

**LIFE ON HIGH IN CHRIST JESUS:**  
The Prophetic Dimensions of Religious Life

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***1. Introduction: God's heavenly call (life on high) in Christ Jesus***

For much of Christian history the prophetic charism has been attributed to particular monks, friars and nuns rather than to religious life as such. But the personal experiences of these religious have much to teach us about how the charism of prophecy can be a corporate dimension of religious life.

Take for example St. Hildegard of Bingen—arguably, apart from St. Scholastica, the most famous Benedictine nun who has ever lived. Hildegard was an abbess, author, composer, poet, philosopher, and mystic who also found time in her eighty-one years of life to write extensively on botanical and medical topics. She has even had a minor planet—898 Hildegard—named after her. This very interesting nun interests us this evening because she clearly possessed a prophetic gift that was recognized in her lifetime. People called her the Sibyl of the Rhine and the Teutonic Prophetess. In 1148 at the Council of Trier, Pope Eugenius III gave his blessing to the publication of her visionary experiences. And so it happened that over the following years, St. Hildegard composed a remarkable series of works in which she described her visions and interpreted their meaning. What she produced has come to be regarded as a comprehensive visionary theology covering the whole history of salvation, and the moral and spiritual life. Not for nothing did she win the title Doctor of the Church. St. Hildegard's visions contained a message that she felt compelled to communicate. Having the approval of the Church gave her the confidence to do so, and assured her listeners of the supernatural character of her experience and the doctrinal integrity of her message.

The prophetic charism as a dimension of religious life as such is characterized by the same essential features as the personal prophetic charisms we discern in St. Hildegard and many other religious in history like St. Vincent Ferrer, St. Margaret Mary Alacoque, St. Faustina: a prophetic message that is authenticated by the Church's pastors.

What is the content of this message? Nothing less than the fullness of Christian life so eloquently described in the third chapter of St. Paul's letter to the Philippians: "Whatever gains I had," Paul writes, "these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him....I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already attained this, or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil 3:8-14). Religious institutes and communities by their very nature embody a prophetic message that expresses the fullness of the Christian life.

### ***1. Prophecy: Biblical, Historical and Theological Perspectives***

#### ***2. The charism of prophecy in Catholic tradition***

A properly theological understanding of the prophetic dimension of religious life must be rooted in Sacred Scripture. Since Mother Mary Timothea Elliot will present a session on the "Scriptural Foundations for the Prophetic Witness of Religious Life" tomorrow afternoon, I will treat this matter only very briefly this evening.

In chapter 12 of 1 Corinthians, St. Paul lists prophecy among the varieties of gifts or charisms given by the Holy Spirit “for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses” (1 Cor 12: 4-11). There are other lists as well in Romans (12:6-8) and Ephesians (4:11) for example. These lists are neither taxative nor precise. It is understood that the Holy Spirit is at work in manifold ways, providing overlapping types of assistance to the Church that are not easy fully to define or classify. Charisms are understood to be extraordinary gifts of the Holy Spirit given to individual Christians for the good of the Church.

Prophecy is one of these gifts, and, considered within the context of the whole history of salvation, it emerges as one of the most important of these gifts. For through the instrumentality of this charism, God makes known the deepest mystery of his plan of salvation that involves nothing less the participation in divine life and communion with the Blessed Trinity.

Christian life is a supernatural life that can be known about and lived only by grace. To the prophets of the Old Testament, God entrusted the communication of divine revelation to lead others to faith and, through admonition, to form their consciences. The prophet’s teaching function may also include interpretation, discernment and prediction. St. John the Baptist—the greatest of the prophets—is the precursor of the Messiah and plays an important role in providing the vocabulary that the Messiah himself will take up: faith, repentance, penance and baptism.

Our Lord allowed himself to be called a prophet even though he was “more than a prophet.” For Jesus Christ, as the Word Incarnate, is God himself speaking to us and thus the definitive revelation. Everything that God wanted to reveal to us for our salvation has been communicated, even though our understanding of divine revelation continues to deepen over time. It is for this reason that the Church understands that public revelation concluded with the death of the last apostle.

### ***3. The charism of prophecy within the theology of grace***

The locus for a properly theological understanding of the charism of prophecy lies within the theology of grace. “Grace is first and foremost a gift of the Spirit who justifies and sanctifies us. But grace also includes the gifts that the Spirit grants us to associate us with his work, to enable us to collaborate in the salvation of others and in the growth of the Body of Christ, the Church” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §2003).

In the Catholic tradition, this key distinction was secured by the terms *gratia gratum faciens* and *gratia gratis data*. *Gratia gratum faciens* refers to the grace through which the Holy Spirit sanctifies the person who receives it. Principally, this is sanctifying or habitual grace, the constant supernatural quality of the soul that transforms our being and gives us a participation in the divine life. It also refers to all the many actual graces that stir us to actions that deepen the life of grace within us. Although every grace is a free gift of God, the term *gratia gratis data*—sometimes translated by the term “social grace”—refers to every grace that the Holy Spirit gives to particular persons for the salvation of others. These include extraordinary gifts of grace such as the charisms (or charismata), the priestly power of consecration, and the hierarchical power of jurisdiction.

While we speak of the charisms as gifts of the Holy Spirit, the seven *Gifts of the Holy Spirit* (wisdom, knowledge, understanding, counsel, fortitude, piety, and fear) properly so-called belong to the perfection of the grace by which a particular person is sanctified. For our purposes this evening, the distinction is really very simple: a *gratia gratum faciens* is a grace given for the salvation of the person who receives it, while a *gratia gratis data* is given for the salvation of others.

According to this distinction, then, the charism of prophecy is a *gratia gratis data*, a social grace freely granted for helping others come to God. The specific nature of the help that comes through prophecy is that it communicates revealed truth to us. Other charisms—like speech, tongues or the working of miracles for example—hand on that truth or make it effective and convincing.

The prophets of the Old Testament possessed this charism to an extraordinary degree as the ones chosen to receive and communicate divine revelation to the people of Israel and then to the Church. After a pause of about two hundred years, the mantle of prophecy was taken up again by St. John the Baptist. In the teaching of Christ, continued through his chosen Twelve Apostles, all prophecy finds in climax and completion. The era of public revelation comes to an end with its consummation in the Only Begotten Son who is the Incarnate Word of God. Catholic teaching recognizes that the Holy Spirit continues to be active in the Church through the charism of prophecy but distinguishes the messages that may come through this charism after the death of the last apostle as private revelations. Over the course of the centuries, the magisterium and theological wisdom have developed a body of principles for discerning the authenticity of such private revelations in clear distinction from public revelation.

With this biblical and theological framework in place, we can now turn to a discussion the prophetic dimension of the religious life.

## ***II. The Prophetic Dimension of Religious Life***

### ***4. The emergence of the theme in the post-Vatican II era***

The presence of prophetic gifts in individual religious has been recognized throughout Christian history, as we have noted. That these gifts should be recognized in religious life as such was a more recent development prompted mainly by the teaching on the Church of the Second Vatican Council.

While a thorough magisterial discussion of the prophetic dimension of the religious life would not be forthcoming until the apostolic exhortation *Vita Consecrata* (1996), this discussion was itself solidly grounded in two principles reaffirmed in the Second Vatican Council's dogmatic constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium* paragraph 12. The first principle concerns the prophetic element within the Body of Christ: "The holy people of God shares also in Christ's prophetic office: it spreads abroad a living witness to him, especially by a life of faith and love and by offering to God a sacrifice of praise, the fruit of lips confessing his name (see Heb 13:15)." The second principle involved a recovery of the Church's teaching on the charisms: "Moreover, it is not only through the sacraments and ministries that the holy Spirit makes people holy, leads them and enriches them with his virtues. Allotting his gifts 'at will to each individual' (1 Cor 12:11), he also distributes special graces among the faithful of every rank. By these gifts, he makes them fit and ready to undertake various tasks and offices for the renewal and building up of the church...Whether these charisms be very remarkable or more simple and widely diffused, they are to be received with thanksgiving and consolation since they are primarily suited to and useful for the needs of the church."

These two principles encourage us to discern in religious life elements that are common to the Church universal, taking account of the nature of religious life as a form of consecrated life in the Church—to recognize, in other words, the many prophetic and charismatic elements present there.

The writings of one influential author in this area (Sr. Sandra Schneiders), while extensive, do not help us to form a comprehensive picture of recent developments in the teaching of the magisterium on the prophetic dimension of religious life. Their focus is limited to “prophetic obedience” with little attention to the prophetic character of the other evangelical counsels or religious life as such. There is little room for discussion of the centrality of the communication of divine truth that essentially characterizes the prophetic charism in the Catholic tradition. In addition, the categories of the feminist critique of patriarchy yield a somewhat adversarial account of the relations between religious and ecclesiastical authority. Here it is preferable to follow the lead of *Vita Consecrata*: “A distinctive aspect of ecclesial communion is allegiance of mind and heart to the Magisterium of the Bishops, an allegiance which must be lived honestly and clearly testified to before the People of God by all consecrated persons....Because consecrated persons have a special place in the Church, their attitude in this regard is of immense importance for the whole People of God. Their witness of filial love will give power and forcefulness to their apostolic activity which, in the context of the prophetic mission of all the baptized, is generally distinguished by special forms of cooperation with the Hierarchy.” (§ 46.3).

### ***5. Key aspects of the prophetic character of the consecrated life***

When we want to identify what makes Dominicans different from Jesuits, or Sisters of Mercy different from Sisters of Saint Joseph, we commonly refer to their distinctive charisms. *Vita Consecrata* underlines the need that each religious institute has for “fidelity to [its] founding charism and...subsequent spiritual heritage. It is precisely in this fidelity to the inspiration of the founders and foundresses, an inspiration that is itself a gift of the Holy Spirit, that the essential elements of the consecrated life can be more readily discerned and more fervently put into practice” (§ 36).

The particular charism of a religious institute is first of all a gift of the Holy Spirit to the founders of these communities. To employ the classical terminology, this charism may be considered by extension a kind of *gratia gratis data*, a gift which the founders received in order to help others to seek the things that are above and, through their apostolates, to serve their neighbor through prayer, teaching, preaching, health care, and so on. The Second Vatican Council did not use the word charism to refer to the vocation to religious life, preferring such expressions as a “special or exceptional grace” (*Lumen Gentium* 12; *Perfectae Caritatis* 12) or simply “gift” (*Presbyterum Ordinis* 9). However, both Pope Paul VI and Pope St. John Paul II regularly used the term charism to describe religious life. It does not seem inappropriate to understand the significant use of the term in *Vita Consecrata* as at least having in view a gift of the Holy Spirit granted to religious founders and foundresses for the sake of building up the Church and sanctifying others—in this sense, then, as an instance of a *gratia gratis data*. Pope John Paul stated that “charisms can in fact be individual or collective. Individual charisms are amply distributed in the Church....Collective charisms, generally, are granted to men and women destined to establish ecclesial works and especially religious institutes which receive their distinctive characteristics from their founders, live and function under their influence and, to the extent of their fidelity, receive new gifts and charisms for each individual member and the whole community. The charism can thus prompt new forms of activity according to the needs of different times and places, without diminishing the continuity of development with the founder, and easily recovering the [original] identity and dynamism [of the institute]” (General Audience, 28 September 1994). The founders sought to embody the charisms they received in the recognizably distinctive forms of Christian life for which they sought and received the ecclesiastical approval that would ensure their future as particular religious institutes (cf. *Vita Consecrata* § 93.4).



In these institutes, the fullness of the following of Christ can be found and pursued. Thus we can say that being a Dominican or being a Franciscan is not something in addition to being a Christian; it is a way of being a Christian. The respective charisms capture all of the essential elements of the Christian life, but shaped according to the distinctive grace, vision, genius and example of the founder or foundress. By giving her approval to a religious institute, the Church in effect guarantees that whoever is called and subsequently undertakes to follow Christ in this community will find the way well, but distinctively, marked out. In this way the religious charism, by fostering—though *not* causing—the sanctification of the persons called by God to the particular institute serves the *gratia gratum faciens* that religious received in the sacraments of initiation, in the other sacraments, in the actual graces of daily life, and in the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

The distinctive charism of a religious institute is a *spiritual* reality, but not an *invisible* one. Thus we can say that the charism continues to function as a *gratia gratis data* for the sake of the salvation of others who are not members. The charism of the community is embodied in the life and teachings of its founders, in its Rule and Constitutions, in its embrace of the evangelical counsels, in its institutions and apostolates, in its characteristic garb and observances, and in the exemplary lives of its saintly members. The visible form of life in religious communities, by its witness, confirms what revelation teaches about the *sequela Christi*. In this way, religious life constitutes an authentic prophetic witness for others who are not members of the institute—a confirmation of the faith of fellow Christians and a proclamation of the faith to non-believers. Thus, what we have seen to be a fundamental element of the charism of prophecy—a message expressed in their visible forms of life and communicated to others for their salvation—is present in the collective witness of religious institutes.

“If you have been raised with Christ,” as Colossians has it, “seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God” (Col 3:1-4). The prophetic witness of the religious life is precisely to communicate in a public and authorized institutional form this seeking of the things that are above that is at the heart of life on high in Christ Jesus and to which all Christians, and indeed all people, are called.

In the words of *Vita Consecrata*, “The prophetic character of the consecrated life...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. The sign value...is expressed in prophetic witness to the primacy which God and the truths of the Gospel have in the Christian life” (§ 84.1).

This prophetic witness is particularly necessary today. Where the primacy of God and the transcendent destiny of human beings are obscured in modern culture, religious life testifies to the glory of God and the love of others. “The fraternal life is itself prophetic in a society which, sometimes without realizing it, has a profound yearning for a brotherhood which knows no borders” (*Vita Consecrata* § 85.1).

## **6. *Confronting the challenges through observance of the evangelical counsels***

According to *Vita Consecrata* the observance of the evangelical counsels plays a critical role in facing the challenges that modern culture poses to the Church herself. These challenges impel the Church and consecrated persons “to clarify and testify to the profound anthropological significance of the counsels” (ibid. §87).

The prophetic witness of the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience directly confronts the massive cultural challenges posed by a materialistic pursuit of wealth and possessions, by hedonistic sexual attitudes and practices, and by notions of freedom detached from truth and moral norms. In a hugely important series of paragraphs on the prophetic witness of the evangelical counsels (§§ 87-92), *Vita Consecrata* insists that “[t]he decision to follow the counsels, far from involving an impoverishment of truly human values, leads instead to their transformation. The evangelical counsels should not be considered as a denial of the values inherent in sexuality, in the legitimate desire to possess material goods or to make decisions for oneself.”

Weakened by original sin, human beings can fail to choose the good to which these natural inclinations point us, and risk acting on them in an immoral way. “The profession of chastity, poverty and obedience is a warning not to underestimate the wound of original sin and, while affirming the value of created goods, it relativizes them by pointing to God as the absolute good.” While consecrated persons “who follow the evangelical counsels seek holiness for themselves, they propose...a spiritual ‘therapy’ for humanity, because they reject the idolatry of anything created and in a certain way they make visible the living God. The consecrated life, especially in difficult times, is a blessing for human life and for the life of the Church” (§ 87).

Since the prophetic witness of evangelical poverty attests “that God is the true wealth of the human heart,” it “forcefully challenges the idolatry of money, making a prophetic appeal...to society” (§ 90.1). To the sexual hedonism of modern culture, “the reply of consecrated life is above all in the joyful living of perfect chastity, as a witness to the power of God’s love manifested in the weakness of the human condition” (§ 88.1). In imitation of Christ’s obedience to the Father, the evangelical counsel of obedience shows that there is no contradiction between freedom and obedience, and that free obedience to the

moral law fosters the human and supernatural flourishing of the person (cf. § 91.2).

## **7. Conclusion**

Prophetic elements are evident in many other aspects of the religious life. Indeed, they are like threads woven into its very fabric. Following the lead of *Vita Consecrata*, we can say that the very depth of the spiritual life of a religious community gives rise to an “apostolic fruitfulness, generosity in love for the poor, and the ability to attract vocations among the younger generation....It is precisely the spiritual quality of the consecrated life which can inspire the men and women of our day, who themselves are thirsty for absolute values” (§ 93.5). A spirituality that is fed by meditation on the Scriptures and on the mysteries of Christ, by the communal celebration of the Eucharist and the Liturgy of the Hours, and the frequent encounter with God’s mercy in the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation—such a spirituality cannot fail to bear fruits in the apostolates of education, evangelization, social communications, ecumenical and interreligious dialogue, and the generous service of others that energizes a vibrant prophetic witness.

In short, everything in a religious institute that is directed toward the sanctification of its members can communicate a prophetic message to others—to those who are not Christians, a revelation, while to those who are, an encouragement and confirmation of their faith. It is in this way that the prophetic charism is active in religious life, for it is a grace leading others to seek salvation and a life of holiness—to seek, in the words of St. Paul, life on high in Christ Jesus.

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