

Ignoring the Prophets of Doom

Be on your guard!

Do not listen to the prophets of doom!

A timely message from Pope Francis for consecrated women and men of our time.

The words of Pope Francis, addressed to consecrated women and men of the Christian world just over a year ago, seem at first sight to be uncharacteristically ominous – not in line with the constant stream of papal messages about the joy of the Gospel.¹ Did Pope Francis have Ireland in mind, one wonders? Did he get his facts from the CORI statistics office before writing that Letter?

I do not know the answers to these questions, but I have heard it said (in convents too!) that the invitation to ‘live the present with passion’ while ‘looking to the future with hope’ could not possibly have been written with the Irish scene in mind. The argument goes that if Pope Francis really knew *our* situation, if he understood the problems that beset *us* (Irish sisters, brothers, friars and priests) – our age profile, diminishment, ‘vocations crisis’, closures, low morale and more – then his Apostolic Letter would have come in another guise! But would it? A study of the Letter reveals strong evidence to the contrary.

Pope Francis is not known for issuing warnings, as a study of his teachings will show. Two exceptions occur among his most recent works – in the Encyclical *Laudato Si’* and in his Apostolic Address to Consecrated Persons for the Year of Consecrated Life (November 2014). In the latter, he warns against ‘prophets of doom’ – against those who predict the end of consecrated life, those who rely on statistics and measuring standards divorced from faith. Here is what he says:

Do not yield to the temptation to see things in terms of numbers and efficiency, and even less to trust in your own strength. In scanning the horizons of your lives and the present moment, be watchful and alert ...²

He quotes his predecessor, Pope Benedict XVI:

I urge you not to join the ranks of the prophets of doom who proclaim the end or meaninglessness of the consecrated life in the Church in our day; rather, clothe yourselves in Jesus Christ and put on the armour of light – as Saint Paul urged (Rom 13:11-14) – keeping awake and watchful.³

Question: Could Pope Francis be talking to us?

The answer is ‘Yes’. Pope Francis is quite aware of *our* situation, as the following excerpt from the Papal Letter shows:

We all know the difficulties which the various forms of consecrated life are currently experiencing: decreasing vocations and aging members, particularly in the Western world ... the threats posed by relativism and a sense of isolation and social irrelevance ... But it is precisely amid these uncertainties, which we share with so many of our contemporaries, that we are called to practise the virtue of hope, the fruit of our faith in the Lord of history, who continues to tell us: ‘Be not afraid ... for I am with you’ (Jer 1:8).⁴

A Tall order!

This would seem to some to be a tall order, given our present reality. Facing the facts, walking in truth is, after all, a constituent element of the Gospel. Denial of our concrete, contemporary reality – painful as that reality may be – can never take us a step into God’s future. Here is where the prophets of doom seem to be playing the winning card. The facts seem to be on their side. But Pope Francis warns, ‘Watch out! Be on your Guard! Beware the prophets of doom!’ So the choice is ours: Listen to Pope Francis or listen to the prophets of doom!

Warnings – against what?

Pope Francis is firmly within the New



Testament tradition when he issues warnings: ‘Watch!’ ‘Be on your guard!’ ‘Stay alert!’ ‘Beware!’ The familiar imperatives occur again and again in the New Testament (Lk 12:15; Mt 7:15 and elsewhere). Jesus warns against ravening wolves, thieves in the night, pickpockets and false prophets. St Paul warns against ‘dogs’ (the cutters), evildoers, circumcisers (Phil 3:2); against false teachers and Judaizers (Gal 6:15). The Beatitudes have their opposites in the form of Woes: ‘Woe to those who scandalise ... Woe to you who are rich ... (Lk 17:1-2). The list goes on. We Christians have been well and truly warned! And all warnings – even those appearing as danger signs on Irish roads – are issued in face of threat.

Consecrated Life under threat?

The warning, ‘Beware the prophets of doom!’ is addressed to insiders as well as outsiders. The Pope’s call to ‘Watch’ is really a call to a radical faith and hope which refuses to consign consecrated life to the refuse-bin of history – and this for one reason only, namely faith in the Risen Lord. If we operate within a faith-horizon, as distinct from a purely secular lining up of facts and predictions, we know that God is at work in our world, in our Church and in the hearts of people. We know that God still invites people into a radical and unique living out of their baptismal commitment in a vowed and special relationship with Jesus – a way of life rooted in the New Testament, which has existed since the first century as a particular witness to Jesus Risen. To those called to this way of life, today or yesterday, it is pure gift: a gift to the person called and to the Church. For those called, treasuring the wonder of it is the work of a lifetime. Growing into ever deeper gratitude is the only appropriate response.

Back to Basics!

It is not surprising then that the Pope's invitation to consecrated persons is a call to return to basics:

The question we have to ask ourselves during this Year is if and how we too are open to being challenged by the Gospel ...

Once again, we have to ask ourselves: Is Jesus really our first and only love, as we promised he would be when we professed our vows?²⁵

We are invited to return to 'our first love', the love that we professed when we made our vows. It is good for us to do this, whatever our situation, our state of health, or our circumstances. Nothing on earth can change or diminish the wonder of being chosen and called by God.

Secondly, we are invited 'to look to the past with gratitude' – which means scanning the sacred story of our individual Congregations and the various ministries which were 'an expression of the Gospel and a means of living the Gospel to the full'¹⁶ at a certain time and place. Prophets of doom are often inclined to confuse the identity of consecrated life with certain time-bound expressions of Christian service. They announce the end of consecrated life, because the 'works' associated with certain congregations are now no longer needed or are being done by others. But the essence of consecrated life is not, and never was, in the 'works'. Prophets of doom, (mostly insiders), have been heard to say: 'Our day is done, because



we are not needed any more in hospitals or schools or parishes'. As if the 'work' (or the Christian service) was all that consecrated life was about! Here is a kind of shaky territory – a favourite hunting ground to many doomsday prophets. It rests on a theological faux pas which confuses the wonder of a vocation to consecrated life with a particular expression of Christian ministry. And so the gloomy prophets find a ready audience when they announce the end of a life-form.⁷

Some will even misrepresent the teaching of Vatican II on the universal call to holiness as supporting evidence for their case. In a word, prophets of doom are misrepresenting standard theology of Baptism as well as standard theology of Consecrated Life. They are operating in a theological vacuum which denies Christian vocation in its glorious array of manifestations. Is it any wonder that Pope Francis issues a warning?

NOTES

¹ Apostolic Letter of His Holiness, Pope Francis, to all consecrated people on the occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life, 2014.

² Ibid., 1, 2.

³ Ibid., 1, 3.

⁴ Ibid., 1, 3.

⁵ Ibid., 1, 2.

⁶ Ibid., 1, 1.

⁷ I borrow the term from Sandra Schneiders, who describes Religious Life as a worldwide phenomenon and a life-form. See her Trilogy, *Finding the Treasure, Selling all, Buying the Field*.

Mary T. O'Brien PBVM
is a Presentation Sister belonging to the
South-West Province of the Union of
Presentation Sisters.

She is a former editor of *Intercom*
and now teaches Sacred Scripture at
Mary Immaculate College/UL
Email marytvbrien@gmail.com