

ECCLESIAL DIALOGUE AND PROPHETIC MISSION

Topic: Ecclesial Dialogue and Prophetic Mission
Convener: Michele Saracino, Manhattan College
Presenter: Stephen Bevans, Catholic Theological Union
Presenter: Bradford Hinze, Fordham University

In this invited session, there were two thought-provoking presentations and a lively and engaging discussion. In “The Church’s Mission as Prophetic Dialogue,” Stephen Bevans reflected on how the church’s basic stance in its mission needs to be one of prophetic dialogue, a term that he and Roger Schroeder have developed through their previous collaboration. Bradford Hinze’s presentation, “Where is the Prophetic in Contemporary Catholic Ecclesiology?” endorsed Bevans’ presentation, claiming further that many of the “inroads” of the Second Vatican Council relative to understanding the prophetic character of the church—“of all the baptized”—“have been eclipsed, but neither repudiated nor forgotten,” and need to be “further developed pastorally and theologically.”

To begin, Bevans explained that mission “is done as we participate in the very mission of God,” and, this participation unfolds in two ways, through dialogue and prophecy, both of which are equally important. He then argued that mission as dialogue “is rooted in the reality that God, in God’s deepest reality, is dialogue.” Here, he refers to the trinity as a dynamic relationship, which underscores the responsibility in which “Christians who engage in mission need to make real efforts to ‘bond’ with the people among whom they minister.” Bevans illustrated his ideas by pointing to various inspirational persons in the Christian tradition who foster this type of mission as dialogue, e.g., St. Francis of Assisi and his dialogue with Caliph Al-malik a-Kamil. Bevans also highlights an image of mission as dialogue in terms of someone entering another’s garden, in which one is challenged to “gaze and admire” what is there, and perhaps, “after getting the trust of the gardener the visitor [missionary] might be able to give advice.”

Just as mission is dialogical because God is dialogical, Bevans argued that mission is prophetic in that God is prophetic because the “Holy Mystery eternally ‘speaks forth’ the Word.” Implicit in Bevans’ argument is that while in some sectors the church already engages the world with a basic attitude of dialogue, which includes (hopefully) an appreciation of cultures, movements, and other religious ways, this attitude always can be enhanced and brought into different contexts. In addition to mission as dialogue, the commitment to prophecy in mission needs to be developed and deepened—to the point at which one becomes counter-cultural, in which one not only listens, which is undoubtedly important, but also speaks forth—witnessing, proclaiming, and even speaking against the injustices of the world. When questioned about the potential triumphalist dangers of a counter-cultural posture, Bevans responded that this is certainly an issue. The biggest challenge for those engaging in

mission, according to Bevans, is to be “vulnerable.” Again, here, Bevans outlined inspirational persons for mission as prophecy, including Janani Luwum and Dorothy Day, as well as images of mission as prophecy, including teachers and storytellers.

Hinze continued the discussion by reflecting on the importance of embracing the “prophetic character of the people of God,” including “the laments of suffering people of God and the groans of a chaotic and damaged world.” He contrasted two ways of understanding prophecy or what he calls “frameworks” in Catholic theology, which work best when understood in tandem. The first framework, “Word Received, Witness Given,” explains prophecy “in terms of individuals who receive a word from God about the present or the future and who deliver this message.” The second grounds prophecy in “the struggles of individuals and communities with the very substance of the faith,” and here he pointed to the laments related to the faithful around *Humane Vitae* or “the ‘teaching authority’ of the pope and the bishops on health care.”

When heeding the prophecy in the laments of the people of God, important related issues of obedience, discernment, and mission come to the fore. The prophet is faced with the question of who they should obey, and if they choose to obey “the voice of the Spirit discerned in the laments and the aspirations of the people of God and the world, this obedience is certainly not obedience to the mob, religious or secular.” Here, Hinze attempts to avoid any blind allegiance to either magisterial authority or what he calls “majority rule” and “group think.” Imagination assists in the discernment process, in hearing the laments of the people of God and for “envision[ing] an alternative self, community, and society.” Rethinking the doctrine of the sense of the faith and the sense of the faithful, Hinze claimed that if “prophetic obedience is the mark of an individual’s maturing sense of faith, the community’s prophetic obedience is indicated by collective process of discernment of faith and its practical implications” that influences “modes of discernment and decision making at every level of the church.” This prophetic ecclesiology has the potential to change the way crises are handled and decisions are made from the ground up. Like at the conclusion of Bevans’ presentation, after Hinze’s, there was a brief period for questions, a few of which connected to the relationship between the role of the magisterium and issues of prophetic mission. Following this question time, Bevans and Hinze moved from the podium to the audience (filled with over 90 members at one point) and created a more intimate setting for a stimulating and productive conversation.

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