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Religious: A Prophetic Voice in the Midst of a Violent World

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LCWR-CMSM Joint Assembly 11:15 AM and 2:30 PM

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Good Morning. It is great to see a lot of people I have shared with individually and communally and through meetings of LCWR and CMSM in the past.

I was at the first assembly of CMSM/LCWR in Cleveland. It was called "Convergence." Were any of you there for that meeting? Oh, we have some old timers here. All the rest of you are new faces.

I look forward to this conversation with you with fear and trembling. I have never given this talk before, and I'm talking to my own community. I'm talking to my own sisters and brothers in religious life, and I don't think it is going to be easy to be saying what I'll be saying and I don't think it will be easy for you to be hearing what I'll be saying. But I think it needs to be said at this time.

I have been here since the beginning [of the joint meeting between LCWR and CMSM] except for the social. I got here too late for that on Thursday night. Having listened to the other speakers, I do not think I have heard the kind of approach [I'll be taking here] and I would hope we could have really good dialogue about it.

As I begin, I would like to set the context for my talk within the overall theme of this Joint Assembly of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious and the Conference of Major Superiors of Men: "No Longer Bystanders: Creating Peace in Violent Times." The theme is taken from the parable of the Good Samaritan found in Luke 10:25-37 but I want to set it in context:

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." And he said to him, " You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, his heart was

moved with compassion. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' Which of these three, do you think was a neighbor to the one who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

In my older preaching days, when I was less acquainted with the Holiness Codes in the Hebrew Scriptures and how Jesus, in effect, dismantled them or tried to dismantle them, I would ask people why the parable begins with the priest walking by the man who has been robbed and stripped and almost half dead. When the people are unable to answer, I'd suggest that the priest walked by the man because he was already robbed. But I've learned more about the Scriptures since then. And it was a good joke, but it is inadequate to the text.

The text in its context is a telling example of the challenge of the lawyer or the expert in Torah legality—a canonist, we would call him—and how the riposte of Jesus undermined the whole vision of what legalistic interpretation can do. As Ron [Ronald D. Witherup SS, President, CMSM] said this morning, with the *lex talionis*: it was meant to avoid violence, but it came to enforce it. This passage begins with a question followed by another question, a response and a riposte, as they are called. And finally, there is another question which finds Jesus challenging the whole approach to clerically-created and clerically controlled and clerically-canonized legalism that have come to define holiness codes in religion. So violence is enshrined in the codes.

The context makes it clear that Jesus was critiquing a system, which had so defined holiness in its various codes, that the priest and the Levite, the representatives of the clerical class, which had embraced that vision, who were at the top of the totem pole of purity, were just being faithful to the law. They had to pass by because, in that system, if they would have touched that victim, they would have become contaminated. The one robbed now was untouchable. They had to pass by to preserve their system and to preserve their honor. Holiness canonized their separation from the victim.

Jesus subverts this clericalized apartheid when he shows that compassion must be the new code and that this compassion involves the kiss of justice (which is the meeting of human needs at every level) with mercy. In face of such needs in our time, I don't believe we can remain passers-by, much less bystanders. So, returning to the joke about the victim already being robbed, and recognizing its inadequacy, I now find that the deeper I go into what Jesus was trying to do in the face of the system which was called holy and whose leaders were considered holy [for upholding that system], what I now understand to be the reality of the priest is the most powerful insight I think I have had in years. And I think we as religious have to understand what it means for us to be disciples of Jesus in similar situations.

In light of today's talk about the Good Samaritan, I find it providential that, two weeks ago I was at the Mercy Retreat Center in Fremont, Ohio: Our Lady of the Pines. At the end of it a priest, who happened to have been a missionary in Zimbabwe, presented me with this sculpture from a Benedictine Monastery in Zimbabwe. It's a sculpture of the Good Samaritan helping the man in the ditch. On the backside there is either the robber [or the priest], who has the bucket of money and is walking by.

I'd like to light a candle to remember the people of Zimbabwe. I'd like to light this candle to remember the people of Zimbabwe that are suffering so much injustice. But, as I do this, I'd like to recall in great honor Pius Ncube, the Archbishop of Bulawayo, which is Zimbabwe's second largest city. An article in The Seattle Times July 18, 2004, which I picked up when I was there, was entitled: "Archbishop Defies Zimbabwe's President: He Campaigns for Human Rights: Church Leader Puts His Own Life at Risk." Why was he speaking out? And why were the Religious silent? Now, a lot of them are foreigners and they know that, if they would speak out, they could be deported. But he was speaking out against the empire in Zimbabwe that was oppressing the people. The only voice, "the lone voice." In fact, it says: "In a country where most people are cowed into silence, the 57-year old archbishop is the leading and often lone voice of defiance against the political and economic turmoil [violence] that is causing Zimbabwe, he says, to 'fall to pieces.'"1

As I read this statement in The Seattle Times about the Archbishop, I thought: "He is fulfilling what the Papal Document on Bishops, Pastores Gregis, says they should be. In the statement Pope John Paul calls bishops to be "Prophets of Justice." A bishop is supposed to be a prophet of justice.

If we follow the theology of priest, prophet and ruler we know that all of us share in all three functions of the Christ. But the bishop, priest, is to be exemplar par excellence of what it means for all of us to be priestly. The ruler is to be exemplar par excellence of what it means for all of us to be involved in the transformation of the political, economic, structural reality and their cultural dynamics. Those in religious life are to be exemplar par excellence of what it means to challenge the other two leaders in the empire and the "ekklesia." Both of these constitute the demand about what I think is the heart of what I am supposed to be talking about.

In his follow-up Apostolic Exhortation on the Bishops, Pastores Gregis, the Pope says: "The war of the powerful against the weak has, today more than ever before, created profound divisions between rich and poor. The poor are legion! Within an unjust economic system marked by significant structural inequities, the situation of the marginalized is daily become worse. . . In the midst of these situations of injustice . . . the Bishops is [to be] the defender of human rights. . ."2

As I read that statement in that apostolic exhortation [Pastores Gregis], I thought of the apostolic exhortation that Ron referred to this morning, Vita Consecrata. In that 1996 document which Pope John Paul II wrote as the follow-up to the Synod on Religious Life, the largest section interprets our life from the vision and the perspective of the lens of prophecy. The bishops get a passing notice [in Pastores Gregis] that they are to be

prophets of justice, but religious, throughout this document, are to become the prophets of justice in the midst of violence.

Within the Scripture of the Good Samaritan inviting us to move beyond the notion of holiness defined by the priests and our canonical codes, I'd like to suggest that we, as Religious in the United States, have been seduced into silence in the face of the injustice and violence around us—not so much regarding the injustice which is being perpetuated in this country and, through this country, in our world but, especially at this time, I am speaking of the sinful, structural and systemic violence that has come to be canonized in a certain understanding of holiness that is increasingly promoted by the highest clerics and their house prophets in our own church. That's the issue I want to address.

In order to honor the adage about “truth in advertising,” I want to return to the title of my talk: “Religious: A Prophetic Voice in the Midst of a Violent World.” First, when I say: “Religious” to begin the title, it does not say “Some Religious.” I am talking about something constitutive to our call: everyone of us, congregationally, not individually. Next, when I say we Religious are to be “A Prophetic Voice” I am appealing to a more communal, collegial and collective response to our charism rather than a periodic and isolated witness that may be coming from this or that individual or a few of our members getting arrested at the SOA protests or even like the three Grand Rapids Dominicans that now are serving time, or even among the four crazy and wonderful McDonald Sisters that the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet of the St. Paul Province.

I don't know if you ever heard of the McDonald Sisters, but people in Minneapolis/St. Paul know all about them and where they're going to be every Wednesday at which demonstration. They are so famous that middle school kids in a public school made this video of them called “Four sisters for Peace.” Down at the bottom of the case for it they have it “Rated R” for “Rebellious.” R for Rebellious. They accompany it with buttons that say “R for Rebellious.” So, when I look at it, I'm going to make it “Religious for Rebellion” because I think that's what we are supposed to be. We are to rebel against anything that is unjust, anything that is violent.

Way, way back I remember the famous section from Evangelica Testificatio by Paul VI. He asked: “How then will the cry of the poor echo in your life? He said the cry of the poor demanded two things of us Religious: “That cry must, first of all, bar you from whatever would be any compromise whatsoever with any form” (look at all the absolutes) “with any form of social injustice.” He didn't say “in the world” but “any form” be it political, corporate, ecclesiastical, or cultural. Secondly he said that this cry demands that “you awaken consciences to the drama of misery experienced in the plight of the poor.” He then says: “It will lead some of you to go among the poor.” So, some of us may be among the poor. But all of us can have no compromise anywhere with any form of social injustice. And any community “that purports,” as the Synod of Bishops in '71 said, “to speak to others about justice, must first be recognized by them as just in their eyes. Hence, we must undertake an examination of the lifestyle and of the system” in which we are. Finally, when I say our vocation and voice must be lived and echoed in a “violent” world, I have found it very helpful to give a definition of violence so that we

might all have the same understanding and, thus, find a basis upon which we can agree, disagree or offer needed nuances about the comments I am about to develop in my next remarks.

This morning, during the talk of Constance [Phelps, SCL, President, LCWR] and Ron, we broke into small groups to address the question: “How do we understand what violence is? How do we understand what peace is and what makes that work?” So we all have different understandings. Thus, in order to have a common language, I’m going to be taking the definition of the [U.S.] Bishops, which they have given in two of their documents on violence. I will be doing that in a little while.

In her keynote yesterday, Dr. Mary Robinson [United Nations’ High Commissioner for Human Rights and former President of Ireland] quoted from the UN’s Commission on Human Security’s document, aptly entitled Human Security Now. I must admit, I didn’t know about it. So I went to the Web and picked it up. It states that the basis of insecurity arises from peoples’ sense of being powerless in their effort to participate in relationships and structures that are just.³

I believe that, at its core, all violence arises from a sense of being unjustly treated. Unjust treatment is sustained by unequal power relationships. When we look at that reality, the UN also has said, a couple of years ago, that the basis of sexism is unequal power relationships that are structured, received and canonized in laws that are made acceptable. I also believe that, at its core, all violence also arises from another’s need to control; furthermore, this control manipulates and exploits peoples’ need for security and is sustained through fear and intimidation regarding one’s personal or group or institutional survival and security. As the document, Human Security Now calls for a shift that moves from a preoccupation with state security to “security centered on people,” as Dr. Robinson noted, I couldn’t help yesterday but think of how security in our church has come to be identified with the controlling power of the clergy to the detriment of the people in the pews. However, I’m anticipating what I’ll be saying about this later. So, with this as background I’d like to share with you my definition of violence.

My personal definition of violence is “any force or negative power that inflicts unjust injury.” In my mind violence, especially systemic or institutionalized violence, has to do with injustice. It’s how people react to the abuse of that kind of power that creates, sustains and even justifies injustice in church and society. My working definition of violence as “any force that inflicts unjust injury” implies, as such, “an unjustified force; it inflicts a wrong through the abuse of power.” My working definition of the prophet is the one called to speak God’s non-violent truth in the midst of that violence whose injustice is sustained by lies.” Simply put, our role as Religious, if we are to be prophetic is to “speak truth to power” whether that power is corporate, economic, political, religious or ecclesiastical.

As I sat in the back of the Assembly Hall yesterday listening to Dr. Robinson, I looked at her through the realities of the thousand plus of you who were between her and me. I considered her remarks and your response. I thought of the way you responded to her

thoughts and those of the respondents. This led me to decide yesterday morning to change the direction of my talk. Luckily, I bring my computer and a printer because [when I come to speak at a gathering such as this] I'm always listening and trying to sense where I should go. So, as I look at it, from listening to her talk and, this morning with Ron and Constance highly concentrated on global violence, I think we can say we are being somewhat prophetic when it comes to speaking against the injustice perpetrated by the imperial powers, be they political or economic, around us.

For instance, last week's New York Times listed on the front page and throughout in the follow-up a whole article on how, under the present Administration, there are all sorts of things that are being undermined. And we are speaking out against such actions. I think we are doing our best to try to bring "good news to the poor" in this way. When we look at the prophetic witness that we do with governments with our lobbying and corporations through our shareholder actions, I also believe our counterparts, represented in (I don't even know the name of the other group that's represented here that the Vatican just recently accepted, this equivalent of LCWR and CMSM, what is it) CMSWR? Okay. But, as I look at that, and I try to really honor what "prophetic" means, I believe that they themselves think they are being prophetic. But, we just have different approaches to what it means to be prophetic. We, on the left, or as I heard this morning, who consider ourselves "progressive," are challenging systems. But they are also challenging politicians. They are picketing abortion clinics in their support for life. I also think many of them, especially the reform that came out of us Capuchins, the Community for the Renewal, have found radical ways of living more austerely and in solidarity with the poor that put us to shame. So, I think they can rightfully say, at least in those areas around public witness, such as the abortion issue and their own personal witness of austerity and in the way they interpret poverty, that they would be considered "prophetic."

In this sense, I do wish, however, that we'd find a way of delinking ourselves [from being selective in our issues], at least de facto, by also challenging our politicians to be equally concerned about other right-to-life issues, especially abortion, where we have been silent. I think if we would do this, we would be more inclusive and faithful to the whole seamless garment that is core to the integral Catholic approach to social justice. My Capuchin brother, Dan, continually reminds me of our need to "both/and" people rather than "either/or." So I don't think that the people on the right, or what I call the "house prophets," are going to be that committed to work for structural reform because they're getting their money from the corporations to keep, in effect, silent about all the divisions between rich and poor. We must do both.

This is all I want to say about our need to be prophetic within the empire; what I want to stress here is our need for to be prophetic in the ekklesia.

Yesterday morning, the more I listened to Dr. Robinson's speech, I decided both this latter group of that other alternative group and ourselves are both failing radically in a most critical area where we must heed the call to be prophetic voices in the midst of violence. This refers to the institutional church itself, especially in its institutionalized, sanctioned, canonized injustice and violence that has been cloaked almost infallibly with

the sanction and fiat of God Himself when, in fact, it must be called the social sin that it is.

It came to me yesterday that the latter group might be called “temple prophets” insofar as they uncritically accept and even identify themselves as promoting the agenda of the priests. In this I think of Isaiah’s words about “the priests and the prophets” who “err in vision” because they stumble in the way they understand justice (Is. 28:7). At the same time, however, and on the other hand, too many of us who have witnessed the abuse of the priests—from the local pastor who fires our members, to the chancery office that releases our outspoken members in the name of cut backs, to Vatican documents and decrees which talk about “Collaboration” but really are written in a way to keep women in their place—have been too silent for too long. And we don’t have much time left, and neither do the church and the people of God. As a result, in both our cases, whether we are the royal and temple prophets, as well as with us, the silent ones who find ourselves in exile in our church—more so than in our nation (because we’ve adapted quite well and been assimilated into the culture—I don’t think it is so much the “people who perish for want of prophecy;” I think Religious Life itself that is perishing for want of prophecy.

I believe the former group, despite their youth and increasing numbers, are perishing because they have failed in their prophetic vocation insofar as they have compromised the soul of our charism by their embrace of clericalism and willingness to accept statements like those in *Vita Consecrata* and the parallel document that came out two years ago from CICLSAL that basically say that “the charismatic task of all [religious] institutes” is to “to give proof of unity with disagreement with the magisterium of the church” and to even become “convinced and joyful spokespersons before all” of its teachings,⁴ some of which many of us here consider unjust, violent and sinful. That is a total sell-out to the priests. And that’s in the document, saying that’s what we all have to do. No more checks and balances. Prophecy is to be determined by the clerics, [to determine] whether it’s official and authentic or not. They’re perishing because of their lack of protest against statements like that.

However, with ourselves, we many not have sold our souls, but we are perishing numerically because we have not been public enough in our protest of patriarchy. Those interested women and men who dream the dream and still have a vision of a Trinitarian and transformed world and church, as a result, do not find home with us. So the women’s groups among us have more members above 90 than under 50 and the men among us remain [witnesses to] what was the theme of a CMSM Conference some years ago that I attended: “Stumbling Pilgrims and Stuttering Prophets.”

Yet we continue to perceive ourselves and define ourselves as “prophets.” In this respect, as I prepared for my talk, I read Gerry Brown’s CMSM Assembly talk in ’94: “Ministry of Religious in Violent Times.” There was not a mention of the violence in our church. It was all [about violence] in the empire—all related to the ruler, not the priest. More honest and more hopeful was Kathleen Pruitt’s statement to the LCEWR two years ago in her presidential address [“To Serve as Prophets of Hope in This Time, This Place”]. However, when I looked at that and when I talked to Kathleen afterwards, I said: “We

still have the dream. But it's all theory. It isn't getting translated, because nobody knows that we're around, especially the bishops. For security reasons we don't say anything; for survival reasons we are silent.

Kathleen gave that talk, I believe, in St. Louis. I had been there earlier for the Franciscan Federation meeting. And just the way the liturgy was dealt with is a case in point.

Maria Elena Martinez and I were co-teaming [at the Federation] sharing our thoughts back and forth, kind of like this morning. Then we talked about what we were going to do for the liturgy and how we would celebrate it. Later I was walking down the hallway where I saw a door open and it turned out to be some of the leadership of the LCWR. Since the door was open, I walked in to say "Hi." And then I said: "What are you doing about the liturgy?" They said, "Oh, we just got a decree from the Archbishop of St. Louis on what we can do and what we can't do." They ended up finessing it by going into small group liturgies.

But luckily, or providentially, I don't know, what happened for us at the Franciscan Federation, is that we didn't get any decrees from downtown. As so Maria Elena and I celebrated what I think was one of the most inclusive liturgies I have been part of. Were any of you Franciscans there for that Federation gathering? It was such a wonderful occasion. She kind of led the Word Service. Then there was this Gospel choir. She was going to be doing the Gospel and proclaiming the Gospel. They were singing the "Alleluia." Then Maria started to move and to sway. Then Maria got her hands up and she started to dance. I never knew what David was about, until I saw what Maria was doing. I didn't know what it meant to dance in the temple of our God. And now we are told this might be "reprobate." This should make us see that there's a whole different vision that we are called to bring into this canonized system that is undermining the integrity of the people.

If you look, the passage revolves around the holiness codes. They had to holy and the way they structured holiness was to divide the unholy from the holy. The holy became the sacred and so you could not have what was defined as profane. You had to separate the pure from the impure or the unpure, those undefiled and those who bled—and you can guess who those were. Therefore, if you bled, you were unclean and you couldn't be part of the holiness because you were unclean. You could be and only remain in the Court of the Women; you could never get into the Temple's sanctuary. You were outside the system versus those who were inside. You were altar observers rather than altar presiders. You were female rather than male. You were sinners, and the priest was above you.

This is exactly what is going on today with all the stress around "holiness." Our church, in its stress on this institutional form of holiness, is reverting to the very institutionalized violence that Jesus rejected on the basis of injustice: "Unless your justice exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you won't know what the reign of God is about." The reign of God is at stake in this church of ours at this point. And somebody who has an understanding of what the reign of God is about has to speak out to bring it about. That is

the Gospel that we have embraced by our vows and by our baptism. And so, as Ron said this morning, in the antithesis statements that begin with Mt. 5:20—“unless your holiness, your justice, exceeds that [of the scribes and Pharisees] and follow with “you have heard said and I say unto you,” we’ve also got to be saying: “We’ve heard what you’ve said, but we are saying to you: ‘This is not bringing about mercy. This is not reinforcing justice. This is, in fact, perpetuating unequal power relationships and division. This is against the vision of the Christ in whom there is no more division between Jew and Gentile, slave or free, male or female.’”

They were able to accomplish the unity between Jew and Gentile within the first generation of our church. We were able to erase alienation, in the Catholic community, by overcoming the division between slave and free. Yet we still have to worship a God that the Vatican says “wills that women not be ordained.” That god is literally “unbelievable.” It is a false god; it cannot be worshiped. And the prophet must speak truth to that power and be willing to accept the consequence of calling for justice, stopping the violence and bringing about the reign of God.

This brings me to the definition of the bishops for violence. In talking about my remarks with my confrere, David Couturier OFMCap, he warned against doing this because he said: “You can’t use the master’s tools to dismantle the master’s house.” Having been forewarned, I’m going to do it anyway because I believe that, otherwise, as Isaiah 5:13 says, “my people [will] go into exile without knowledge” (Is. 5:13). Otherwise we will have no common basis for our information.

In the last years, the U.S. Catholic Bishops’ have released two statements on violence, albeit violence in the form of Domestic Violence. In their first—we all know it came originally out of their inability to deal with the issue of women [in the church and was] a fallback position because they had to deal with the issue of power and they couldn’t be honest about it, about the structural inequities—they said that: “We say as strongly and as clearly as we can that violence against women anywhere is (italicized) never justified.” They say “violence in any form” and they happen to name some forms: “physical, sexual, psychological or verbal.” They don’t add “institutional, religious or ecclesiastical.” But they do say “violence in any form is sinful. Many times it is a crime as well.”⁵ So that is the basis of violence and I’m going to use the Bishops’ own statement about violence. It “can’t be justified in any form and it is sinful.” And we’ve got to be the prophets, the ones that start exposing the sin and demand conversion and are willing to go to the wall on this.

In that same statement (since we are seeing how now what I consider violence based on injustice to be based on unequal power relationships to preserve “security” in the system of the clerics) we find later on, the Bishops saying: “As a church, one of the most worrying aspects of the abuse practiced against women is the use of biblical texts, taken out of context, to support abusive behavior.” Of course, that’s domestic violence. But we heard this morning about fundamentalism. Our church in its institutional expression is a fundamentalistic institution on the issue of women, on the issue of Eucharist and, ultimately, on the issue of the power to find and lose itself. And it must be challenged,

because we are as fundamentalist as the John 3:16 people and the Jehovah Witnesses downstairs [the convention being held simultaneously in the same convent center as the LCWR/CMSM joint meeting] all around the preservation of the male, celibate, clerical model of the church to preserve the priests in their sanctuaries and the women and the lay people outside. They're only able to come in, if the priest and when the priest so defines it.

In their 20th anniversary statement of the original statement made 20 year sago, that came out November 12, 2002, the Bishops updated it. They changed a few of the words. Gone is the part about the scriptures being used to support abusive behavior against women. And while they reiterate as clearly and strongly as they can that violence against women "inside or outside the home is never justified," and that "violence in any form is sinful and often criminal," what they immediately add is helpful to us today. Acknowledging that "violence has many forms, many causes, and many victims—men as well as women," they call for "a moral revolution to replace a culture of violence."⁶ I believe we must be those revolutionaries. We have to be so or we're going to die. We are already dying, so let's do it with class. Let's go out in style.

I find it interesting that, in their 1992 statement on domestic violence, the Bishops define abuse as "any kind of behavior that one. . . uses to control another through fear and intimidation."⁷ However, in the anniversary statement two years ago, they use these words to give their definition of violence. They call "domestic violence" "any kind of behavior that a person uses to control an intimate partner through fear and intimidation."⁸ So I'm going to take the Bishops' definition. Violence or abuse "is any kind of behavior that one person, group, organization or institution uses to control others through fear and intimidation." This makes me ask: Who of you, as members of organizations and congregations, who have been their leaders, have not been afraid to deal with priests and they system they represent? Who of you have not had members intimidated into silence to preserve the system? The very definition lives in our bones. We've been the victims of the violence. And somebody has to say that this sin has to stop.

I know that many men and, even more unfortunately, some women will insist that what is happening to women in our church is not unjust, much less violent and, for sure, not sinful. But, if the Bishops say violence anywhere against women, where's the church? I don't see how we can limit it to Africa where mutilation still exists, as we learned this week, not just in the Middle East where we found no women in the delegation of Saudi Arabia at the Olympics Sunday night, but in our church as well. I'm reminded of the article in the National Catholic Reporter years ago, which the late Loretta Mather, once President of the School Sisters of St. Francis, wrote, but she did so anonymously, out of fear. Remember the title of it: "Religious Women: The Battered Women in Our Church," the abused ones. What is abuse? It is "any way one uses to control another through fear and intimidation." She couldn't even sign her name.

This brings me to Isaiah's call to be a prophet in the midst of the structures of violence that surrounded him in his empire and religion. But, before I reflect on his call, I'd like to recall another Assembly of LCWR and CMSM in which I participated. This was in

Louisville. How many of you were in Louisville? Okay. We have a few more of us here that were in Louisville. It was there, in 1989, 15 years ago, that we gathered together as LCWR and CMSM to envision what we called the “transformative elements for religious life in the future.” We agreed that the foundation of religious life flowed from its first two core elements. If we were to be transformed individually, communally and congregationally as religious in our church and the wider world, this transformation, we said, needed to be grounded in “prophetic witness” and come from a “contemplative attitude toward life.” These are the two core elements of spirituality that Constance was saying she thought should be the key to the transformation of us into people of peace. These are the two components of spirituality: the mystical, contemplative basis and the justice/prophetic basis.

In explicating what we meant then in Louisville about being “prophetic witnesses in church and society,” we said 15 years ago: “Being converted by the example of Jesus and the values of the gospel, religious life in the year 2010 will serve a prophetic role in church and society. Living this prophetic witness will include critiquing societal and ecclesial values and structure[s], calling for systemic change and being converted by the marginalized with whom we serve.” Regarding the second element, the mystical or contemplative, that should characterize our future as Religious we highlighted our need to cultivate “a contemplative attitude toward all creation. They will be attentive to and motivated by the presence of the sacred in their own inner journeys, in the lives of others, and throughout creation. Recognizing contemplation as a way of life for the whole church they will see themselves and their communities as centers of spirituality and the experience of God.”

I suggest we recall these first two transformative elements and be willing to admit where we have been particularly remiss to apply them to the “official” patriarchal church with its unjustifiable violence against women, and, I would also say, against gays. But I’m stressing the woman thing here.⁹

To help us do this, I’d like to spend the rest of my time revisiting Isaiah’s prophetic/mystical call. As I look at this passage, I believe it’s got to be the foundation for the kind of spirituality that Constance was talking about. If you look at Isaiah 6, it’s his mystical/prophetic call. I’ve written about it in the last chapter of my *Spirituality of the Beatitudes*.¹⁰ It was also going to be in a new book that was supposed to be here which is coming out in January and is called: *Can Religious Life Be Prophetic?*¹¹ You all know the passage:

In the year King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a high and lofty throne, with the train of his garment filling the temple. Seraphim were stationed above: each of them had six wings: with two they veiled their faces, with two they veiled their feet, and with two they covered aloft. “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts! They cried one to the other. All the earth is filled with his glory!” At the sound of that cry, the frame of the door shook and the house was filled with smoke. Then I said, “Woe is me, I am doomed! For I am a man of unclean lips, living among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD OF HOSTS!” then one of the seraphim flew to me, holding an ember which he had taken with tongs from the altar. He touched my mouth with it. “See,” he

said, “now that this has touched your lips, your wickedness is removed, your sin purged.” Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?” “Here I am,” I said; “send me!” And he replied: “Go and say to this people: ‘Listen carefully, but you shall not understand! Look intently, but you shall know nothing! You are to make the heart of this people sluggish, to dull their ears and close their eyes: Else their eyes will see, their ears hear, their heart understand, and they will turn and be healed. “How long, O Lord?, “ I asked. And he replied: “Until the cities are desolate, without inhabitants, houses, without an occupant, and the earth is a desolate waste. Until the LORD removes people far away, and the land is abandoned more and more. If there be still a tenth part in it, then this in turn shall be arid waste. As with a terebinth or an oak whose trunk remains when its leaves have fallen. The holy offspring is the trunk.

When I look at each one of these points, I believe

1) That our prophetic/mystical call comes today. It occurs within the context of the empire; it’s in the context of ekklesia as we have experienced it. It cannot be removed from the reality.

That’s the signs of the times. 12

2) Secondly, this call involves the biggest section: Isaiah’s religious experience. Now remember he was a priest; he was doing temple duty; he was considered pure; he was considered holy. All of a sudden the empowering experience of God in the life of Isaiah transformed him to realize what “holiness” truly involves.

When I look at our experience of the reign of God, the holiness of God, God’s holiness: the Trinity represents God’s holiness. The holiness of God we have come to understand over hundreds of years is that this one God is a community of three persons who relate to each other in such a way that everyone can say “I am who I am” precisely because of the way we share the resources. Everything that makes me be who God is, is what makes you be who God is: three in one.

From this reality God made us male and female in the divine image. And God blessed us. Now remember the context for this passage is Exilic, the priestly version. We are to increase and multiply. Thus the whole vision of holiness is how we are going to get all males and females and all their relationships to be blessed in ways that will bring us out of Exile into communities wherein we will be able to every persona say: “I am who I am” And because I am a woman doesn’t make me less able to have access to the fullness of the resources of this community.

In Pope John Paul’s recent Apostolic Exhortation on Religious Life, *Vita Consecrata* as well as CICLSAL’s June 14, 2002 elaboration on it, great stress is made on the Trinitarian foundation for religious life in its prophetic constitution. The latter states: “The apostolic exhortation *Vita Consecrata* clearly and profoundly expressed the

Christological and ecclesial dimensions of consecrated life in a Trinitarian theological perspective. . .” 13

If we do not understand the Trinity, we’re going to be co-opted because, when you deal with God as One, you can get into patriarchy. But the minute you get into the Trinity you get into community. And here we are going to have the experience that the holiness of God is called the “Holy Trinity, the Blessed Trinity,” and this is key to our second point. Out of this reality we see that the freedom of persons is key to our Catholic [Social] Teaching, and the relationships of mutuality are to bring about security in those relationships, and the resources are to be ordered in such a way that there are no needs.

3) But when we see sin entering into the world—the individualism of the few and the “isms” of the few (whether it’s racism or sexism or the other “isms” that Constance [Phelps] talked about this morning that end up structured in dynamics of control reinforced through fear and intimidation to perpetuate the wants of the few at the expense of the many)—somebody has to get up in the name of God and the reign of God and say that this is sinful—individually, communally, economically, politically and ecclesiastically, once we understand that this holiness of God is Trinitarian.

So, when the Vatican and these Right-Wing people who are talking about abuse in the church, saying: “If only priests would be holy,” they are still going back to the holiness codes that Jesus rejected. We’ve got to come and pronounce the new holiness. What is the holiness of the total body that is going to bring out cosmic implications for the integrity—not just of individuals and groups—but the integrity of creation itself. We have to begin, therefore, to start calling this “sin.” I believe this is the most important thing. We can no longer be silent in the face of sin. We are in a sinful institution and we have been silent too long. The violence is taking too much of a toll. The abuse has made us silent victims; we have to say “no” to it.

When we look at this sin, we believe that, out of this reality, we know that the leaders and even our own members will say: “How can you say this? Who do you think you are? You go to Fort Worth and you get converted! What’s going on here? Just let us be. If you do that, well, maybe our endowment will be shaken.” Or [they’ll say] whatever else we’ve got to do to keep surviving?

If we follow Maslow’s “hierarchy of needs” and apply it to us congregationally, we, at one time, had the vision of justice and love and responsibility. They were the highest forms. And now we’ve reverted to the first two forms: survival and security.

Furthermore, they are being exploited by the empire and they’re being exploited by the ekklesia through fear and intimidation. I cannot spend the next twenty years of my life in a lie, in a fiction. We’ve got to “speak the truth to power” and accept the consequences of “being persecuted for justice sake, for ours is the reign of God” that we’ve been trying to proclaim.

4) When we being saying this, Isaiah immediately knew, that, when he would go back to the system that called itself holy and say: “Now I’m coming out with another vision of

holiness,” they’ll say: “Who do you think you are.” To that he said: “Yet my eyes have seen the glory of God.”

Once we understand this Lord of Hosts, that the glory of God is the Trinity and that the Trinity must characterize every dynamic “on earth as it is in heaven,” everything on earth must be transformed from glory to glory into this image. We should be unable to be stopped in our prophetic voice. And then what happens?

5) Empowered in this word, we go as God’s ambassadors. We may go reluctantly and I don’t think we’re going to find it so easy to sign: “Here I Am Lord,” as the song goes that comes out of this txt.

Interestingly, this text [about being rejected] of Isaiah is the only one from the Hebrew Scriptures that is in all Four Gospels. We know that Jesus, in the story of gospels, is the one who took on the system and the system thought it had killed him. But then the power, the energy of the universe called “Spirit” was released into those first members [of the church]. And they had the courage to speak that Gospel to whomever and accept the consequences, even today as we heard about Stephen [in the Acts of the Apostles].

Preaching God’s holiness and society’s sinfulness in the empire and ekklesia promises rejection by those whose psyches have been numbed: “They have eyes to see and will not see and hearts to hear, lest they understand in their heart and turn and be converted.” Such a response represents what I call the imperial and infallible consciousness. That’s the reality [Walter] Brueggemann says the prophet must engage. But I’m not going to go into it here because it’s in my forthcoming book, *Can Religious Life Be Prophetic*.

I honestly believe we aren’t going to do it congregationally. We are too far down the line. There are internal reasons why it won’t happen and there are external reasons in the empire and ekklesia why it won’t happen. Let’s be honest about it: Religious life is not going to be prophetic in the next five years because, according to what LCWR and CMSM said in Louisville fifteen years ago, they gave us this 20 year mandate. We’ve got five years left. We’ve got five years left.

6) Despite these objections, what does Isaiah say: “A ‘shoot’ will spring up.” I believe we’ve got to support those members who are going to stick their necks out with the support of the congregational leadership and understanding.

You don’t know how important this was for me this year. A certain Archbishop wrote to my Provincial because I said about [his call to have a group of Benedictine’s refuse to host Call to Action at which I was invited to speak] that he abused his power. This was quoted in the paper. So we wrote to my Archbishop and he wrote to my provincial saying I should be sanctioned. Now, when I met with the Provincial Council, I didn’t sleep the night before. But when I went there I found I had the full support of my provincial Team. That’s the kind of support you can give that I’m talking about. You might not be able to do it but you are going to be the ones to say: “You go, girl!”, “You go, guy! We gotta do it.”

We've got to bring about this transformation. We've got nothing to lose except our souls. I think we've gone too far in this moral decline [to refuse to bear responsibility for] what it really means to be prophetic. And I believe that's the transformation that we've got to be doing.

Thank you very much.

1 Archbishop Pius Ncube, quoted in John Murphy, "Archbishop Defies Zimbabwe's President: He Campaigns for Human Rights; Church Leader Puts Own Life at Risk," *The Seattle Times*, July 18, 2004. A22.

2 Pope John Paul II, *Pastores Gregis*, 67,

3 Commission on Human Security, United Nations, *Human Security Now*, May 1, 2003. <http://www.humansecurity-chs.org/finalreport/08.20.04>.

4 Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, "Starting Afresh from Christ: A Renewed Commitment to Consecrated Life in the Third Millennium," no. 32, *Origins* 32:8 (July 4, 2002), 143.

5 Committee on Women in Society and in the Church and Committee on Marriage and Family Life, United States National Conference of Catholic Bishops, October, 1992, *Origins* 22:21 (November 5, 1992), 353.

6 United States Catholic Bishops, "When I Call for Help: A Pastoral Response to Domestic Violence against Women," November 12, 2002, <http://www.nccbuscc.org/bishops/help.htm>. 11/14/02, 1-2.

7 *Ibid.*, 355.

8 *Ibid.*, 2.

9 Notes distributed at the 1989 Louisville Assembly.

10 Michael H. Crosby, OFM Cap, *Spirituality of the Beatitudes: Matthew's Vision for the Church in an Unjust World*, second, revised edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005), 194-198.

11 Michael H. Crosby, *Can Religious Life Be Prophetic?* (New York: Crossroad, 2005).

12 Walter Brueggemann reminds us of something very important as we consider today's topic: prophets did not concentrate their critique on "the king, the government, the military or the war planners;" they "blamed the religious community, the clergy, [and the false] prophets." Why? Because of all the three groups represented in the triad of priest, prophet and ruler, it was the prophetic community that was "responsible for truth-telling." I guess this means we should not expect that honest truth will come from the king or the

priest. Therefore, we must find our truth elsewhere: in our personal experience of the Trinitarian God.

13CICLSAL, no. 3, 131.