God neither in the violent storm, nor in the phenomena of fire, but in the silence of the gentle afternoon breeze [1 Kings 19].)

There is a saying from the desert fathers and mothers which goes like this: “Some brothers, accompanied by lay people, were looking for Abba Felix in order to ask him for a word [a prophecy]. Meanwhile, the elder remained silent. After a long time they insisted, asking the old man to say something. He replied: 'Do you want to hear a word?' They answered: 'Yes, abba'. So the elder said: 'When the brothers asked for a word from their elders, and carried through what the word asked of them, God revealed what the elder had to say. Nowadays since you ask without practicing what you hear, God has taken from the elders the grace of speaking a word.' They didn't know what to respond, since they were no longer practitioners of the word.”²

Characteristic of the Word of God is the announcement of the Reign of God that is coming, but is not yet fully present. The prophecy of the Church, and specifically of Religious Life, is to point towards the future of the Reign of God, without losing touch with the present. It is not about a break between the present and the eschatological future, but a dialectic tension. Concretely prophecy means living today in the present, organizing our life in such a way that it manifests the tension with the coming Reign of God.

Something that impresses me in people such as Brazilian bishop Pedro Casaldáliga is how he is always awaiting for something, living in order to inspire people to start out anew on this journey

of hope. The late Brazilian bishop, Dom Helder Câmara, at every moment of his life (and I was able to accompany him beginning in 1964) had always a program of sorts going on: “Operation Hope;” “To encourage once again in the world 'Abrahamic minorities;” “The Moral Liberating Pressure” and many others. When he was already an old man, he used to say that he wanted to invest all of his strength into creating a world without misery by the year 2000.

Monastic communities should take good care to foster this special capacity to renew humanity's hope — to be a sign, in the Church, of what the whole Church is called to be.

2. Prophecy in this new world context

The word of God is given to us to be a gift for others, just as it is given to others to become a gift for us — this was taught by the pastor Dietrich Bonhöffer. The monastic movement, as we know it today, responded to a prophetic call of the age in which it first emerged. Today, as the world has evolved, the question remains: has monastic life, as lived in our monasteries, continued to give witness to the coming of the Reign of God as something new, subverting all worldly wisdoms? May it be that monastic profession, which in past centuries was a prophetic sign of the Reign of God, today has to be re-formulated? Or is it still the prophetic sign that it once proclaimed?

I get the impression that in an individualistic and very competitive world, the sign of a truly communitarian and brotherly and sisterly lifestyle is a prophetic sign that attracts many people, and in some way or other raises questions to everyone. It is said that Saint Dominic Guzmán, founder of the Order of Preachers (Dominicans), called the community “the holy preaching.” When he asked the brothers: “How is the holy preaching?” he was referring to the *community*.

It is clear that this Christian community could not be just for itself, as something closed and self-centered. Community is an end in itself, because human relationships are not just the means to something else. Human relationships have a truth and a profundity in themselves. They are a sign and sacrament of the Reign of God. A monastic community may have its own style, but *it is prophetic in the same measure in which it reveals to the world new kinds of human relationships, ones that are truer, more brotherly and sisterly, and more in solidarity with others*. Therefore the prophetic dimension of a community is linked to its capacity to be a clear and attractive parable of the Reign of God for the world.

3. What is behind the social and political dimension of faith?

In a world where more than half the population suffers from poverty, the United Nations and other international organizations keep making plans, looking forward to the next 15 years. Is it realistic to think that in 20 years (or in how many?), poverty in the world will be cut in half? Over a billion persons live with at most one dollar a day, and over two billion persons “live” without drinking water. But does poverty assume that out of 50 persons, 30 or 20 will be poor? In today's world, poverty is — tragically — taken as a given, and accepted as “the way things are.”

Everyone knows that poverty is *not* something linked to natural causes, but to *injustice* in the world. Poverty exists in the world because the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is treated more as idealized legislation than as a real commitment to be actually implemented. Human rights are organized in the UN Declaration as five kinds of rights: civil, political, cultural, economic, and social. *So if there is poverty, it is because persons are not having their human rights respected*. They are being disrespected in at least some, if not in all, their human rights. The Vienna International Conference (1993) recognized that there is always a connection between poverty and violation of human rights.³ The poor are poor because their human rights are not honored, their social human

rights are violated, their economic rights are often violated, and almost always along with this, their cultural, political, and civil rights are not respected. Now, to systematically violate these human rights, or to construct a society based on the violation or disrespect of these rights, is a crime against humanity. Each time a human right is denied to one person, the whole of humanity is diminished.

What does this have to do with faith and prophecy? A lot! The civilization that nurtured and enabled this system of injustice and domination elevated Christianity to be established as a culture. It was also able to give the Gospel a face so domesticated that it seems that the Gospel itself agrees that poverty should be controlled, but in the end, allowed to go on. Dollar bills and coins have the name of God written on them. In Italy a political party that promulgates laws against the immigrants wants to put a crucifix in the office of each government employee. In our own city of Goiás in Brazil, the monument that characterizes our city is a wooden cross, used by the first colonizers when they killed the indigenous population and took over their land. So here we have something that must change — not just in the area of social work or politics, but also in the *religious* field itself, in the *monastic* contour. To what God do we, as monastics, give our allegiance? To a God who sleeps, while 30 thousand children die of starvation every day, or while millions of persons go to sleep without having eaten a meal? To a God who does not care that the whole African Continent is suffering and threatened with death, because of colonialism and governments that, up to the present, we legitimize?

What is at stake here is the image of God. What God do we monastics profess? If it is the God of Jesus Christ, then to be a monastic is to be a prophet. We cannot go on singing the psalms, doing our breathing exercises, and living in an affectionate community, while outside the doors of our monasteries, the bodies of the dead are being piled up in a dump of “disposable” humanity — a phenomenon considered to be the normal, inevitable price of neo-liberal progress.

In the unjust world in which we live, to give witness of a God who is love, and who has a project of justice for all of humanity, can only demand of us to make a commitment for justice in all the ways that we are able to: each of us, and each community, in the specific way available to our capacities, but always with the same spirit. What is at stake is not only the world. This is because, as long as the injustice that exists in today's world continues, God is judging, and depending on the way we structure our monastic life, we are witnesses to its innocence or its guilt.

That is why the greatest prophecy in the world of today is *work done as communities on behalf of peace, justice, and the defense of creation*. A monastery contextualizes this in its own particular manner, but specifically as a *monastic* community, and not simply as a pastoral agent committed to a cause. It is necessary to live out this prophetic witness in our enduring and everyday relationships, and in the dialogue with God, to which we give expression in our prayer. In this way, monastic life does not become an esoteric way of life, but one that reflects an experience of life which grounds the words we speak.

A monastery can live this specifically, by dedicating itself more to dialogue among the cultures, seeking communion among the religions, and witnessing to the construction of visible unity among the Christian Churches.

I repeat: the prophetic dimension of monastic life is expressed by the way we live, by the way we pray, and by the way we give form to our community life. In 1968, at a gathering of Christian, Buddhist, and Hindu monastics, which took place in Calcutta, Thomas Merton said: “The deepest level of communication is not communication, but communion. It is wordless. It is beyond words, it is beyond speech, and it is beyond concept. Not that we discover a new unity. We discover an

older unity. My dear brothers and sisters, we are already one. But we imagine that we are not. And what we have to recover is our original unity. What we have to be is what we are".⁴

I understand that the call of God is made manifest and recognized in the concrete situations in which we live. Therefore, it would be good to ask ourselves:

1. What are the challenges that God is offering to our way of being monastics — challenges that come from the reality of today's world, and how is this revealed in that part of the world in which we live?
2. How are we to respond to these challenges of God in our monasteries, as persons and as a community? How will we involve in this spiritual journey those people who, although living outside, are linked to our communities?

These two questions, addressed by today's world to all monastics, may help us to reflect on the prophetic dimension of our life.

¹ EUSEBIUS OF CAESAREA, *Dimostrazione evangelica* 1,8; quoted by ENZO BIANCHI, *Non siamo migliori, La vita religiosa nella chiesa, tra gli uomini*, Magnano (BI), Italy – Ed. Qiqajon, Comunità di Bose, 2002, p.27.

² PALAVRA DOS ANCIÃOS, *Sentencias dos Pais do Deserto*, São Paulo, Ed. Paulinas, 1985, p. 62.

³ PIERRE SANÉ, *Pauvreté: pour un changement d'approche radical*, In *Le Monde/ Sélection hebdomadaire*, 19/10/2002, p.8.

⁴ *Extemporaneous Remarks* by Thomas Merton, cited by JEAN-CLAUDE BASSET, *Le Dialogue Inter religieux, histoire et avenir*, Paris, Ed. du Cerf, 1996, p.122.

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