

To the General Assembly of the *Sisters Adorers of the Blood of Christ*

(Rome, July 2, 2023)

Good afternoon to all of you and thanks to Sr. Nadia and her Council for having given me the opportunity to share with you at the beginning of your Assembly on a current topic like the one you suggested to me:

NEWNESS IS HELD WITHIN OUR TODAY.

I would like to help you and me to reflect upon how religious life might offer elements of prophecy in light of the global transformations we are experiencing.

The title could also be What newness can religious life offer in the face of a rapidly changing world?

"The One who sat on the throne said, 'Behold, I make all things new.' Then he said, 'Write these words down, for they are trustworthy and true.'" (Revelation 21:5)

We are living in a time in which rivers of ink, mountains of words, and countless internet pages impact – or, at times caress – our senses as if they were trying to lighten the challenges and threats of all kinds that beset humanity.

All these realities impacting our world especially impact us consecrated people, since *nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in the hearts of the followers of Christ. (Gaudium et Spes, 1)*

The Church and consecrated life, as part of this time we are living, also experience their own acute difficulties, of which we are all aware. We are overwhelmed by reduction in numbers, loss, decline, old age, lack of witness... and other realities that sometimes we do not know how to deal with.

Today, especially in the media, it is often said that we are living in or entering into an apocalypse because the phenomena surrounding us are very similar to those of such biblical accounts (pandemics, climate change with all its consequences, countless social inequalities, wars, threats from nature and especially from people... uncertainty and fear in the face of advancing artificial intelligence... and a very long etcétera.)

And in the face of all this, which is real, what do we do? We know and believe that *nothing is impossible for God* (Lk. 1:37), that our God is able to create *new heavens and a new earth* (Is. 65:17), that God can *turn stones into sons of Abraham* (Mt. 3:9) and calm storms (Lk. 8:22-25), that God can feed a multitude with two loaves and five fish (Lk. 9:16), and so on. Without this implying falling into the providentialism of a God who solves our problems with a magic wand. God has left the world in our hands, and with God's help we must solve our problems, especially those we ourselves cause.

As people of faith we feel called to give some kind of answer to our world. We should ask ourselves: do we believe and live the Promise or do we allow ourselves to be conditioned by the despair and fear that pervade everything?

What do we say? How do we say it? Where do we look for answers?

We might also ask ourselves whether we need the old wineskins that have contained the good wine for so long (Lk 5:33-39) in order to say a word of encouragement or to be witnesses of God's newness, or do we need to change the old wineskins for new ones to show that the wine is still good and that we can offer it not in worn-out wineskins, but with more credible behaviors, with more understandable gestures and words, with styles that everyone recognizes as evangelical. Are we prophets of doom or are we living and helping others to live Christian hope, the hope that is beyond all human hope and is based on Christ's resurrection?

If we truly believe and live what we want to convey, our faces, our smiles, our words, our gestures, our decisions..., must be painted with green, the color of hope. Not because everything smiles at us or we have a lot of security, or because of our social importance, or because of our abundant human and material resources; nor because of our unflawed life..., but because our very reason for being is Christ, who died and rose again; because we believe that love is stronger than indifference and selfishness; because we are certain that light overcomes darkness and that only the grain buried in the earth is capable of bearing fruit (Jn. 12:24).

Paul's challenge to himself in his letters and to us today is to prevent "appearances" from being the foundation of our lives, our faith, and our apostolic or missionary activity. It is not just good formation received; it is not good arguments; it is not accurately done analyses of reality; it is not our radical engagement in social circles and efficient and well-run apostolic institutions ... no, none of this gives foundation to our faith and that of those to whom we are sent. Following the Pauline model, we regard all this as loss and garbage compared to the experience and knowledge of the Crucified-Resurrected One.

Today, in the midst of our world, the only thing that matters, the one thing we cannot delegate and cannot give up, is prophetic witness. Prophecy is not a

degree, a doctorate, a master's degree.... The prophet is chosen by God from the womb (Jer. 1), always with a mission, not just a testimony. It is something you cannot buy in the supermarket: a few pounds or bags of prophecy!

The prophet is the person, the woman who, in God's name, has something new to offer. Sometimes, with great helplessness, with great fear, with great poverty, with very little social recognition and in the most adverse circumstances, she is able to rely on God alone and help others to do the same. (Jer. 1:4-10)

In relation to the context of consecrated life, the term prophecy has undergone quite a few variations in meaning and ecclesial impact from the Council to the present day. If in the years immediately following the Second Vatican Council it was almost synonymous with the innovations introduced by it - the so-called "prophecy of the Council" - it gradually shifted toward a consecrated life that senses the *renewal approach*- the well-known *aggiornamento* (updating) - as an inescapable urgency. The rediscovery of charism and foundational charisms brings a further shift, as the authenticity of charism reveals its prophecy. In the years immediately approaching our time (the beginning of the 21st century), the complexity of social, cultural and ecclesial challenges inevitably project themselves into a consecrated life that positions itself as prophetic. The prophecy of frontiers.

If we only wanted to mention the elements that in today's socio-cultural context connote prophecy they could be outlined as follows:

- ***Credibility***: the emphasis is on the values that make our intentions and motivations manifest. To risk credibility is to disqualify yourself. Credibility is persuasive because it accepts confrontation and above all does not shy away from self-criticism. The prophets were critical voices in their time, but they did not fear criticism from others.
- ***Trustworthiness***: we are trustworthy to the extent that we are credible. The trustworthiness of God's people reads prophecy in the everydayness in the transparency (not just management) of our actions as consecrated men and women, and in gratuitousness as the capacity for availability in selflessness.
- ***Radicality or Rootedness***: undoubtedly the evangelical inspiration to the demanding perspectives of the following of Christ, yet it should not be confused with lifestyles of deceptive 'attraction'. Radicality is witness rooted in the Truth of the Gospel and not in the socio-ecclesial fashions of consecrated life.

The three connotations - as can be well understood - are "faces" of a prophecy of consecrated life that is not rhetorical, but is anchored in history and is concretely involved in ecclesial dynamics.

In this perspective, either we return to the always ancient, always new prophetic spirit, we reinvent the way of living the Gospel each day, we live the spirit of inclusion of everyone without reservation, we show faces of the risen... Either we do this or we remain in a society that no longer needs us as an alternative to get where the state and public institutions (education, health care, welfare, etc.) didn't used to go before, and in a society that looks at us with suspicion, criticizes us, scolds us for sins, and perhaps admires us like a well-painted picture, but says: this is not for me.

During his visit to Hungary last April, Pope Francis emphasized that one of the most important demands for us is to "interpret the changes and transformations of our time, trying to face the pastoral challenges in the best possible way." This is what the prophets of all times have done: interpret the signs and read what God manifested in a thousand ways and asked them to show the world. God repeats to each of us, as he did to Jeremiah, 'What do you see?'

This is what our Foundresses experienced. They were women, who in the worst circumstances of history, knew how to read their time, as they relied only on God and sought to respond to the most urgent needs of their historical moment. They were able to live prophecy, to revolutionize a world of injustice, to give dignity to the human condition, to break obsolete patterns that served only to cover up questionable lives and customs. They, like the grain of wheat, did not calculate their dedication and gave their lives in the name of God and in service to the most vulnerable.

See, I am doing something new! Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? In the desert I make a way, in the wasteland, rivers. (Is 43:19).

The Spirit tells us today to make the words of Isaiah relevant. There are many deserts and wastelands, and not only already severe environmental ones, but also the very harsh deserts and wastelands that make us nostalgically remember the fleshpots of Egypt (Num. 11:4-28), that make us believe that *any time in the past was better* (J. Manrique), that cause us to long again for full churches, overflowing houses of formation, influential apostolic works, large buildings full of life, assured generational passing down ... and our omnipresence in all kinds of apostolates. This is already history and nostalgia wearies us and prevents us from opening our eyes to the new, to creativity.

The Lord speaks of newness and asks us to wake up: *do you not see this?*

Newness is not harnessed in the pursuit of "new things" to be done. First of all, in the perspective of salvation history, the *novum* or newness is in relation to *eschaton*. New things are the indication of the already and not yet, that is, the anticipation of the ultimate fulfillment in the here and now. Therefore, *novum* or newness is the new look at history, our time, the events that affect our Institute. Above all, it is a non-prejudicial look. In this perspective, prophecy is an exercise of discernment, in the sense of keeping "our eyes open" to what is happening around us. It is concretely about intercepting the signs of the contemporary world that surprise us because many new things come unexpectedly. Prophecy is in not letting ourselves be surprised, that is, in understanding what is happening.

The important - and perhaps the difficult - thing is to find out what the newness entails, what makes us hopeful, what fills us with hope again, what renews us... Is it not the small, the marginal, the simple, the small numbers, the work on the margins, the "inter" apostolates (intercongregational, intercultural, intergenerational, interdenominational...) that eliminate our self-sufficiency? Does all this make us poor and trusting in the Lord again?

Power, social influence, large numbers, the ability to reach everyone and everything, and security in the media and human resources... have certainly had their value, but perhaps they have not always done us good. It is true there has been much dedication in the Church and in consecrated life. There has been much visible or hidden holiness, much help to the very poor, much good spirituality, a sincere search for God's will, and much missionary heroism... But today the question is: how do we stay with what is genuine, with the charismatic, with the essence, with the spirit, with the grain, with what is always old and always new, and free ourselves from the accessory, from what changes, from the relative...?

Prophetic tension is the one thing we cannot abandon, and which we can strengthen with all our might, in all the responses we want to give to our world. And, according to L. A. Gonzalo Díez, director of the magazine *Vida religiosa* (Religious Life), *this is not based on aesthetic programs that do not arise from life and merely entertain life. Prophetic tension is not improvised; it is ingrained in faith and from faith. It is the vital expression of those who have discovered the meaning of their lives in the Gospel and thus manifest it.* (VR, April 2023)

Following the Pope's message in Hungary, this is only possible by looking to Christ as our future. The risen Christ, the center of history, is the future. This brings me back to Teilhard de Chardin who comes to his famous conclusion: all

existence, all the cosmos is centered in the "Omega Point," Jesus Christ, the captivating and saving point.

Our life, though marked by fragility, is placed firmly in God's hands. If we forget this, we too will seek human means and instruments to defend ourselves from the world, shutting ourselves up in our comfortable and tranquil religious oases; or, on the contrary, we will adapt to the changing winds of worldliness, and then our Christianity will lose potency and we will cease to be salt of the earth.

The Pope continues, *"Neither defeatism nor conformity. These, then, are the two temptations we must always guard against as Church - and as consecrated life. The first is that of a catastrophic reading of present history, which feeds on the defeatism of those who repeat that all is lost, that the values of the past no longer exist, that we do not know where we will end up. On the other hand, the other risk is that of a naive reading of the times themselves, which instead relies on the comfort of conformity and makes us believe that in the end all is well, that the world has changed and we must adapt.*

Against catastrophic defeatism and worldly conformity, the Gospel gives us new eyes, gives us the grace of discernment to enter our time with a welcoming attitude, but also with a prophetic spirit.

Since the beginning of his pontificate, Pope Francis (cfr. *Evangelii Gaudium*) has encouraged us to face the changes in the world with a prophetic embrace, learning to recognize the signs of God's presence in reality, even where it is not explicitly marked by the Christian spirit. It is a reality that provokes us and, at the same time, challenges us to interpret everything in the light of the Gospel, without becoming worldly, but remaining witnesses of Christian prophecy.

In the crisis of faith that our world is going through, and in the face of so many painful situations that no one understands, believers and consecrated people are sometimes looked at with a questioning gaze and even with probing questions: *Where is your God?* (Ps. 42) In the face of catastrophic defeatism and worldly conformity, the Gospel gives us new eyes and gives us the grace of discernment to enter our time with a welcoming attitude, but also with a prophetic spirit.

A Spanish theologian, Pepa Torres, makes a somewhat far-fetched but thought-provoking reflection: the mystery we call God is neither miraculous nor punitive, nor does God intervene directly in history, neither to provoke evil nor to prevent it, but God is the breath of life, the source of resilience, as revealed to us in the Crucified One. God sustains, inspires, mobilizes solidarity and loving creativity, as God has done and continues to do in the hearts of so many people, in this crisis that produces and accompanies so many extreme situations.

The God of Jesus is an expert at reviving life from what is broken and indicating hope when everything seems lost.

There is what we might call the error of the perfect: everything will be new and different ... but with the awareness of the existence of the "limit," the "risk" of everything! Risk identifies us. Those who are at risk are:

- Humble (future path of religious life).
- Dependent (on God in all things).
- Collaborators

In his encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis lists and analyzes the causes of the crisis we are experiencing in the world that threatens universal fraternity and communion:

Dreams falling apart

History showing signs of returning

The end of historical consciousness

The global gap

Human rights not universal enough

Conflict and fear. Wars, attacks, persecution...

Globalization and progress without a common direction

Pandemics

The illusion of communication.

Fake news.

Manipulation.

Aggression. Subjugation.

No human dignity at the borders.

And he invites us to hope:

"I invite everyone to renewed hope, for hope 'speaks to us of something deeply rooted in every human heart, independently of our circumstances and historical conditioning. Hope speaks to us of a thirst, an aspiration, a longing for a life of fulfillment, a desire to achieve great things, things that fill our heart and lift our spirit to lofty realities like truth, goodness and beauty, justice and love.

'Hope is bold: it can look beyond personal convenience, the petty securities and compensations which limit our horizon, and it can open us up to grand ideals that make life more beautiful and worthwhile.' Let us continue, then to advance along the paths of hope." (Fratelli Tutti, n. 55)

Hence, religious life responds to the great transformations in our world, with an eye toward the Gospel, the most disadvantaged and those suffering the consequences of war and violence.

Sr. Carmen Ros Nortes, NSC
Undersecretary of CICLSAL