

Signs of the Times: The Prophetic Role of the Church in America

by Vincent Cushing, OFM | December 2, 2015 |



The essay below is the second in a series of reflections by friars and partners-in-ministry about issues facing our culture. The series is part of Holy Name Province's response to the call to revitalize Franciscan life and ministry in the United States — a key objective of the leaders of the American OFM provinces, who are evaluating ways to reconfigure Franciscan life in the U.S.

These essays are meant to provide social analysis as part of the many considerations aimed at creating a preferred future for the Franciscans of the United States. It is hoped that this initiative will generate dialogue among friars; all friars are encouraged to provide comments about the content of this and all essays in this series. These essays do not represent the official policy of Holy Name Province.

We can address prophecy by asking four questions. First, what is prophecy or a prophetic role? Second, what is history? Third, where is the Church existentially? Fourth, what is the role of discernment of spirits in regard to true and false prophecy?

Here is a descriptive definition of prophecy:

Prophecy is the activity by which a person or group reflects upon and analyzes contemporary history or events within the horizon of the Christian tradition and both enunciates a current analysis and suggests a possible direction for the foreseeable future. Prophecy entails both Christian prophetic teaching and/or the bearing of living Christian witness to a particular issue or event that it sees as good or evil.

History is where “the action is” i.e., that which a person or group addresses prophetically either by bearing Christian witness or by educating or both.

Church (most often) expresses prophecy on a *local* or *regional* level. Sometimes an issue may be national or international, e.g., immigration policy, ecology or abortion. At other times, the Church addresses a nation or the international community about such issues as hunger or world peace.

Discernment of spirits takes into account that there are false prophets in the Church and world. Discernment of spirits entails a reflective analysis of an issue or event, a prayerful study of its contextual setting, a judgment of the issue within the horizon of Christian tradition, and specific speech or action that proposes something for present or future action. Discernment should never be carried out in isolation. It looks to discussion, being challenged, and often needs an outside voice — a director — to express cordial judgment on what is being proposed.

All of the above provides guidelines for engaging in prophecy. Prophecy itself may initially arise from the Holy Spirit urging a person or group to take effective action in light of what's being

addressed. Prophecy is concrete, specific, courageous and delivered with limpid clarity so that its message or action registers with a larger group or community.

The Catholic Church in America is blessed with prophetic voices addressing varied key issues. Basically, the acceptance of prophecy depends on acceptance by the people, and, when feasible, the blessing of the bishop. Therein a problem sometimes arises, where the faithful people accept and endorse prophecy, but the local bishop is reluctant to affirm that this is of God. A dramatic example of prophecy is the recent review of the role and ministry of Sisters in America under the aegis of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious. The Sisters refused to allow this issue to descend into argument, but thoughtfully sought civil discussion, clarification, prayerful reflection, and amicable resolution. The methodology of the sisters exemplifies a workable model and process for prophetic dialog in the Catholic Church. Prophecy needs to have a larger voice in the Catholic Church in America.

A remarkable prophetic voice was that of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The following is an apt description of that prophet:

He had theologically defined the Christian life as active, not reactive. It had nothing to do with avoiding sin or with merely talking or teaching or believing theological notions or principles or rules or tenets. It had everything to do with living one's whole life in obedience to God's call through action. It did not merely require a mind, but a body too. It was God's call to be fully human, to live as human beings obedient to the one who made us, which was the fulfillment of our destiny. It was not a cramped, compromised, circumspect life, but a life lived in a kind of wild, joyful, full-throated freedom – that was what it was to obey God.

— *Fr. Vincent, a resident of Holy Name College, Silver Spring, Md., served as president of Washington Theological Union from 1975 to 1999.*