

# STATIO CONFERENCE

## The Prophetic Dimension of Religious Life According to the Vision of Pope Francis

By

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### INTRODUCTION

One of the most important events of the year 2013 was the election of Jorge Mario Bergoglio as Pope Francis. Since then he has not ceased to amaze not only Catholics but the whole world. I, for one, who in the past years was wont to say to my friends that I am very happy as a Sister but am a bit uneasy being a Catholic, can now say I am very proud to be a Catholic because of what Pope Francis has effected in the Church in such a short time. It is not as if he has overturned the doctrines of the Church. In fact doctrinally he is very orthodox. However he is very radical in his practice of the Gospel. And this has brought back so many disillusioned Catholics and also amazes and inspires atheists, unbelievers and skeptics who now think that there must be something in the Catholic Church if there is such a pope as Francis. Just look at the blogs in the internet to see what I mean.

### **THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO POPE FRANCIS**

Before I share my reflection on what I think Pope Francis' understanding of the Gospel is, I would like to point out some of his actions that speak louder than words. First of all on his election, as he stood still quite dazed on the balcony together with cardinals on his first appearance as Pope, he humbly bowed his head to be blessed by the people!. We know that he still lives in Sta. Martha and not in the Papal palatial residence. We know that he does not wear Ferragamo shoes and that his car is a tiny Ford. Then we all know that on the first Holy Thursday as Pope, he chose to wash the feet of youth offenders, two of whom were women and one was a Muslim. I saw a picture where a couple put the hand of the Pope on the womb of the pregnant wife to feel the new life growing there. And he did so without embarrassment or squeamishness but with genuine interest. And who could forget the picture of that little boy hugging the legs of the Pope while he was addressing the crowd on a family day celebration. He even let the boy sit on the Papal Chair and kept his hand on his head while he continued talking. Unbelievable! I also cannot forget how he tenderly hugged the man whose face and body was disfigured by horrible disease that covered him with ugly, mottled skin. There was no disgust or revulsion on the Pope's face—only tenderness and compassion.

When one looks as these, one cannot say he is doing extraordinary things. Someone said he is only introducing “the scandal of normalcy” in the Vatican

These for me is the Gospel according to Pope Francis which he learned from no other than his teacher, Jesus Christ.

## POPE FRANCIS' VISION OF THE CHURCH.

In my opinion the vision of Pope Francis is expressed best not only in his encyclicals but in the talks that he gives to live audiences. And one of the statements that expressed this most was when he said that the task of the Church is not so much in making doctrinal and moral pronouncements but in HEALING THE WOUNDS OF PEOPLE. "I see clearly, that the thing the church needs most today is **the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful** "

The following words of Pope Francis further defines his vision:

- *The church's pastoral ministry cannot be obsessed with the transmission of a disjointed multitude of doctrines to be imposed insistently. Proclamation in a missionary style focuses on the essentials, on the necessary things: this is also what fascinates and attracts more, what makes the heart burn, as it did for the disciples at Emmaus. We have to find a new balance; otherwise even the moral edifice of the church is likely to fall like a house of cards, losing the freshness and fragrance of the Gospel.*
- *The church sometimes has locked itself up in small things, in small-minded rules. The most important thing is the first*
- *proclamation: Jesus Christ has saved you. And the ministers of the church must be ministers of mercy above all*
- *This church with which we should be thinking is the home of all, not a small chapel that can hold only a small group of selected people.*
- *We must not reduce the bosom of the universal church to a nest protecting our mediocrity.*
- *In every way that matters to God, human beings are completely equal and completely loved. They can't be reduced to ethical object more than any cause; they are the cause."*
- *I believe I have already said that our goal is not to proselytize but to listen to needs, desires and disappointments, despair, hope. We must restore hope to young people, help the old, be open to the future, spread love. Be poor among the poor. We need to include the excluded and preach peace."*

**IN SUMMARY, POPE FRANCIS EXPRESSES HIS' VISION FOR THE CHURCH THUS:  
"I DREAM OF A CHURCH THAT IS MOTHER AND SHEPHERDESS"**

## POPE FRANCIS AS PROPHET

A prophet is usually defined as one" who preaches the good news and denounces the bad

news.” In the course of time the word prophet has become synonymous with someone fortelling future events usually catastrophic event and so the phrase: a prophet of doom. Pope Francis is far from being a prophet of doom. He is actually A PROPHET OF JOY!

Announcing the good news, of the Gospel means bringing to people the good news of God’s Reign which redounds to the total and concrete salvation, not only of the soul but the whole person, not only from sin, hell and death but from all that oppress a human being and prevent one’s full growth as a person. It is not only hereafter but begins with the here and now. In this aspect, the religious could ask themselves what “good news” they preached, whether it is relevant to peoples’ total well being or just lulls them either towards complacency or confirms them in their apathy.

Another factor in this first aspect of prophetic response is that we have already to mirror in ourselves whatever it is we preach to others. Here is where the credibility of the bearer of the good news is tested.

The second element of prophecy is denouncing the bad news. This means to make a clear stand after thorough analysis of the situation. It is to make moral judgements.. It means fearless resistance to evil, to oppressive or exploitative acts or policies.

Pope Francis in a very short while has shown that he truly preaches the good news, the Gospel, not only by his words but by his acts as we have seen above. He does not only bring the good news to people in general but to concrete groups of people. As he shows concern for this concrete groups of suffering people, he also denounces those who are the cause of this suffering. For example:

#### ON THE POOR

*To live charitably means not looking out for our own interests, but carrying the burdens of the weakest and poorest among us....True charity requires courage: let us overcome the fear of getting our hands dirty so as to help those in need.....Let us ask the Lord to give us the gentleness to look upon the poor with understanding and love, devoid of human calculation and fear.*

*My thoughts turn to all who are unemployed, often as a result of a self-centered mindset bent on profit at any cost.*

*The measure of the greatness of a society is found in the way it treats those most in need, those who have nothing apart from their poverty.*

#### ON MIGRANTS/ REFUGEES:

° *A change of attitude towards migrants and refugees is needed on the part of everyone, moving away from attitudes of defensiveness and fear, indifference and marginalization – all typical of a throwaway culture – towards attitudes based on a culture of encounter, the only culture capable of building a better, more just and fraternal world.*

*The creation of opportunities for employment in the local economies will also avoid the separation of families and ensure that individuals and groups enjoy conditions of stability and serenity.*

## ON WOMEN

° *"In the Gospels, however, women have a primary, fundamental role... The evangelists simply narrate what happened: the women were the first witnesses. This tells us that God does not choose according to human criteria,*

## ON THE ECONOMIC SYSTEM

° *"As long as the problems of the poor are not radically resolved by rejecting the absolute autonomy of markets and financial speculation and by attacking the structural causes of inequality, no solution will be found for the world's problems or, for that matter, to any problems."*

*Just as the commandment 'Thou shalt not kill' sets a clear limit in order to safeguard the value of human life, today we also have to say 'thou shalt not' to an economy of exclusion and inequality. Such an economy kills."*

Pope Francis is not a goody-goody Pope. As someone said: "Don't think Pope Francis is naïve. After all he is a Jesuit!" He has made tough decisions when called for just like a prophet. For example:

1. HE APPOINTED ADVISORY COUNCIL OF 8 CARDINALS FROM DIFFERENT CONTINENTS
2. HE ORDERED THE INVESTIGATION OF VATICAN BANK  
He has hired secular consultants and set up a special commission to oversee the Vatican Bank.
3. And while he has spoken infrequently on clerical sexual abuse, HE HAS APPOINTED A SPECIAL COMMISSION TO INVESTIGATE CASES.
4. HE SUSPENDED EXTRAVAGANT GERMAN BISHOP
5. HE IS BREAKING UP POWER GROUPS  
He is dismantling the power circle of Cardinal Bertone, who led a ring of conservatives centered on the city of Genoa. In September, Francis demoted Cardinal Piacenza, a Bertone ally, from his post running the powerful Congregation for the Clergy.

I think Pope Francis' vision of the Church and his prophetic words and action cannot but have a great impact on the life of the Religious of today.

## **THE PROPHETIC DIMENSION OF THE RELIGIOUS LIFE.**

Religious life is an essentially prophetic movement in the Church. Throughout Church history whenever there was something wrong with the Church, a new

religious group would rise up. An example is the foundation of our Benedictine order. The luxury and the degradation of life in the Roman church urged our founder, St. Benedict to drop out from school and society and go to the hills of Subiaco where he founded the Benedictine order that would Christianize the whole of Europe. But congregations of religious women are doubly prophetic because women religious live a life that is a deviation from the usual life of women who are socialized primarily to be wives and mothers. They thus gained the opportunity to be educated. It is no wonder that even in a patriarchal church, religious women like St. Teresa of Avila, St. Catherine of Siena, St. Hildegard of Bingen, Abbess Hilda of Whitby contributed not only to the Church but greatly influenced the society of their times.

This is the heritage of religious women—to exercise their prophetic role in the context of the present time. Pope Francis reminded them of this. During the private audience of the 800 Superiors General after their Triennial Assembly in Rome called by the UISG in May, 2013, Pope Francis admonished them:

- °° *Chastity for the Kingdom of Heaven shows how affection has its place in mature freedom and becomes a sign of the future world, to make God's primacy shine forever. But, please, [make it] a 'fertile' chastity, which generates spiritual children in the Church. The consecrated are mothers: they must be mothers and not 'old maids'!*
- ° *"Forgive me if I talk like this, but this maternity of consecrated life, this fruitfulness, is important!*
- ° *"May this joy of spiritual fruitfulness animate your existence.*

This call to fruitfulness by the Pope is a challenge to religious women to exercise their prophetic role in today's world. Again taking the cue from the Pope's concern for specific problems of people, I will discuss here the different areas in today's world that call for a prophetic response. I would like to focus on four issues: economic injustice, ecological crisis, the woman question, and the quest for a just peace.

## **1. Economic Injustice**

The Pope himself has pointed out the evil of the prevailing economic injustice in the world. Religious women must see the link between the struggles of peoples of the Third World with the lifestyle of the affluent. The negative effects of globalization are felt by all not only among the poor in underdeveloped country but in developed countries as well especially—among the people in the inner city, among migrants, among the blacks, among the unemployed, the aged.. There is need of knowing the workings of Transnational Corporations, the policies of the IMF, WB, the GATT, the WTO, and other international bodies. Religious communities have investments. They must know where their money is being used. Religious must be concerned about the corollary effects of economic injustice like the plight of migrant workers, refugees, homeless people , trafficked women and children, etc.

## **2. The Ecological Crisis**

One crucial problem of the world today is the ecological crisis. Overproduction has not only depleted our unrenewable natural resources but it has caused pollution that has taken away people's livelihood and have caused a lot of infections and diseases.

Logging and mining have caused denudation of forests which not only depleted wood supply, but also have caused erosion which have resulted in flash floods that kill thousands of people in a matter of minutes. The destruction of coral reefs and mangroves and destructive fishing methods like dynamite and cyanide fishing as well as the use of giant fishing trawlers have seriously affected the life-resources that seas once offered to people.

Use of ecologically unfriendly energy fuel like coal and nuclear energy has not only caused pollution but has caused destruction of life and property like in the Chernobyl, Three Mile Islands and the Fukushima incidents.

The global warming that has been the disastrous effects ecology-unfriendly projects and activities has caused natural disasters of hitherto unknown proportions: tsunamis, tornadoes, floods, supertyphoons, sinkholes in ever increasing frequency.

If human beings can no longer turn the tide of ecological deterioration we will become extinct as a species.

Do religious women, seriously take the challenge of the ecological crisis? What do they do to conscientize the students and the people they work with regarding these matters? How do they reconcile their vow of poverty with consumeristic tendencies that have not spared convents? What concrete projects have they done to return to the earth what have taken from it? What kind of spirituality have they developed to re-establish the human being's relationship with nature?

## **3 Women's Issues**

Women religious should be especially touched by the woman question I would like to classify the current issues of women into 3: 1) inequality and discrimination, 2) violence against women, 3) trafficking of women into prostitution, mail order bride trade, and overseas women contract work.

Although the equality of men and women before the law is provided in some constitutions there is no country to my knowledge where there is actual equality of women and men in practice. This may vary in degree from country to country but it is safe to say that in the home, society and the church, women are still second class citizens.

The incontestable proof that there is as yet no real equality among men and women anywhere is the prevalence of violence against women. Studies have shown that about 90 percent of violence against women and children happen in their homes. Incest, which has been a taboo topic for ages is now coming out and it points to fathers, brothers, brothers-in-law, cousins, uncles, and even grandfathers as perpetrators. Marital rape was not recognized as such until recently when laws were promulgated penalizing it. Many women are subjected

to verbal and psychological and physical abuse by their husbands ranging from insulting words to actual assault and murder. The daily newspapers report cases of rape-murder, and many and varied forms of violence against women and children.

In Third World countries, to escape the perennial economic crises, women and children are prostituted. There is no tourism program in Third World countries that does not include prostitution even if those countries consider prostitution illegal. Foreign military bases stationed in a country will occasion the development of prostitution cities around them. There is the phenomenon of so-called mail-order brides, surrogate mothers, victims of the human transplant business. The result is the spread of venereal diseases, AIDS, corruption of children, hole in the wall abortions causing death, unwed pregnancies, fatherless children, etc. etc. and the overall degradation of women.

Have religious women ever examined how they might have a role in the perpetuation of the woman question by our system of education and especially by religious education that can justify and perpetuate the discrimination and subordination of women and the entrenching of her stereotyped roles?

I am convinced that women religious should be at the forefront of the women's movement because they are the group of women who have shown that they can live significant lives without a husband. It is not necessary for them to experience rape or wife-beating to be able to empathize with victims of sexual violence.

How much of convent resources are used to conscientize women about their situation and to give service to victims of violence?

#### **4. Quest for a Just Peace**

The September 11 event and the subsequent US War on terrorism made me feel that there should be a renewed effort for a just peace in our times. This culture of violence and death manifests itself in various forms of violence: economic, racial, political, military, ecological and domestic. That is why the United Nations has declared a decade for the development of a culture of peace and the World Council of churches has likewise launched a decade for overcoming violence.

By peace, we don't mean just an absence of war or conflict; we don't mean an unprincipled peace or peace at all cost. It is the peace of Christ that the world cannot give and is based on truth, justice, and interconnected well-being both on the personal and societal level. On the personal level, this calls for a personal conversion, reconciliation with one's fellow human beings, with the planet, and with God. It is an effort to be men and women of peace, to create an oasis of peace wherever one is and to contribute to the development of a culture of peace in the greater society. This latter includes working for economic, justice, empowerment of women, sustainable development, preservation of the environment, political participation of peoples in governance, constructive conflict resolution and interfaith and intercultural dialogues.

#### **CONCLUSION**

Living in our times is a great challenge for the women religious. It is a special challenge for them to concretize the prophetic dimension of their life. Evangelization today necessarily includes tackling the social issues that are causing great misery and suffering for peoples. Religious women have actually involved themselves in many of these issues. However, whether the factors are external or internal, the lack of tangible, long-lasting success in many struggles for transformation is enough to discourage the fainthearted. And yet in spite of all these constraints, the frustration, the disappointments, the religious must remain steadfast AND NEVER LOSE HOPE. This hope is not floating in the clouds but is based on small victories—a violent retaliation prevented, overwhelming manifestation of global solidarity with victims of catastrophe like the Yolanda typhoon victims, witnessing the miracle of forgiveness from someone whose whole family was massacred. Hope is anchored in one's memory of God's fidelity, of unexpected, unplanned intervention of the Holy Spirit in seemingly hopeless situations. Being elected at a time when the Church has lost so much credibility causing hopelessness and helplessness among its members POPE FRANCIS IN HIS ACTIONS AND WORDS PROVIDES US WITH SUCH HOPE!

### **REFLECTION QUESTIONS:**

1. In your opinion do you think the Church in the Philippines fulfills Pope Francis vision of the Church? In what ways?
2. In what way does our Priory fulfill its prophetic mission in our country?
3. Personally, how have you contributed to the fulfillment of this prophetic dimension of our priory's mission?