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On Being a Prophetic Voice for Action, Rooted in Contemplation

On Thursday evening, October 1, Fr. Phil Cover spoke to the Montgomery, MD VOTF. Below is an excerpt from his remarks.

My remarks this evening relate to the third goal of the Voice of the Faithful—to shape structural change within the Catholic Church, and the seventh objective of your recent. “Voices in Action Campaign”—encouraging systematic transformation and growth in the universal Church. My operating premise is that any action directed toward systemic change in the Church requires also some systemic changes in the lives of those committed to and seeking change.

In short, the individual Christian and the ecclesial community are always in need of conversion, reform, and purification; always in need of being fashioned and refashioned according to the ways and thoughts of God, generation to generation to generation. We cannot change anyone other than ourselves, but individually and collectively, we can influence change for the better. If we remain steeped in prayer and faithful to our deep desire to be God's instruments in and through whom God can bring about transformative change, we are then positioned to influence change, even systemic change.

Tonight, I address you on the subject: On Being a Prophetic Voice for Action, Rooted in Contemplation in four parts. First, I will offer a few words of introduction, laying the groundwork from which to move deeper into our subject. Second, we will look briefly at being God's prophetic voice in the world today. Third, what does it mean to join the action-work of God's Spirit? Finally, we will touch upon contemplation as being a constitutive part of being a prophetic voice for action. I will move through each part of the presentation in the same way: a few remarks about (1) context, (2) the issue at hand, and (3) some challenges for the Voice of the Faithful. I hope and trust that my remarks might be for you a catalyst for expanding this topic through your own prayer and reflection.

The first reading in last Sunday's lectionary (26th Sunday B) seems to anticipate our gathering this evening. You recall Moses lamented: “Would that all the people of God were prophets! Would that the Lord might bestow his spirit on them all!” (Numbers 11: 29) Indeed, God has done this in the Church through the sacraments of initiation. Therefore, I am confident in making three operating assumptions regarding you and your presence here.

First, God has graced you with a higher level of consciousness as to the ways and thoughts of God. Using Paul's words, you have “the mind of Christ.” (see Phil 2: 5f) Using Jesus' metaphor—“I am the vine...you are the branches”—the process of assimilating Jesus' consciousness into your consciousness

continues. (see Jn 15: 1f)

Second, you have a prophet's heart, not of your making, but fashioned in you by God. (see Jeremiah 18:1-7). You sustain within you a passion for justice, peace and love. You have claimed back God's claim on your life, a claim made before you were born. That is, what God said to Jeremiah individually—"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations," (Jer 1,5) God also says of you in God's revelation via Paul's Letter to the Ephesians—"Before the world was created, God chose you, chose you in Christ to be holy and spotless, and to live through love in [God's] presence." (Eph 1:3)

Third, you are poised for prophetic action, because you are in the second half of life chronologically and spiritually. You have crossed the threshold of the paschal mystery many times in your lives. To use a phrase from Patricia Livingston, "you have grappled with mystery and mystery has grappled with you. We will work with these assumptions and hopefully confirm them as we move through our topic this evening.

On Being a Prophetic Voice

CONTEXT. What is a prophetic voice? Whose voice is it? The context for the answer is the Hebrew Scriptures. A prophet is God's messenger, an individual inspired by God to speak in God's name regarding the will of God. The prophet hears God's voice and by reading the signs of the time the prophet anticipates the future by interpreting the present. Prophets have the capacity to feel God's heart. They recognize the sins of humanity as egregious failures in love. "In the presence of God [the prophet] takes the part of the people. In the presence of the people, [the prophet] takes the part of God." (source—Burghardt, S.J., Walter J., *Preaching: The Art & the Craft*) Prophets feel God's frustration. They experience deeply God's disappointments, sadness and anger. Prophets challenge idolatrous beliefs, call addictive behavior of institutions, individuals and the people into question, and open pathways for conversion and a change of heart. (Burghardt, *Ibid*) In reestablishing a right relationship with God, the community and the world, the prophet calls for personal and communal accountability and transparency.

I find that among those whose faith was nurtured by the teachings of the Second Vatican Council a great deal of sadness, frustration, disappointment and anger regarding the Church and its leadership. It is important to discern whose sadness, frustration, disappointment and anger it is. Is it God's sadness, and anger at work in you, calling forth systemic change in the life of the Church, or might it be some unresolved matter within you that can benefit perhaps from spiritual direction. In both instances, we must through prayer ask the Spirit to search out the nature of our sadness, frustration, disappointment and anger and to allow God's compassion for ourselves and for the Church to emerge and take root as part of the grist of the prophet's heart.

Fast forward to the II Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church. In that document, the

Council Fathers affirm the prophetic office and responsibility of the faithful. They wrote:

“The holy people of God shares also in Christ's prophetic office; it spreads abroad a living witness to Him, especially by means of a life of faith and charity and by offering to God a sacrifice of praise...[the Spirit allots] His gifts to everyone according as His wills, distributing special graces among the faithful of every rank. By these gifts, the Holy Spirit makes them fit and ready to undertake the various tasks and offices which contribute toward the renewal and up-building of the Church...These charismatic gifts, whether they be the more outstanding or the more simple and widely diffused, are to be received with thanksgiving and consolation for they are perfectly suited to and useful for the needs of the Church.” (Lumen Gentium, Paragraph 2)

I am therefore confident that what is percolating within you is a charismatic gift in the process of becoming ripe for action.

In our living memory and history, we bear witness to a number of individual prophets who have spoken God's truth to power for the life of the world—Mahatma Gandhi, who, through non-violent protest led India to independence; Martin Luther King, Jr., who took up the cause of racial equality, seizing the moment when one woman, in claiming her dignity and human equality sat in the front of a bus; Oscar Romero, who became a counter cultural advocate for God's poor, marginalized and forgotten; Nelson Mandela, whose imprisonment for 27 years helped destroy apartheid in South Africa; Archbishop Desmond Tutu who helped to reconcile a nation through a Truth and Reconciliation Commission; Pope John XXIII, who was God's spokesperson, reading the signs of the times, causing systemic change in the Church; Philip & Daniel Berrigan, who with six others became known as the “Plowshares Eight,” giving birth to the national plowshares movement. In our day, prophetic voices speak poignantly through women such as Joan Chittister, Sandra Schneiders, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Teresa Kane, and Rosemary Radford Ruether to mention a few. Participation in Christ's prophetic office, affirmed by Lumen Gentium, is very much alive and refuses to be stifled.

ISSUE. While there are many issues pertinent to being an effective prophetic voice, let me limit myself to naming three issues to which you can add many more.

(1) The Church in which we were raised is largely that of a belonging system, manifested through membership and attendance. Membership and attendance do not in themselves create a transcendent system of counter-cultural, transformed consciousness, which Jesus established. He called it the reign of God. Rather membership and attendance create an organization whose concerns are about money, who is in, who is out, who is worthy, who is unworthy, who is right and who is wrong, and who is in control. As Fr. Richard Rohr aptly observes, “we have a Church that is largely held together by administrators, held offices, and programs. It's not all bad. It's just not enough.” (source—Letting Go: A Spirituality of Subtraction)

Gathering in the name of God and being intentionally centered in God fosters spiritual community, which,

by its very nature, is to constantly call into question one's right relationship to God, to the world, the person in need and one's self. In short, we need a whole new way of being Church. We need to grapple with this question. Being a Catholic Christian is much more than membership and much more than attendance—what constitutes “the more” for you? I believe that what you name as constituting “the more” for you will, in some large part, define a new way for you to be Church. To create a transcendent system, we need to teach and practice and promote contemplative listening, contemplative prayer and contemplative living. More about that in a moment.

(2) Most of the people in the pew, by and large, have not paid attention to nine-tenths of the teaching in the Gospels. The reasons are many, but the root cause is that the institutional Church remains largely a first half of life Church, and its preaching has focused on first half of life issues and formation. The gospel teachings, because they are radical teachings, belong to a spirituality for the second half of life, and the Church has done little to help the faithful facilitate the transition to the second half of life.

In a snap shot, the first half of life formation is focused on building a container of beliefs, supported by conformity to do's and don't's, pat answers and grounded in dualistic thinking. It is life's journey of ascent, accomplishments and success. It involves creating a personality and forming the false self that we will spend the second half of life dismantling spiritually in order to discover our true self. The second half of life spirituality is grappling with the hard questions, with uncertainty, ambiguity and even chaos. It calls for an inner capacity to live with paradox, contradiction and mystery. Only those who have crossed the threshold from the spirituality of the first half of life to the second half are ready to undertake the deeper meaning and consequence of Jesus' teachings.

(3) The culture of the west is locked into the mindset of dualistic thinking—right-wrong; us-them; either-or; good-bad. In many ways the Church has assimilated this. In some places it is the only thing people in the pew are exposed to. While dualistic thinking helps to make distinctions and to clarify this from that, and that from this, it is a low level of consciousness. When I speak of a level of consciousness as being low, I don't mean it a pejorative sense of being inferior. Rather the general, prevailing, and conventional thinking characterizes a low level of consciousness. In gospel language, being asleep, or blind, or deaf, or lost or dead are code words for a low level of consciousness. Conversely, a raised level of consciousness is synonymous with being awake, seeing, hearing, living, and being found.

Low-level consciousness often becomes a trap in which people take sides, hold intractable positions and are stubborn and uncompromising in their point of view. This is the level of consciousness that is the energy behind so much of our public debate today. Within the Church a low level of consciousness creates polarity and the mistaken belief that God takes sides. With God there are no sides, only the unitive consciousness of love, a love that is all-inclusive, universal, extravagant, and gratuitous.

The wisdom of Thich Nhat Hanh speaks well to this issue. He writes, “Most of us take sides in each encounter or conflict. We distinguish right from wrong based on partial evidence or hearsay. We need indignation in order to act, but even righteous, legitimate indignation is not enough. Our world does not

lack people willing to throw themselves into action. What we need are people who are capable of loving, of not taking sides so that they can embrace the whole of reality. . . [Then] we can do the real work to help alleviate suffering.” (source—Thich Nhat Hanh, *Peace is Every Step*)

Until we teach a new way of thinking, the non-dualistic mind of both-and; we are spinning our wheels and being unresponsive to the world’s hunger and thirst for spiritual meaning. Only the non-dualistic mind, and the contemplative heart can love enemies, pray for the persecutor and be non-violent.

CHALLENGE. The challenges for the Voice of the Faithful in being a prophetic voice are many. For me, I believe the overarching challenge is to be an effective two-edge sword. How do you meet this challenge—through the largesse of your heart and the generosity of your inner spirit. Specifically, you must ensure a collective capacity to: (1) effectively and persistently call into question what is that should not be; (2) to be advocates for holding opposites together in love and avoid being adversarial; and (3) to ensure that all your actions are motivated by love for the sake of love supported by integrity, authenticity, credibility, accountability, transparency. I believe one of the best ways to achieve this is to promote the reign of God rooted in one of the Church’s greatest, authoritative treasures, its teachings on social justice, which remain largely hidden in plain sight.

For Action

CONTEXT. In calling for prophetic action, it is important to remember that a “prophet’s truth is not our truth; it is a transcendent truth. [The prophet] sees life, human action from God’s high vantage.” (Burghardt, *Ibid*) Thus, whatever it is we call into question, must be viewed through the divine gaze, through discernment as to what God’s desire and prayer is for us. Discernment is the prayer-filled activity that clarifies, purifies, cleanses and diminishes our ego-driven agendas. Discernment allows one’s true self to emerge together with love, simplicity, and compassion. In discernment we enter into God’s desire and God’s prayer by leaving the comfortable, secure and safe place, and displacing ourselves, becoming vulnerable to God’s purpose on the one hand, but free on the other hand to ask the hard questions and to process reality steeped in prayer. In a real sense, discernment reveals what we are willing to stake our life on for the sake of love.

ISSUE. Again, there are numerous issues in this context “for action.” Let me jump-start the process for naming your own issues with one difficult issue. For those whose consciousness has been raised to the level of God-consciousness, one must be willing to love the Church, but not hold on to it or cling to it as a possession. Only God can save us. No church, no strategic blueprint, no technique or formula, nor and set of pious practices can save you. The Church is a means, not an end. Its purpose is to point us toward God and open up access to God. When it fails to do so, one may be called to do as Jesus did—he stepped outside the framework of institutional religion, but did not repudiate it. We see him all the way to the end of his life going to the synagogue and teaching. But he stepped outside the boundaries of

organized religion to announce and established the reign of God. His action was radical. Being radical means a willingness to get down into the root causes of the issues at hand, and to bring good news to the poor, proclaim liberty to captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free, (see Lk 4:18)

CHALLENGE. A necessary challenge for the Voice of the Faithful, in being a prophetic voice for action, is to be willing to live in liminal, sacred space. To be in liminal space is to be on a threshold, in the in-between place, poised for action, but not certain whether to go forward or back, in or out, up or down until the work of discernment is complete. On the threshold it is imperative that you read the signs of the times with prayer-filled discernment. Some of the signs you must attend to in group discernment are these: (1) celibacy—does our stance toward celibacy become in effect more important than the Eucharist? We continue to act as though it has as more and more people are denied access to the Eucharist; (2) the inequality of women—in God’s eyes women are equal in the order of creation and in the order of grace, why therefore do we remain complicit in opposing God’s purpose for the world? (3) non-violence—why is the Church not an advocate and radical proponent of non-violence, from opposition to war to the use of violence as a form of entertainment in the media?

Once the Spirit, through prayer and discernment maps out the action called for, then you must be willing to bear the burden of God’s radical action for the life of the world. You must be willing to bear the experience of being maligned, marginalized, discredited, and judged falsely. Be mindful of the importance of Paul’s words in Second Corinthians. “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair, persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. (2 Cor. 4:8-10)

Rooted In Contemplation

CONTEXT. To be rooted in contemplation is to be grounded in God without any personal agenda. A contemplative life is a life of being open and available to God in whatever way God seeks to be God for you. A contemplative way of life will recognize and claim the counter cultural nature of the spiritual life. Contemplative prayer and contemplative living will bring about a new mindset, a change of consciousness, a new way of being present in the world.

The contemplative mind processes reality differently. Rather than judging, analyzing, explaining, fixing or controlling everything as the dualistic mind seeks to do, the contemplative mind focuses on the whole picture, wide open to God, mystery, and the present moment just as it is. In the words of Fr. Richard Rohr, “Contemplation is letting go of all the thoughts that want our attention so that God can get through to our overly cluttered mind and our hearts that are usually split in all directions.” (source: CAC Webcast, March 2009) The practice of contemplative prayer brings us into union with God, ourselves, others, and the present moment.

Look at Jesus. He led a life of action and contemplation. He began his ministerial life with prayer in solitude for 40 days in the desert. As he grapples with the identity given him at his baptism, he assimilates God's consciousness. Because he has come to terms with the counter cultural and counter intuitive nature of the spiritual life, he proclaims the reign of God and teaches us the path of transformative consciousness. Conventional consciousness is 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth;' while transformative consciousness is "offering no resistance to one who is evil. (Mt 5: 38-39) Conventional consciousness is: "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy; but transformative consciousness is love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you. Jesus frequently returned to the desert, often spending whole nights or the pre-dawn hours in solitary prayer to the one he called his "Abba." His life becomes a lifelong consecration to God, integrating a contemplative life of personal and shared prayer with a whole-hearted commitment to full-time public ministry in service of the will of God.

A life of action and contemplation involves a whole new way of seeing, which points toward unitive consciousness. It is what Teilhard de Chardin means when he said "the whole life lies in the verb seeing." It is what Meister Eckhart, means when he wrote: "The eye with which I see God is the same with which God sees me. My eye and God's eye is one eye, and one sight, and one knowledge, and one love." Jesus' eight beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount comes from "unitive" and non-dualistic thinking. The contemplative mind allows us to surrender to what reality IS at the deepest level. (source: CAC Webcast, Ibid)

ISSUE. The principal issue, for those who want to shape structural change in the Church and foster systematic transformation and growth in the universal Church, will be a change in consciousness, which I spoke of earlier. Without it, no systemic change can endure. In the absence of a change in consciousness, people become angry, disillusioned, alienated, or hurt. If we don't have a way of dealing with the hurts, and the people we don't like, and those who don't agree with us, we will drop out. A contemplative life, supported by contemplative practices and discernment must be the norm for engaging in systemic change.

CHALLENGE. For the Voice of the Faithful, I believe the primary challenge is a two-fold question. First, in what or whom are you centered? Second, are you an intentional spiritual community grounded in discernment? If you are centered in programs, personalities, lofty goals and projects, you may survive on collective energy for awhile, but over the long haul, you may miss the mark and be no different than any other like organization or group. If the community fails to call itself frequently back to the question of where it is centered, it will gather in God's name to engage in actions not sanctioned by God. But if you are centered in God, entrusting to one another your desire and love of God, then you join God in the care of one another's soul and will be positioned to become instruments of the Holy Spirit for the life of the world. Then you will be a formidable entity and energy for implementing the reign of God.

It is my hope that all your efforts toward structural change and systematic transformation of the Church be centered in God and rooted in discernment and contemplative prayer. May your Voices in Action Campaign "take root downward, and bear fruit upward." (see 2 Kings 19:30 and Isaiah 37:31)