

RELIGIOUS LIFE: A CALL TO TAKE A PROPHETIC STANCE

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ABSTRACT

In Nigeria, we are blessed with religious vocation: Men and women who accepted the invitation of Christ to come follow him and they have lived the evangelical counsels of poverty, obedience and chastity with commitment and grace. However, in the new dispensation, Nigeria is being confronted with an old but growing new situation of injustice and exclusion: The massive poverty of more than 50% of our population, the threat to expression of need through violence, insecurity and instability of those men and women that the religious are called to minister to. In this article therefore, I will discuss the renewed call on religious to take a prophetic stance in the contemporary context of Nigeria. This propounds the need for initial and on-going formation to be tailored to the understanding and critical analysis of an option for the poor and a courageous look at what it means to be a prophetic witness in contemporary Nigerian society.

INTRODUCTION

A society such as Nigeria that has to address social problems such as corruption, unemployment, poverty, inequality, poor education and labor unrest is in desperate need of prophets. In this article, it is suggested that the clear prophetic voice of men and women religious could change the society in which the people we are called to serve belong. The problem is that this prophetic voice seems to have either lost momentum or has disappeared. As part of the solution to the growing problem in Nigeria, formation of religious men and women at the initial and on-going formation should make them more authentic Christians with passion for social justice and courageously committed to using their prophetic voice. Jesus who calls us has showed an example of taking a prophetic stance by addressing boldly the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, Sadducees and tax collectors of his day. You hold the key of the kingdom, not going in yourself and not allowing anyone else. God invited prophets to announce: Go and proclaim these words toward the north and say, 'Return, faithless Israel,' declares the LORD; 'I will not look upon you in anger. For I

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am gracious,' declares the LORD; 'I will not be angry forever. 'Only acknowledge your iniquity, that you have transgressed against the LORD your God, and have scattered your favors to the strangers under every green tree, and you have not obeyed My voice,' declares the LORD. Jeremiah 35:15. When David arose in the morning, the word of the LORD came to the prophet Gad, David's seer, saying, "Go and speak to David, 'Thus the LORD says, "I am offering you three things; choose for yourself one of them, which I will do to you." 2 Samuel 24:11-12. These are some of the scriptural foundations of an invitation by the Lord for us to be prophets given the mandate to call society to order. In the thirteenth century there was a significant movement from hermitage to mendicancy. This movement was a significant event in the history of religious life that highlighted the socio-political implications of religious life as a prophetic witnessing to the gospel. This transition was both symbolical and practical, as it marked the beginning of many current religious institutes. The entrance of these holy men and women into society replicates in a way the appointment of the prophets and the inauguration of the prophecy of old.² Against this backdrop, therefore, religious men and women like Jesus are called to use their prophetic voice to effect positive social change especially in the Nigerian society.

Hence, this article will investigate the following: What is prophetic witnessing and how is prophetic testimony grounded in the prophecies of the Old Testament prophets, the Vatican Council 11, and of Jesus? The act of performing the gift of prophecy in the present-day Nigerian society will be explained. Finally, what type of formation is needed for initial and on-going formation of men and women for Christian commitment and witness in church and society.

METHODOLOGY

The research is conducted mainly by means of a critical literature study and by suggesting how relevant findings could be put into practice. What is prophetic witnessing and how is prophetic testimony grounded in the prophecies of the Old Testament prophets, Vatican Council 11, and of Jesus.

There is a variety of meanings designated to a prophet and several synonyms are attributed to the old definition of a prophet: Seer, soothsayer, fortune teller, clairvoyant, diviner. However, a contemporary definition refers to a prophet as a person who spreads God's truth, who speaks for God or a deity, or by divine inspiration. A person chosen to speak for God could be likened to for instance Moses who was chosen to guide the people of Israel; as the greatest of Old Testament prophets. *There are other male prophets such as Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, and Micah to mention but a few. Micah expresses with courage and conviction what he believes that God has put into his heart to proclaim to the people of Israel.*

²Obiezu, E. C., & Szura, J. (2004). *Journey's to renewed consecration: Religious life after Fifty years of Vatican II*

"He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:8)

In this way, creating a question and curious inquiry into the knowledge of what this inspiring verse teaches on the issues of justice, mercy, and humility.

Lest anyone think that prophets are only males called to witness to the salvific mission of God; women are also invited to be prophets. The label "prophetess" or "woman prophet" (*nēbī'āh*) is attributed to five women in the Old Testament: Miriam (Exod. 15:20), Deborah (Judg. 4:4), Huldah (2 Kings 22:14; 2 Chron. 34:22), Noadiah (Neh. 6:14), and "the prophetess" (Isa. 8:3). Its significance is clear. Miriam claims the Lord "has spoken" through her (Num. 12:2). Deborah says to Barak: "Look, the Lord, the God of Israel, has commanded" (Judg. 4:6). Huldah similarly uses the prophetic introductory formula: "Thus says the Lord God of Israel..." (2 Kings 22:15).³ Scripture, then, describes a woman prophet as someone through whom God speaks to his people. In this regard, a "prophetess" is no different than her male counterpart prophet.

In the old testament, God continues to speak to God's people through the prophets. God sees the importance of eloquent prophets who are fearless and restless in the face of evil and lawlessness of society. The Lord was relentless in warning Israel and Judah through all his prophets and, saying,

"Turn from your evil ways and keep My commandments, my statutes according to all the law which I commanded your fathers, and which I sent to you through My servants the prophets." 2 Kings 17:13

"Yet I sent you all My servants the prophets, again and again, saying, "Oh, do not do this abominable thing which I hate." Jeremiah 44:4

"I have also spoken to the prophets, And I gave numerous visions, and through the prophets I gave parables Hosea 12:10

When David arose in the morning, the word of the LORD came to the prophet Gad, David's seer, saying,

"Go and speak to David, "Thus the LORD says, "I am offering you three things; choose for yourself one of them, which I will do to you." 2 Samuel 24:11-12

God presents his son to humankind as the epitome of a person we can learn from.

"Here is my servant, whom I have chosen, my beloved, in whom my soul delights. I will put my Spirit on Him, and he will proclaim justice to the nations (Mtt 12:18)

Jesus obeys his Father's will by teaching us by example in what it means to take on the cause of members of society who live on the margins; he proclaims:

"The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of spirit to the blind, to set free those who are downtrodden (LK 4:18)

³Del Housaye, J. (2009). Who are the women Prophets in the Bible. *Journal of CBE International* Vol. 16 No. 2

Jesus's stance on his prophetic call affirms the sense of prophecy (1Corinthians 14) which is not to forecast future things, but to interpret scripture concretely and to apply the interpretation in consoling and admonishing the congregation and society.⁴ Prophecy is above all the gift to understand and express what the will of God is in a concrete, given situation.

The prophetic character of the 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.⁵ The sign value, which the Second Vatican Council acknowledges in the consecrated life, is expressed in prophetic witness to the primacy which God and the truths of the Gospel have in the Christian life.

John Paul II, in *Vita Consecrata* crystallized this characterization by succinctly stating that prophetic witnessing is inseparably linked to religious vocation both intrinsically and teleologically. Intrinsically refers to religious life and its radical nature to the call of the Father to follow Christ and theologically implies to the core of the mission men and women religious are called to embrace.⁶ Prophets, such as Bishop Oscar Romero of San Salvador, believe in creating and preparing for a brighter future not his own. Thus, our task is to call the people as a community to accountability and responsibility in their relationship with God as lived in their various social milieus. As mediators of the covenant of God with his people, prophets needed to identify with what was expected of them in that relationship. In doing so, they often interpreted history, the flow of events, in light of relationship with God. Like the prophets of old and like Christ, not even the threat of death would deter their commitment, so marked was their life by utter self-giving. This way of life was instituted through the charisms and prophetic witnessing of Founders/Foundresses of Religious Congregations that we belong to. That all founders and foundresses witnessed to the love of the communitarian God, was not an abstract mission but one with strong implication for the social reality of h/her time.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

⁴De Klerk, B. J. (2013). Service to the South African society through prophetic testimony as a liturgical act. *HTS Theological Studies* vol.69 n.2 Pretoria Jan. 2013 Retrieved from http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0259-94222013000200015

⁵Vatican Council II (1975). *The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*. Dublin, Ireland Costello Publishing Company, Inc., and Reverend Austin Flannery, O.P.(Ed.)

⁶ *Ibid. i*

A prophetic witness in the face of challenges in the present-day Nigerian socio-political climate

Religious life has embarked on a changing, painful, challenging, life giving journey. The doors of once sheltered religious men and women have flung open creating all sorts of vulnerabilities through the new age realities, challenging the status quo and questions the credibility and role of religious life in our present day. This reality is gradually settling in the church in Nigeria. It is a common practice in Nigeria to see young children, especially in the Northern part of Nigeria, actively engaged in begging. In Northern Nigeria, many families send children known as “Almajiri” to Koranic schools.⁷Abiodun, George, Amadi, Oladipo, and Iluno(2017) described the challenges faced by Nigeria as law enforcement from other nations apprehend many trafficked women and girl-children. The findings revealed that traffickers take their victims to Europe, some parts of Africa and the Middle East.⁸ Kelly (2017) states that in 2014, 1,450 Nigerian women were registered at the landing port in Italy, in 2015, 5,600 women were registered by the International Organization for Migrants (IOM) and in 2016, out of 180,000 migrants arriving in Italy by sea, 37,500 were trafficked Nigerian women, and children.⁹Eze (2017) explained the trend of deportation of trafficked Nigerian women and girls for sex. Her research findings proved that in 2003, Spain deported 160 women and girls, 59 from the Netherlands, four from the United States, 13 from South Africa, six from Ireland, others from Cote d'Ivoire, Niger Republic and 104 from Mali.¹⁰ The insurgence of Boko haram activities threatens national/regional security and stability.¹¹ The economic contraction in 2016 led to a projected increase in poverty by close to 2 percentage points and reached 48.4 percent. Poverty in Nigeria, as per the projections based on NLSS 2009/10, is estimated to have increased along with negative economic growth in all four quarters of 2016 and the first quarters of 2017. The economic recession, insecurity and displacement in North Eastern Nigeria led to low agricultural production, substantial disruption of basic services and damage to

⁷Ekong, S. (2016). Nigerian Policy on Child Labor: An Evaluation of the Education Sector Preparedness for Effective Policy Implementation Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com.ezp.waldenulibrary.org/pqdtlocal1005747/docview/1758252321/abstract/98BC2B3E83D4DCEPQ/>

⁸Abiodun, A.K., George, A, Amadi, C.C., Oladipo, G. & Iluno, L.U. (2017). Human trafficking: A global challenge reflection on the challenges in Nigeria. *Journal of Law, Policy, and Globalization*. Vol. 61 2017 Retrieved from <http://heinonline.org/HOL/Page?handle=hein.journals/jawpglob61&id=193&div=&collection=ile>

⁹Kelly, A. (2017). Number of Nigerian women trafficked to Italy for sex almost doubled in 2016 *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2017/jan/12/nigerian-women-trafficked-to-italy-for-sex-doubled-2016>

¹⁰Eze, M. D. (2017). *Human Trafficking and Prostitution Among Women and Girls of Edo State, Nigeria Possibility of Rehabilitation Through Education and Prevention*. Xlibris Publishing Corporation, UK

¹¹Ogbonnya, E.M., Ogujiuba, K. & Stiegler, N. (2014). *Terrorism in Nigeria: Implications of Boko Haram's movement for security and stability in the ECOWAS sub-region* DOI 10.1080/10246029.2014.903378 <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10246029.2014.903378>

infrastructure, depleted household's food stocks, and reduced purchasing power, with several millions of people facing food security crisis. The conflict between the herdsmen and farmers in the North Central, Nigeria also posed similar threats in the region, especially food security.¹² In the face of a troubled nation such as Nigeria, where kidnapping has become the in-thing, political instability forms the wake of our day, preventable diseases plague our land, unemployment renders our youths to self-inflicted slavery within and across the world, we could go on and on. The problem of refugees due to Boko Haram's deadly campaign and Northern children parade our streets as "Alamajiris" while politicians fold their arms, watch and engage in partisan wrangling and embezzlement of public funds. The litany of pain and suffering tells the story of the ever-widening gap between the poor and rich in Nigeria.

Poverty, unemployment, food security crisis precipitates kidnapping, armed robbery, terrorism just to name but a few. Lack of education due to either unavailability or lack of access to expensive education by the poor (including schools run by the church). Tribalism has eaten deep into the fabric of Nigerian society. In the face of these complicated but multifaceted problems that plague society, religious are called to raise the questions with enthusiasm while staying hopeful for the future. Religious life lived in faith is to say "Yes" to be faithful in all circumstances. A passion to follow Christ in the lame, broken-hearted, the sick, and the marginalized on the margins of society. To say Yes: I will surrender to a future so blurry to be claimed with hope, yet I know that God is in the question. The ability to say Lord I believe; help my unbelief; in living the paradox of my life. God is still calling the religious to contribute to the healing of the body of Christ. The joy of service is the daily transformation causing the dry bones to rise again (Ezekiel 37: 3); in believing in the people that we are called to serve by walking with them to Calvary. A reporter covering the funeral event of Martin Luther King saw an old man standing at the edges of the cemetery. The reporter asked him: What did this man mean to you? Why was he special? Through tears he answered. He was faithful. He believed in us when we stopped believing in ourselves, he stayed with us when we were not worth staying with. This can be a testimony of a life well lived in faith and hope for us and others entrusted to us.

We are called to be the one who walk with God's people in the corridors of death, who sing in the hallways of terror, who return as the rising of hope.¹³ We are called to take the road less traveled and uncommon. To go against the grain, not to settle; to be restless. We are called to address the problems in our Nation and the polarity in citizens' thinking. To be the voice of the marginalized poor's call in a supposedly richest nation in Black Africa. To engage with courage the tribal divide that threaten the message of Christ; "that they may be one" (Jn 17:22).

¹²World Bank, (2017). *Country poverty brief: Sub-Saharan Africa Nigeria* 2107. Retrieved from http://databank.worldbank.org/data/download/poverty/33EF03BB-9722-4AE2-ABC7-AA2972D68AFE/Archives-2017/Global_POV_SP_CPB_NGA.pdf

¹³ Richardson, J. (2000). *In wisdom path: Discovering the Sacred in Every season*. Pilgrim Pr.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Attributes needed for initial and on-going formation of men and women Christians

What sort of religious men and women are needed to address these contemporary national; but global issues? This question is crucial because religious life in Nigeria is facing similar narrative/challenges that plague Nigerian society: Materialism, tribal tension in communities, love of power rather than the power of love, lack of accountability of communal property, cliques or what I refer to as "Religious Gang". The gradual move by religious men and women towards secularism was voiced in *Vita Consecrata* (the outcome document of the synod issued by Pope John Paul II). Pope Benedict XVI, (2011) posited that consecrated life, like other aspects of Church life, is trapped in the wave of worldliness that challenges us today. According to Pope Benedict XVI, consecrated life has become too settled in this world, adapting itself to worldly standards. Its vocation to prophetic openness has been abandoned in favor of greater weight and attention paid to self- preoccupation, self-centeredness and self-preservation rather than total self-giving to God, love for Christ the teacher, Lord and bridegroom of the Church who is intimately followed and served above everything and decision to live according to the Spirit.¹⁴ Institutes of Consecrated Life are thus invited to courageously propose anew the enterprising initiative, creativity and holiness of their founders and foundresses in response to the signs of the times emerging in today's world. This invitation is first of all a call to perseverance on the path of holiness in the midst of the material and spiritual difficulties¹⁵.

The Synod Assembly paid special attention in the discussion of the formation of those who wish to consecrate themselves to the Lord and recognize its decisive importance. The primary objective of the formation process is to prepare people for the total consecration of themselves to God in the following of Christ, at the service of the Church's mission.¹⁶ To say "yes" to the Lord's call by taking personal responsibility for maturing in one's vocation is the inescapable duty of all who have been called. According to Vatican II decree on the up-to-date of religious renewal, *Perfectae Caritatis* published in 1965, the Church Fathers emphasized the need for initial and ongoing formation for Christian growth.

They deliberated on a formation that will prepare the novices in the type of life or the activities which will be theirs in the future, and to teach them how to

¹⁴Apostolic Exhortation, (1996). Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *VITA CONSECRATA* of the Holy Father John Paul II Libreria Editrice Vaticana

Retrieved from

http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_25031996_vita-consecrata.html

¹⁵ *ibid* iv

¹⁶ *Ibid* iv

xvi Nolan, A. (2006). *Jesus today: A spirituality of radical freedom*. MaryKnoll, New York,

realize in their lives in progressive stages that cohesive unity whereby contemplation and apostolic activities are closely linked together. The type of formation that will inculcate in them a unity which is most fundamental and primary values of these same societies. The attainment of this unity, they emphasized, requires training in self-denial and persevering efforts towards purity of intention in action.

The Vatican Council II, Decree on Religious life; *Perfectae Caritatis* also affirmed that continuing formation, whether in Institutes of Apostolic or Contemplative Life, is an intrinsic requirement of religious consecration. As mentioned above, the formation process is not limited to the initial phase. Due to human limitations, the consecrated person can never claim to have completely brought to life the "new creature" who, in every circumstance of life, reflects the very mind of Christ. *Initial* formation, then, should be closely connected with *continuing* formation, thereby creating a readiness on everyone's part to let themselves be formed every day of their lives.¹⁷ Community, they stressed nurtures this process.

Against this background, therefore, what should religious institutes be forming both those in initial and on-going formation for? I believe that religious institutes should base their formation on some of the concerning issues that threaten to cripple religious communities and the challenges of social and political realities of our environment. The problems identified as a challenge is not peculiar to Nigeria. However, it needs to be addressed by developing formation curriculum that is contextualized and appropriate, so that Nigerian religious men and women will be relevant not only to Nigeria but also that they can develop skills and attitudes to address global questions. I would suggest the following issues to be addressed both at the initial and on-going formation to help consecrated men and women to develop relevant skills needed to be true prophets witnessing with their lives and actions to the resurrected Christ:

- *Formation in contemplative prayer,
- * Formation authentically rooted in detachment,
- *Formation in awareness of social justice /involvement,
- * Formation in Contemplative dialogue,
- * Formation in cultural competence,
- *Formation in the spirituality of servant-leadership style and
- * Formation in the knowledge of self.

Formation in contemplative prayer

Religious men and young women in both initial and on-going formation need to realize the importance of being a contemplative in action. The formation has to inculcate in a religious the essence of not just the recitation of the Breviary, but authentic union with God in prayer; where every word and action becomes a prayer. We need to live lives which question whether we are "human being" or "human doing". A prophet who wants to be rooted in God who calls h/her to a deep christian formation needs to engage h/herself in silence and solitude. It is in this state of quiet that we can experience the power of God calling deep in our souls to be

⁸² Ibid iv

aware of who we are, whose we are and which route we want to take on our journey. The quest for 'busyness' in our apostolate can become an obsession where we set out to save the world, but we also need to realize that unless we can be spiritually transformed, we cannot be part of others' transformation. We will experience burnout and lack spiritual upliftment to become our best selves. Jesus was a busy person. Great crowds followed him, pushing and shoving to get closer to him (Mt 5:24, 31), hoping for healing or words of wisdom. And yet Jesus would try to get away to a quiet place to rest awhile. He adhered to his need for silence and solitude. He withdrew for forty days and forty nights and to which he went early in the morning to pray (MK 1:35).

According to Luke, he went to the mountains with the twelve and spent the night in prayer (Lk 6:12). If we want to follow Jesus, we need to follow him first and foremost into the desert. We cannot accomplish any task let alone get to know who we are without creating some space in our lives for prayer and communion with God. In this way, we are energized for mission.

Formation authentically rooted in detachment

In every age there have been men and women who, obedient to the Father's call and to the prompting of the Spirit, have chosen this special way of following Christ, in order to devote themselves to him with an "undivided" heart (cf. *1 Cor* 7:34). Like the Apostles, they too have left everything behind in order to be with Christ and to put themselves, as he did, at the service of God and their brothers and sisters.¹⁸ In this way, through the many charisms of spiritual and apostolic life bestowed on them by the Holy Spirit, they have helped to make the mystery and mission of the Church shine forth, and in doing so, have contributed to the renewal of society. The three disciples caught up in ecstasy hear the Father's call to listen to Christ, to place all their trust in him, to make him the center of their lives. The words from on high give new depth to the invitation by which Jesus himself, at the beginning of his public life, called them to follow him, to leave their ordinary lives behind and to enter into a close relationship to him. It is precisely this special grace of intimacy which, in the consecrated life, makes possible and even demands the total gift of self in the profession of the evangelical counsels.

The Son, who is the way which leads to the Father (cf. *Jn*14:6), calls all those whom the Father has given to him (cf. *Jn*17:9) to make the following of himself the whole purpose of their lives. But of some, those called to the consecrated life, he asks a total commitment, one which involves leaving everything behind (cf. *Mt* 19:27) in order to live at his side and to follow him wherever he goes (cf. *Rev* 14:4). Formation at initial and on-going which is rooted in the dialogue of detachment may help religious men and women to be less materialistic, but to ask for that which is needed for mission.

Formation in awareness of social justice issues/involvement

¹⁸ Ibid xiii

The prophets of today also need to interrupt the status quo by unmasking and deconstructing the structures of today. The regular Sundayliturgy needs also to be seen as an opportunity for the gathering of the faith community to be nurtured and revitalized for prophetic action in and for the world.¹⁹ Our lives are continuing acts of worship. When the members of the prophetic community of faith gather around God's Word, they find grace to articulate their mission in harmony with the gospel of Christ they preach. Prophetic mission is directly connected with the praxis of justice. Liturgy expresses and fosters faith that does justice in missionary praxis. No prophetic mission is isolated from efforts to restructure the social-political-economic order. The justice Christians proclaim in their mission must recognize that the struggle for a just social-political-economic order parallels the struggle for the dignity of the whole human being. The theological foundation for a Christian praxis of justice is God's saving work through grace.

Therefore, the formation of prophets in initial and on-going process should embody the

God who continues to call men and women who will be able to adapt themselves to the changing times. Men and women who are fearless, courageous, selfless, committed and prayerfully listening to the promptings of the spirit to embrace the struggle for justice. As men and women called to be prophets if we do not understand, know, able to evaluate and critically analyze what national and international politics and policies are, if we are not aware of the laws that are promulgated in our land that impact us and the people we serve, if we do not listen to news, how can we understand the obstacles militating against our efforts to announce the reign of God. Then religious men and women would be like the kid who came to school but fell asleep. When the teacher asked. Junior, what is the answer to the question I just asked. Junior replied: Sorry Teacher, in the first place, I did not hear the question.

Formation in Contemplative dialogue

Called to life in communion (Interpersonal relationship), prophets need to perfect the art of relationship. The ability to navigate interpersonal relationship will help both men and women both in initial and on-going formation to master ways to relate to God's people on the missions. My conviction is that religious are first missioned self, to each other and then we can gain better skills to give what we possess. Jesus washes the feet of his disciples inspiring humanity to take up the basin and the towel. Through this gesture, God calls us into deeper and greater communion with God-self. Day after day we are invited to take up the basin and the towel. The tenderness of the towel and willingness of the water inspires us. The call is to community; the impoverished power that sets the soul free and the humility to take the basin and the towel.

Hence, as vocation ministers, we are called to invite God's children into service of the washing of the feet. Be it at the initial or on-going formation, we encourage consecrated men and women to take the basin and the towel in humility.

¹⁹ iii

In this urgency to take the basin and the towel; we become the change we want to see.

The challenge however is, sometimes in relationship; metaphorically we run a movie in our minds called Reality which is construed from our perception of what is. Tipping (2009) describes this scenario as the Projector. Once we understand that our reality is just our projections, instead of blaming others we can begin to take responsibility for what we have created with our thoughts. When we change our perception and drop our illusion and attachments to our belief that what appears on the screen represents reality, we experience Radical Forgiveness.²⁰ Radical forgiveness sets our hearts ready for mission, with no stress, no baggage, no chip on our shoulders; we can go with great enthusiasm to be authentic prophets.

Formation in cultural competence

In a country such as Nigeria, religious men and women are called to minister among people from other ethnic and tribal groups. It will be incorrect to think that since we are Nigerians, we share same culture and tradition. In the way our languages are different so are some cultural and social ways of life. Nigeria is not a homogenous country and thus men and women in initial and on-going formation need to learn to take off their sandals when they meet each other or are missioned in other areas other than theirs; as where they are sent to is a Holy ground. For its part, the consecrated life itself is the bearer of Gospel values and, where it is authentically lived, it can make an innovative contribution in meeting the challenges of inculturation. As a sign of the primacy of God and his Kingdom, it can, through dialogue, elicit a positive reaction in people's consciences. If the consecrated life maintains its prophetic impact, it serves as a Gospel leaven within a culture, purifying and perfecting it.²¹ In present day circumstances, special importance must be given to the interior freedom of consecrated persons, their affective maturity, their ability to communicate with others, especially in their serenity of spirit, their compassion for those who are suffering, their love for the truth, and a correspondence between their actions and their words. *The apostolic dimension* opens the hearts and minds of consecrated persons and prepares them for constant effort in the apostolate, as the sign that it is the love of Christ which urges them on (cf. 2 Cor 5:14). In practice, this will involve updating the methods and objectives of apostolic works in fidelity to the spirit and aims of the founder or foundress and to subsequently emerging traditions, with continuous attention to changing historical and cultural conditions, at the general and local levels where the apostolate is carried out.

Formation in the spirituality of servant-leadership style

A call to servant leadership is a call to invite people and educate them on how to engage themselves at the table of dialogue, peace, justice, fairness,

²⁰ Tipping, C. (2009). *Radical forgiveness*. Boulder, CO. Sounds True Inc. Publishers.

²¹ Ibid xiii

brother/sisterhood. At this table there is mutual accountability and freedom to be who you are created to be while mutually seeking transformation of the soul of the leader and the one being led. ²²A call to be a companion on the journey, a call to offer “the power of love and not love of power”.

As religious we are called to model servant leadership; that liberates and affirms the giftedness of community members and people we are called to serve as companions on the journey. The spirituality of leadership means service, so it is absurd and un-Christlike to use it as a position of power over others to humiliate, intimidate, and strip them of their dignity and deprive them of a just hearing. It is not to be used against those who are not in the clique which I refer to as “Religious gangs.” When such abuse of leadership takes place in religious community, it becomes unhealthy. Formation of new and old religious should emphasize the need to reverence and respect brothers and sisters who wholeheartedly gave themselves voluntarily, trustingly, and open heartedly to the church and humanity. Men and women in initial and on-going formation should be taught to understand that in a dictatorial state, people might yield to a greater power even though their souls reject the process that led them to give in to the action. But sooner or later especially younger members will begin to live in fear with the hope of making it to what I christened the Nigerian religious “Final Profession” syndrome. In this state, the growth of those young men and women religious in initial and on-going formation prior to final vows becomes stunted and lack genuine commitment with freedom which goes with responsibility. They lack spiritual maturity, they fail to ask relevant questions, they wear masks till they make final vows. This is the tragedy of Final vows syndrome.

Religious - both those in the initial or on-going formation - can learn not only from Jesus, but also from outstanding leaders who have modeled servant-leadership; who led their people through the path into the light of day. Leaders such as Moses, Joseph son of Jacob, and Mary the Mother of God who have led the world to new ground, a fertile ground with the soil of forgiveness and tilled with a desire for truth, reconciliation, and restoration. Mandela, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Mohandas Gandhi are the forerunners of today’s leaders who lived and worked based on the principles of servant-leadership.²³ Pope Francis models this type of leadership and is accessible and approachable, though he may not agree with people on all fronts. Such leaders are the modern-day expression of a long line of visionaries; leaders with foresight, able to hear the voice of others, and capable of leading in a way that provides others with light, life and maturity needed for prophetic ministry. Religious men and women may learn from what Mandela had to say: As a leader, I have always led from behind. I would listen to what each person had to say in a

²²Arnold, J.H. (1994). *Discipleship*. Walden, New York, Plough Publishing House

²³Ferch, S. R. & Spears, L.C. (2010). *Spirit of Servant-leadership*. Mahwah, New Jersey U.S.A. Paulist Press/Orbis Books Inc.

discussion before venturing my own opinion. Oftentimes my opinion is simply represented in a consensus of what I heard in the discussion.²⁴

Formation in the knowledge of self

Teaching religious men and women in getting to know oneself is an essential element to authentic Christian formation and spiritual development. The need to strive for self-knowledge cannot be overemphasized in the journey towards initial and ongoing formation in religious life. A prophet without self-scrutiny is bound to project, take refuge in blame syndrome and would lack effective prophetic stance. Jesus was a poet and an artist who communicated with people by painting mental pictures. In this case he exposed the ludicrousness of not knowing oneself by painting a picture of someone offering to take out a speck from her neighbor's eye while ignoring the huge log of in her own eye. It is a cartoon and caricature like the picture he painted of a camel attempting to pass through the eye of a needle. By implication therefore, with a such a log, one cannot see anything. To quote the text in full:

“Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, “Friend, let me take out the speck in your eye,” when you yourself do not see the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye. (LK 6: 41 -42).

The log in the eye is the ego, selfish self. What can blind us in the journey of initial and on-going formation is the truth about ourselves and others is ego. What can be blindness to ego, is the ego itself. Our egos make hypocrites of us all. Although each of us has a slightly structured ego, there are ways of categorizing general personality types to help us discern where we need to focus on to experience healing.

One way to explore self-knowledge is through the scripture and enneagram. The nine ennea-types point to different compulsions and obsessions; different forms of self-centeredness. The enneagram summarizes the different strengths of various personality types. In recent types, people in ministry have begun to use these tools to unlock who they are which has helped them to begin the journey to self-knowledge. Enneagram explains why we behave the way we do and helps to point out specific directions for individual and spiritual growth thus improving relationships with other companions on the journey.²⁵ Self-knowledge is therefore the growing awareness of our ego and all its work; without judging or blaming or making excuses for ourselves. We need to form religious men and women to begin to observe their behavior in different circumstances, of recognizing obsessions and

²⁴Mandela, N. (1994). *Long walk to freedom: The autobiography of Nelson Mandela*. London. Little, Brown and Company

²⁵Baron, R. & Wagele, E. (1994). *The enneagram made easy: Discover the Nine types of People*. New York. HarperCollins Publishers.

compulsions; in this way we can become effective prophets and are able to gain more freedom in the knowledge that we are not wearing the mask of perfection and projection.

Conclusion

What do great prophets such as Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah, Ezekiel and Jesus have in common with the religious? asks Joan Chittister. And she answers: All of them were simple souls like you and me. All of them loved without limit, burned with an enduring patience, were afire with God and proclaimed a new vision. All of them invite you and I to claim our prophetic dimension and speak God's word in the midst of human chaos. Prophecy, she insists is not a luxury; it is an essential dimension of the Christian life.²⁶ That's key to the whole question of the prophetic voice in any society. It comes out of the experience and history of the time. When you look at the situation you're in, prophets are not people who sit around theologizing out of some kind of airy-fairy transcendent overview of somebody else's idea of what the world is. These are people who, out of immersion in the mind of God, speak about what the society is now and what the society should be. The prophetic movement in any society looks, first of all, at what is the Word of God for humanity. And then uses that as a measure for the way humanity itself is acting at this moment.

Men and women religious are chosen by God to raise questions, to disturb the peace, to rock the boat of political leaders. In a country such as Nigeria, the attempt right now is to silence the questions. "You may not discuss, you may not think, you may not do." Also, if we can suppress the questions, we'll have the time, we hope, to build up a young generation in the old answers. The way you empower is religious men and women to refuse to be silent. If consecrated people are silent now, if they fail to articulate the real questions now, it will take another fifty years just to legitimate the questions again. Hence, it is crucial to know the naked position of the Gospel, "I live no longer with my own life" (Galatians 2:20). In that place, as Jesus warned, "the whole world will hate you" (John 15:19). Chittister (2009) poses the question: Why anyone would choose or want to be a prophet.²⁷

Jesus explains that prophetic stance is not so that we can isolate ourselves in order to be in the world but not of it. It is essential to understand that we are not of the world only in the sense of separating ourselves from the evil root of self-interest, greed, and injustice. We need to separate ourselves from all that is loveless in the present world order. In the midst of the political instability, corruption, nepotism, man-made unemployment, reckless administration of the Nigerian political elite, ethnic division, juvenile delinquency, violent crime, quest to gain and control power, mental illness, hijacking of the wealth of Nigerians by a few, God calls each prophet. Religious are called out of this world order not to complacency and to maintain

²⁶Chittister, J. (2009). *The cry of the prophet: A call to fullness of life*. PA. U.S.A. BenetVision Publishers

²⁷Ibid xxvi

culture of silence, to glory in the status of being religious and to walk the streets in dazzling religious regalia, attaining final vows and obtaining a ring (while this is a good outward sign), it is not what makes us authentic religious and clearly not what makes us consecrated people. The essence of our commitment to vocation to religious life and our vows is to build the city of God where the Spirit alone rules, to build the city on the hilltop which cannot be hidden but shines into the world. It is our deeds that will shine out for others to have life and life to the fullest.²⁸

Prophetic stance ultimately calls for risk taking in daring to expand the kingdom and reign of God for the hopeless. Hence, call to prophetic living invites us to take strength in Jesus who dared to rock the boat of the Pharisees and Sadducees, those who turned his father's temple into a market place. It is also important for prophets to know that for Jesus to risk bumping into an unknown became challenging and cost him his life. It is also imperative to remember that sometimes the road will be foggy, the thunderstorm scares us as heavy rain blurs our vision. The rivers and oceans may overflow their banks. Dead bodies will be found in prisons and on street sidewalks.²⁹ Those who dare to speak up against injustice can be silenced or killed. Sometimes culture of silence and pessimism sets in our souls and dominate our weary and hopeless hearts as we watch the malnourished waste away, the sick given fake drugs, children are either brainwashed or forced to fight as terrorists. We watch new forms of slavery emerge as our youths pay their way, coerced and trafficked within and outside the shores of Nigeria, youths take to drug addiction with no hope for a future. Let us not give up. Let us always remember the words of Isaiah: Do not be afraid, ...should you pass through the raging waters, you shall not drown (Isaiah 41:10).

²⁸ Ibid xx

²⁹ Iwuoha, N. (2012). *Walking in the wisdom of the "Worn Out" shoes of Blessed Catherine Kasper: A symbol of transformation*. Donaldson, Indiana U.S.A. Poor Handmaids of Jesus of Christ Publications.