



Making Prophetic Leadership Relevant for Our Times in the Light of Lumen Gentium

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The Context

What was our reaction when that brutal gang-rape of a 23-year-old woman in Delhi on 16 December 2012 led to a sudden outpouring of anger and frustration about the situation that allowed such attacks to take place? How did we respond to the latest incident of landslide at Malin village in Ambegaon Taluka of Pune district on July 30, 2014 – another heart-rending calamity, with its massive destruction of precious human lives and property? Did our hearts ache when over 1.5 million Iraqis were forced out from their homes since the insurgents captured Iraq's second largest city, Mosul, in June 2014 and quickly swept over other parts of the country? Did we feel helpless when millions of innocent children, men and women were massacred at the disastrous human crisis in Mosul, Iraq? Have we not become indifferent when the nearly 500 Syrians, Palestinians, Egyptians and Sudanese, migrant workers and refugees, were put on a boat that left from the Egyptian port of Damietta and are feared dead at the hands of human traffickers who rammed and sank the boat off

the Malta coast in Sept 2014? Were they the saddest moments in our life, such that they knit us together with deep emotional and spiritual ties drawing our attention anew to dreaded inhuman and barbarous acts? What about the recent Church attacks in Delhi, the fears of the re-conversion (*ghar vapsi*) campaign of Sangh affiliates and, the silence shown by the Prime Minister, who has been accused by opposition parties and Christian groups of turning a blind eye to a string of recent attacks on five churches and a Christian school in Delhi,? Did we become speechless, spellbound on hearing that callous and heinous acts of desecrating the sentiments of the Christians?

The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, of the Second Vatican Council makes a significant statement concerning the prophetic leadership that “the entire people of God, who by their baptism, equally share in Christ’s prophetic office [and] are called to be living witnesses to Him” (# LG 12, 35). It is true that we live today in a world that has an abundance of resources, but it is not sufficient to satisfy the greed of every individual.¹ Therefore taking a clue from the teachings of *Lumen Gentium* which has given a dignified status to every one of the faithful, and inspired by the insights of George M. Soares-Prabhu SJ, which have enriched my vision with an awareness and understanding of the prophetic role one is called upon to play in today’s Indian context. I as a Christian disciple would like to understand prophetic leadership as a call offered to the entire people of God, who equally share in Christ’s prophetic office, to be living witnesses to Him.

1. Leadership: The Scripture as the Ultimate Leadership Book.

Leadership is a topic of great interest currently. However, the present is comprehended by looking backwards at great and small leaders, and by examining leaders of today who influence the lives of trillions. To understand the past, one studies the leaders who have shaped history. It is obviously true that the call to leadership is a continuous pattern in the Bible. Humanity is created in God’s

image and entrusted with a unique calling among all creatures.ⁱⁱ This calling reflects God's own relationship with creation, a leadership role i.e. generative and expansive, seeking the flourishing of a world affirmed as intrinsically good. Though the entire biblical story shows the downside of such freedom the first pedagogical question "where are you?" (Gen 3:9) brings back the scattered being before God and oneself and the wider creation. This is the primordial and mystical picture of the Christian understanding of leadership. And for Christians Jesus Christ is the primary lens for understanding both human and divine leadership.ⁱⁱⁱ

2. Theological Basis of Prophetic Leadership

The prophet was but one office of leadership in ancient Israel, but it was in its full expression in the Hebrew canon, the most unique to Israel and the most directly related to the covenant foundations of community as the people of God. New Testament explorations have documented a strong role for this prophetic tradition in the life, teachings and ministry of Jesus. The multidimensional charisma of the biblical prophets according to their office, nature, role and communication informs this biblical prophetic role. Hence, prophetic leadership is God calling and authorizing a person to speak on his behalf.

2.1 Etymology and Meaning of the Word 'Prophet'

Four terms were applied to individuals, both men and women, who demonstrated prophetic traits: "man of God" (*ish hā-elōhîm*), "seer" (*rō.eh*), "visionary" (*hōzeh*), and "prophet" (*nābî*). The word "diviner" or "soothsayer" (*qōsēm*) is used of those who practise formal divination, perhaps using lots of other methods of discerning the will of the deity, but that term was not applied to those prophets who receive legitimate sanction in the OT. The terms "seer" and "visionary" (*rō.eh* and *hōzeh*) are descriptive of the individual's experience, the first emphasizing

the extraordinary insight that came to the prophets and the second the method of reception by means of visions or dreams. The terms “seer” and “man of God” are both attested in the case of Samuel (1 Sam. 9:9), the former term being the older of the two. The implication of the phrase “man of God” is that the person was possessed by God for special service. With the dawn of literary prophecy, however, the Hebrew term *nābî*^{iv} became the common name for the prophet.^v

According to Luis M. Bermejo S.J., the biblical prophet is primarily a man of sterling fidelity to God. The very acceptance of the prophetic office is an act of supreme obedience, of submission to God. In his opinion, the biblical prophet feels constrained by God into acquiescence: Jeremiah feels cheated by God; Moses seems to have suffered a crisis of depression; and Ezekiel, who experienced the hand of God firmly pressing upon him, was filled with bitterness and anger (Ez. 3:14-15). For, intense suffering is connected with mission and often the prophetic office is crowned with martyrdom.^{vi}

2.2 Prophetic Leadership: Finding its Roots in Jesus the Prophet Par Excellence

Jesus came as the promised Prophet, Priest, and King, the one worthy and able to live and speak the truth in every situation, able to be the mediator between God and humans, and able to reign in righteousness and peace. For our consideration, we shall limit ourselves to the prophetic leadership of Jesus which is seen at a functional level, in his mission and to substantiate the relevance of prophetic leadership finding its roots in Jesus the prophet.

The socio-economic, political and cultural domains had their own impact on Jesus. But the response of Jesus was different in making his presence relevant to his time. The primary source of Jesus’ prophetic courage was his intimate relation with his *Abba*. *Abba* denotes God’s unconditional love.^{vii} As George Soares-Prabhu states: “If it is the God-experience of Jesus that empowers him to identify with the poor and confront the rich, it is an act of solidarity with the poor that is the occasion for his experience of

God.”^{viii} It is this God-experience that allowed Jesus to address God as *Abba*.

The Kingdom of God was central to the life and ministry of Jesus. ^{ix} “Jesus responds to the situation of poverty and exploitation he encountered in His time by proclaiming a new social order which is founded on a new experience of God as *Abba* and humankind as brothers and sisters.”^x He does not teach a new doctrine but he announces a new event and asks that it be welcomed, because it can change everything. Therefore, grounding himself on His *Abba* Consciousness He reveals to us, life as God wants to build it and share with us the unconditional love of God, our Father/Mother. In other words, it’s an inclusive community where no one is excluded and all live in solidarity.

Jesus’ table fellowships form the essence of his prophetic leadership. By sharing a meal with ‘sinners,’ God’s love and solidarity is vividly painted as far more superior to any other action. For it reaches down even to the lowest level of human society. Jesus’ table fellowship with prostitutes, tax collectors, and sinners had a tremendous meaning – he was elevating them to his status circle and expressing his solidarity with them. Jacob Neusner observes that the zeal for ritual purity extended so far that the Pharisees viewed the tables on which they ate their meals as representations of God’s altar in the Jerusalem Temple.^{xi}

In the patriarchal, androcentric society of the first century Palestine, where women were numbered with children and slaves as minors with diminished responsibility, and a restricted role in worship and in public life, Jesus admits them into his movement as helpers and disciples. Not only do women follow him to take care of his needs (Lk8:2) , but Mary who sits at his feet listening to what he teaches (and so assuming the role of a disciple) is commended for having chosen “what is best”. (Lk 10:42). The sensitive loyalty shown to Jesus on the eve of his Passion by a woman at Bethany contrasts sharply with the ideological fixation of the disciples and the disloyalty of Judas. This contrast is

carried a great step further in the stories of Passion and resurrection, where the women disciples of Jesus are found at the cross and at the tomb (Mk 115; 40-41, 47; 16:1-8).^{xii}

Indeed, Jesus proclaims this with a special urgency, because he is aware that in him the 'Kingdom', God's definitive offer of salvation, has come, precipitating a crisis in the lives of men and women and summoning them to a most radical decision.^{xiii} The God - experience of Jesus and his identification with the poor and the marginalized are thus joined together finding a powerful expression in a pair of symbols both of which are basic to Christian life. The symbols are the Incarnation, the Cross and the Resurrection. The Cross is therefore, the outcome of a life of solidarity with the poor and the outcast. And this is the Cross which shows forth not just the death of Jesus but announces his resurrection from the dead which grounds our hope for the future. Resurrection, in the words of George M Soares Prabhu, though it is not accessible to our naked eyes, is still accessible to us in our present experience of the living Jesus, which assures us that he is alive. This faith experience which grounds our hope is only available to us in a life of love.^{xiv} Because it anticipates the end of history, the resurrection of Jesus, which is God's overwhelming answer to our cry for life which can be understood and grasped only through our sharing in the prophetic mission of Jesus.

3. Making Prophetic Leadership Relevant for our Times

Prophetic leadership of Jesus involves a radical response for the construction of a new society leavened by the values of freedom, fellowship, truth, love and justice.^{xv} From the Catholic perspective (among other Christian perspectives), the source of human dignity is rooted in the concept of *imago Dei* (Gen 1:26-27), in Christ's redemption and in our ultimate destiny of union with God. The Church, the entire people of God has to think anew with resourceful innovativeness if we want to be relevant. The urgency of innovativeness is glaring at our face as more and more disillusioned youth take recourse to religious fundamentalism. Is the Church ready to face these upcoming challenges? What is

required of us the people of God to respond to the inherent challenges encountered in our context?

3.1 Contemplating the God of Compassion

One of the main challenges that the Church is facing today is to instill God consciousness. God is more to be experienced than to be intellectually known. The traditional idea of a judging and punishing God needs to recede to the background and a ‘youthful’ idea of a loving, forgiving and affectionate God needs to be presented to the young population. For this, one has to encounter God in Jesus in the Gospels, who transcends human made petty divisions of caste, creed, clan and colour.

3.2 Creating a New Understanding of Mission

One of the important trends in the contemporary paradigm of mission is that though the geographical principle of mission *ad-gentes* is relevant there is equal emphasis on mission *inter-gentes*. That is to say that “every area of life that is still not sufficiently transformed by the values of the Kingdom, our politics, social relationships, trade relations, economic structures, everything has become concerns of the mission of the church.”^{xvi} Today, the message of the Gospel is eclipsed in the dark clouds of globalization and post-modern thinking. Relativistic thinking is the characteristic of modern - day youth. While the religious practices are reduced to ritualistic performances, faith has remained skin deep. As a result there is ambiguity, confusion and lack of commitment to an ideal.^{xvii} The consequences are painfully felt at the family level, at the parish level and in the larger society. The day-to-day life of the struggling people and the Newspapers should be the syllabus and the text - book for our daily update. As Rudolf C. Heredia affirms “For divorced from the social context the expression of faith-tradition cannot be made relevant.”^{xviii}

3.3 Becoming Embodiments of the Kingdom Vision

We are in need of a cultural revolution which will produce a new hierarchy of values, a new world of vision, a global strategy. The new vision of the Kingdom which Jesus was oriented to is a kingdom where the Gospel values prevail. New values that are liberating will replace anti-human values; thus the value of sharing will replace exploitation, cooperation will take the place of competition; freedom, brotherhood and sisterhood of people will replace hate and suppression; justice will replace powerlessness; basic needs of the people will have priority over the wants of the affluent in the use of resources and domination, inequality and discrimination in policy making decisions will give place to equality, respect and participation; and unrealistic and inhuman technology give way to need based and people oriented technology and development.^{xix} The only way to restore the dignity of humanity is that Church and Church leaders must be a counter-cultural community witnessing to the communitarian values of the Kingdom^{xxx}

Conclusion

Theology, indeed, is a faith response in a context. As we know, the subject of theology is the common people. As has been pointed out, in the biblical times the king, the priest and the prophet were the three pillars of the society of Israel, with this difference that, whereas kings were appointed and priests were ordained, prophets were created exclusively by divine initiative. The prophet is called by God, called for a specific task. This task is innovative, creative and contextual. When we consider the prophets of the Old and New Testaments, we see none rivals the majesty and power of the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus is the final prophet. He opened the Scriptures as no man ever could and spoke as no man ever spoke (see John 7:46). Jesus is the culmination of the prophetic stream that runs through the history of Israel. The approach of Jesus the prophet was Kingdom-oriented, coupled with *Abba*- experience. The way of the kingdom

is a viable solution to the present crisis of Indian society. His vision ultimately created a community.

Can the vision of Jesus be relevant to the present? Making Jesus' prophetic leadership relevant for our times means sharing in his vision and in his mission. It is to respond to the situation of today only by entering into Jesus' heart, his world-view and his God-experience. The need of the hour is that we confront the challenges of today and enhance and ennoble the human dignity of the person who is created in God's image. The call of today is to take a plunge into the lives and struggles of people. Therefore, Christian life in India needs to be redefined ☩

ⁱ S.L. Gandhi, *Anuvibha Reporter, Jaipur*, Vol. 5 (September-December 2000): 4.

ⁱⁱ To care creatively and collaboratively for the earth and its inhabitants (Gen 1: 27-28).

ⁱⁱⁱ Dwight. J. Zscheile, *Christian Biblical Understanding of Leadership*, Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota book.(ed.) Sharon Henderson Callahan, *Religious Leadership: A Reference handbook*, (U.S.A : SAGE Publications, 31, May 2013), 153.

^{iv} T. J. Meek, *Hebrew Origins*, (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1936), 147. Cf. *The Stone Age to Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Garden City, N.Y: Doubleday, 1957), 303.

^v T. J. Meek, *Hebrew Origins*, 16.

^{vi} Luis M Bermejo, SJ. *The Three Jewelled Crown: Trinitarian Spirituality*, 2-3.

^{vii} His God experience allowed him to address God as Abba (loving parent), a name which, like all the names of God, is an invocation rather than a description. Abba is the usual invocation Jesus used to address God in prayer. God is never directly addressed as 'Father' in the Hebrew Bible; God is addressed as 'Father' with a qualification in rabbinic texts of the time of Jesus. The language of Jesus, then, is unique and points to a unique experience of God. Cf. George M. Soares-Prabhu, *Biblical Spirituality of Liberative Action* (Pune: J.D.V. Theology Series, 2003), 3.

^{viii} George Soares- Prabhu, "The Spirituality of Jesus as a Spirituality of Solidarity and struggle," in *Liberative Struggles in a Violent Society*, (ed.) J. Vattamattam (Hyderabad: Forum publications, 1991): 152-153.

^{ix} George M. Soares Prabhu, "The Kingdom of God: Vision of a New Society", in D.S. Amalorpavadass (ed.) *the Indian Church in the Struggle for a New Society* (Bangalore, 1981), 584.

^x George M Soares Prabhu, "Jesus and the Poor," in *collected writings of George M. Soares Prabhu*, Vol 4, (ed.) Francis X. D'Sa (Pune: JDV Theological Series, 2001), 190.

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- ^{xi} Jacob Neusner, "Two Pictures of the Pharisees: Philosophical Circle or Eating Club?" *Anglican Theological Review* 64, (1982): 525-38.
- ^{xii} Soares- Prabhu, *Biblical Spirituality of Liberative Action*, 6-7.
- ^{xiii} Soares- Prabhu, "A *Biblical Theology for India*", 128.
- ^{xiv} "The Resurrection is not a doctrine that we try to prove or a problem that we argue about," Thomas Merton has said, "it is the life of christ himself in us by the Spirit". Cf. Soares- Prabhu, "A *biblical Theology for India*", 11. See also T. Merton, *He is Risen* (Niles, IL: Argus, 1975), 10
- ^{xv} Soares-Prabhu, "The Miracles" in *Jesus Today* (ed.) Kappen. (Madras: AICUF Publications, 1985):5.
- ^{xvi} Joseph. Mattam, *Formation of Evangelizers for the Church's Mission and Ministry in the 3rd Millennium*". Paper Presented in the National Mission Seminar, (Rajkot: Joseph Mattam, 2010), 4.
- ^{xvii} S. M. Michael, "A Vision of Faith for Asia in the Context of Post -Modern World", *Third Millennium Indian Journal of Evangelization* XV (10 2012): 57. Cf. Flossy Molly Lobo (Sr Surekha BS), "The Role of Vision in the Transformative Mission", *MPM Thesis* Guided by PT Joseph SJ.(Pune: JDV, 2013). Unpublished Material.
- ^{xviii} Rudolf C. Heredia S.J., *A Church that is Poor and for the Poor*, (Ramwadi, Pune: in collaboration with Jnanam, 2013), 34.
- ^{xix} John, Vattamattam and others, (ed.), *Liberative Struggles in a Violent Society*, *Forum Series – 1*, (Hyderabad: Forum Publication, 1991).
- ^{xx} Flossy Molly Lobo "The Role of Vision in the Transformative Mission," *MPM Thesis*.