



Sisters of Charity of Jesus and Mary  
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My dear Sisters,

During this advent season we listen to the readings where prophets announce a new beginning with the coming of Jesus. The message of Christmas is peace, hope and love for which today's world is waiting. I hope our coming chapter, which is not far away will bring in a newness and vitality with the theme: *"SCJM woman listen and dare to be prophetic, do what ever he tells you"*. (*John 2:5*) In my last annual letter for Christmas I had tried to reflect on the first part of the theme of the chapter particularly of our identity as SCJM women and the aspect of listening after the example of Mary who listened and responded to the situation during the wedding at Cana and she asked the servants to "do whatever He tells you". Since I have dealt with the listening aspect of the theme last year, now I would like to focus on the prophetic aspect of our call in today's world. Prior to Vatican II, it was understood that living the prophetic dimension of Jesus' mission was only the privilege of the clerical church. His holiness Pope John Paul II, in *Vita Consecrata* asserted the prophetic role of consecrated religious. Later Pope Benedict XVI in his address to the Major Superiors Union in 2007 invited women religious to live their prophetic role.

So, as religious women we are called to play a prophetic role in our contemporary context. I would like to share with you my understanding of what it means to be a prophet. Being familiar with our scriptures, it immediately takes us to the major and minor prophets of the Old Testament. According to the bible, prophets are ordinary human beings chosen by God to live and communicate His message of love to the people of their time. Prophets normally arose in a society that was estranged from God and often did not care for the well being of the

people. The prophets were affected by the contemporary realities of injustice and oppressive structures that neglected the poor.

Every prophet experienced God in an intense way in the simplicity of his own self and in the ordinary realities of daily life. There was always an invitation from God and urgency about the call to be a messenger and a spokes person for God; however one had the freedom to respond to this divine calling. Responding to this call they experienced the holiness of God and the challenging reality of the world before them. They experienced a transformation within their being and were empowered to challenge the leaders and the people to conversion in order to bring God's reign marked by justice, peace, equality, and care for the weak and the poor. After this profound experience of God, they started seeing with new eyes, hearing with new ears and being sensitive to the needs of the people with a new heart. We too had this fundamental experience of being called by God and being empowered by his spirit to make daring choices for God and in favor of the poor and the abandoned. The prophets also read the signs of the times and challenged the contemporary society to alternate ways of living. This led them sometimes even to be rejected. The prophet's role was not only to speak the message but to live it in his own life. Prophets always focused on the Word of God and they were passionate about it. Their lives were dedicated to announcing God's message which on the one hand was calling for conversion and on the other promising God's continuous faithfulness.

Isaiah's prophetic vocation was generated in the mystical experience of God's holiness. This enabled him to speak His word asking the people to change their ways to bring newness to all the reality and relationships. The Prophet Jeremiah who was aware of his human limitations was empowered by God to be the spokes person of the divine message. He was called to give utterance to the message of God calling for a transformation of the society. The Prophet Ezekiel was called to communicate God's strength and to give people hope when they were

in exile. He had to live a spirituality of exile that is based primarily on the experience of God which is expressed in concrete ways in the context of some kind of a community or a society. He is a model for us to critically analyze the current reality while remaining energized to create alternate communities grounded in authentic contemplation, justice and solidarity with others who are marginalized. To be a prophet one needs to be close to God, have a personal experience of God's love and holiness, have a mission to communicate God's love to the society, especially where there is marginalization. Prophet analyzes, is a messenger, and is a witness. The prophet does this in dialogue with God and in solidarity with God's people, inspired by the demands of justice. The prophets nurture, nourish, evoke consciousness and perception which are alternate to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture.

This mission of the prophets is completed in the person of Jesus as He lived the roles of a prophet, priest and king. Jesus' prophetic ministry started after His baptism when He opened the scroll and announced His mission of bringing the Good News to the poor, the blind, the deaf, the dumb, etc. Jesus' prophetic experience was rooted in His mystical life or intense union with His Father. He continuously experienced God as 'Abba'. For Him God was not just a loving parent but love itself. So he assumed His Father's project for the people as his own. This is what gave Him authority as a prophet. There was coherence between His life and His message. This is the invitation addressed to every Sister of Charity, *"Christ is always inviting us to enter into his experience of the Father's love and to know his mercy. He is inviting us to follow him generously in the total gift of ourselves to those to whom we are sent. When we respond to him freely, seeking no reward, and are ready to live the powerlessness of love, then we enter also into his joy. Caritas Christi urget nos"*. (Constitution art 3)

In our contemporary society too we have prophetic men and women who communicate God's love by their example and their prophetic

action. Following the attempted assassination of Pope John Paul II at St. Peter's square he said, *"pray for my brother, Mehmet Ali Ağca, whom I have sincerely forgiven"*. In 1983, he and Ağca met and spoke privately at the prison where Ağca was being held. This incident of Pope John Paul II sitting in the prison cell of his attempted assassin spoke louder to the entire world than all the encyclicals that he wrote during the 27 years of his papacy. As a prophet of his time he lived the message that he tried to communicate. Mother Teresa who was very timid by nature rose to the occasion when she experienced God's holiness calling her to a prophetic response to take the side of the poor and the abandoned to give them dignity and hope. Nelson Mandela, a prophet of our time, was willing to pay the price for his witness to racial justice.

Our founder Fr. Triest too was a prophet of his time who preached the message by his own example. He was impelled by the love of Christ and wanted to share this with the most unfortunate. So he dared to be different for the sake of the Gospel. He founded our congregation at a time when religious life was suppressed in Belgium. Lucienne Cnockaert in her book on "Fr. Triest, the Vincent de Paul of Belgium" writes, *'the institution and organization of Triest's first foundation, the Sisters of Charity of Jesus and Mary, is an interesting perhaps exceptional case in the evolution in the life of feminine religious congregations'*. I presume I don't overdo when I say that He was a prophet of his time by daring to give a prophetic response to the concrete situation.

So this takes us to our own role as SCJM women to dare to be prophetic in living our charism and spirituality in the context in which we live. We need to know the changing realities of today in order to respond prophetically both to the deepest yearnings of human beings and to the demands of the situations of the marginalized and the poor which is the mission entrusted to us. Our prophetic role also is to humanize the contemporary society in the face of the slaveries of our world. The idols of our present culture are short term rewards, immediate pleasures, excessive and irresponsible consumerism, individualism, and the ego

that searches for ultimate self-satisfaction and self realization as the primary motivating factor. As SCJMs do we become part of it and are affected and influenced by it in our personal lives or can we become prophetic by purifying the culture with values of the Gospel? In our contemporary society where values of marketing and business endorse efficiency, and follow the norms of higher production, can we SCJMs uphold the wisdom of the beatitudes and bring in the grace that generates brotherhood, joy, equality and justice to our neighbors and to the entire cosmos? At the heart of our prophetic vocation is the call for right relationship throughout the universe and to establish justice. Can we offer prophetic alternatives to our individualistic, consumeristic, globalized growth economies destroying the earth? During the international climate summits both in Copenhagen and more recently in Cancún, our world leaders could not make a decision to minimize the destruction of the earth because of our greed for money and progress. In the face of such realities what would be our prophetic contribution both individually and collectively as a congregation?

Some can be tempted to label “prophetic” for any kind of protest that is extreme, conspicuous or stubborn or sometimes one can call oneself a ‘prophet’ when one’s ideas or behaviors are questioned by authority. Discerning between prophetic stance and mob fanaticism, between courage and arrogance can be very difficult. So prophetic response is not equated with arrogance.

One needs to have a prophetic vision at all levels. Our vision will remain only a vision or an ideal unless a witness is made in concrete life situations. The question that we ask ourselves is how do our choices, our decisions, our proposals affect the poor. (Poverty is a global reality but the density of it differs). Every congregation begins to lose its vitality and initial enthusiasm and the spirit of the founder in the course of time. Slowly institutionalization becomes more important than the mission and vision of the founder. When it happens we have to find an alternate way; a new model must emerge if the prophetic vision is to be

sustained. Can we create prophetic communities who live the message of the Gospel through personal conversion and transformation to bring God's kingdom in our midst?

In today's terminology we speak of mystico prophetic spirituality (International Union of Superiors General 2010). We cannot be prophetic without being mystic or contemplative. Authentic prophecy flows from mystical experience and mystical experience is empty without proclamation of prophecy. The present understanding of mysticism is not having visions or searching for some spectacular moments of grace or some exceptional experience. It happens in the perception of events of daily life, in its interior disposition to resist evil and in its unconditional love, its passion for works well done, its protest against injustice, its commitment to the poor and its effort for an effective brotherhood in living together. Instead of looking for spectacular experience we should be accustomed to contemplate the daily reality with the eyes of faith. Experience of God is not experience outside daily life. It is an experience of God in the human and the real. God manifests himself daily also in human weaknesses and is present in the human pain. He shows himself in the apparent helplessness and leads us to an experience of the powerlessness of love and empowers us to act with daring faith.

Prophetic tasks require friendship with God, an authentic intimacy with Him. Prophetic stance originates and is nurtured by a contemplative attitude. This is developed in quiet moments when one learns to share heart to heart with God and begins to see and hear from God's point of view. Then we are able to see the world and its people from God's perspective. True prophecy is nourished by the Word of God and the contemplation of His presence and action, in history. For this we need to enter into a period of deep reflection and silence inspired by the Word of God and accompanied by prayer. In contemplation there is an encounter with God and with the realities of the society. This enables a prophetic daring as witnessed in the experience of the monks of

Tibhirine. God whom they experienced in their daily lives, in their prayer and contemplation and the daily encounter with the people gave them the prophetic daringness to communicate God's love to the people of Algeria, even sacrificing their own lives.

Today people look to the East for a spirituality based on experience of God rather than knowing God from dogma and theology. Rabindranath Tagore, an Indian mystic expresses in his poem that God comes into our life silently, intently and endlessly every day, every moment, in silence and amidst noise, in every event and in every happening in the entire universe (*Gitanjali: poem 45*). Awareness that all reality is inter-related and grounded in God not only constitutes the heart of contemplative experience, it challenges us to have the contemplative attitude towards life.

During his address to the UISG (International Union of Superiors General) conference, Fr. Ciro García, OCD shared with us that mysticism is the experience lived not only in the silence of prayer but also in the daily existence. Experience of God cannot be realized in isolation or indifference and lack of attention to human suffering. This is our spirituality of contemplation in action.

A prophetic response also includes a desire for a radical change or a conversion. In our present society where we experience different crisis situations, it is an indication that what we live is not adequate. This calls for a change of heart which brings in a new way of being. This is not possible without a profound experience in our lives: the experience of God.

Our charism is dynamic and our spirituality is energizing. Inherent in its nature, it seeks continuously the experience of God and reaching out to the poor and abandoned of the contemporary society. It was born in a particular situation, at a particular time but is relevant to be lived for all time to come. It finds new expression to respond to new needs.

The emerging spirituality of today is the spirituality of wholeness and global inter-connectedness. The stress today is on participation, harmony, healthy interpersonal relationships, reverence for the earth, integration of spirituality and technology to be relevant witnesses of the Gospel. We are called to live our prophetic role for today. Yesterday is gone and tomorrow is not yet born. Can we continue to listen to Mary when she says that they have no wine? She is telling her son that today people have no bread, no housing, no money, no education, no opportunities and no dignity. Faced with this reality, can we offer ourselves as prophets for the kingdom that the water in our jars will be changed into wine, that they may have life and life in abundance?

I wish you a Merry Christmas and may the New Year awaken you to deeper contemplation, and prophetic daring enabling each of us to do whatever He tells us. This will surely bring newness and hope.

God bless you.

Affectionately,

Sr. Valsala George Chennakadan  
Superior General