

Inherent Dangers of Prophetic Ministry

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INTRODUCTION

The words and works of Jesus Christ in the gospels have been a source of great inspiration for many movements throughout Christendom. These movements attempt to realise certain accentuated aspects of Jesus' life as received vision in the here and now. This study will concentrate on the Franciscans as one such movement. The paper aims to examine the vision of the Franciscans within the religious environment of that time so as to ascertain the prophetic nature of the movement, and then go on to examine the inherent dangers of the vision. Finally, some general lessons will be drawn from the whole study for the contemporary church.

THE RELIGIOUS CRISIS CONFRONTING THE CHURCH

In order to appreciate the prophetic role of the Franciscans, one needs to know the religious situation of the Roman Church and the role the vision played in it. In the twelfth century, the friar minors seemed to appear at a time of deep religious crisis. Lawrence observed that this crisis was essentially a "confrontation between traditional assumptions of the Christian life and the religious needs of a newly arisen urban and secular culture."¹ It appeared then that religious forms of the organised church could no longer satisfy the religious needs of a new culture. A corollary of this new culture, as shall be seen, is the erosion of the traditional assumptions.

Prior to this crisis, the sociological concern of the medieval Church was mediated through her clergy and ritual processes.² Then, the Roman Church traditionally assumed that the recognised way by which Christians might achieve a holy and spiritual life for God is through withdrawal from

¹ Lawrence, 1994, p. 1.

² Troeltsch, 1960, p. 201.

the world.³ That being the widespread assumption, the Roman Church could meet the religious needs of the populace through its existing sacerdotal, sacramental processes, and enviable monastic life.⁴ Of that time Southern says “the identification of the church with the whole of organised society is the fundamental feature” of the Middle Ages.⁵ In other words, there was religious monopoly by the Church over the society.⁶ For the established Church to lose her control to the other religious forces there had to be some revolutions.⁷ What then were the factors that resulted in the organised church losing her traditional sacerdotal and sacramental control over society?⁸ There were several⁹ but two particular ones will be discussed briefly as it relates to the difficulty of the Roman Church to contain and control¹⁰ – urbanisation and shift in spirituality.

With the onset of urbanisation, the organised Church was finding the society developing at such a pace as to threaten her integral unity with it. The urban environment of great towns and universities had promoted commercial activity, encouraged mobility, and a radical increase in social and intellectual sophistication. This social phenomenon proved to be less amenable to control and organisation.¹¹ With the forming of new cities and the accessibility of learning, the population became more educated

³ Bolton, 1983, p. 17.

⁴ The monastic life was seen then by many to be a class beyond ordinary Christian people but that soon changed. At the beginning of this period (twelfth century), the clergy was expected to conform to the standards of purity already expressed in the monastic life. See Bolton, 1983, p. 24, see also chapter 2. Roundabout the same period, there was a basic shift in monastic spirituality, from an inward looking one to an evangelical entry into the world. Note that the shift is not as simple as moving from one type of spirituality to another. It is subtler than that. This is not the place to trace the subtleties. See Chenu, 1968, p. 204-219 for a helpful summary.

⁵ Southern, 1970, p. 16.

⁶ Lawrence, 1994, x.

⁷ See section on the social forces of urbanisation.

⁸ See Chenu, 1968, xv, and Keen, 1968, p. 149.

⁹ See Lawrence, 1994, pp. 1-25, for more social causes. However, it is possible to group them into three areas: accessible education, spirituality, and economic urbanisation. See also Bolton, 1983, pp. 11-32 for her perspective from a religious point of view, Southern, 1970, pp. 214-299 for urbanisation and education.

¹⁰ See Keen, 1968, pp. 149-161.

¹¹ This was not to be in the rural areas where they are treated as inertly more amenable to control and organisation. See Lawrence, 1994, pp. 3-25 for a helpful overview.

and more critical of the status quo of the organised church, which hitherto had been the main focal point of societal piety. With this accumulation of knowledge of the world, the literate became powerful and critical of what used to be truism. For example, a main role of the medieval Church to define orthodoxy came under siege by the internationalisation of learning right across Europe. This meant that the Church could not smoothly play its defining role of orthodoxy without being challenged and questioned by the literate and critical laity.¹² There was also free movement of new ideas and ideals afforded by urbanisation. And people were at liberty in a turbulent society to embrace whatever delighted them. This picture fits well with Southern's, a recognised authority on Medieval History, who says that "the West was in the grip of an urge for power and mastery to which there appeared no obvious limit." It was this new drive which did more than anything to disintegrate the old social and religious systems.¹³

It was in such an unstable but fertile environment that the Franciscans flourished.¹⁴ They were popular because of their radically new and literal¹⁵ imitating of Jesus Christ in his poverty. They were able to speak God's word into the poverty-stricken population by identifying their poverty with Jesus' poverty. According to Frugoni, slipping into poverty was extremely easy.¹⁶ Social inequalities at birth, the failure to repay a sum of money, the homeless as a result of fire, broken arms and even the slightest infirmity could render these victims begging for alms. To make matters worse, the extreme disparity of the rich and poor, of the employed and the unemployed were ever increasing.¹⁷ And for the friars to be in solidarity with those in destitution was a powerful statement. The Franciscans lived in absolute material poverty – to lead a life without possessions. The use of money, and the ownership of property, books, food, clothes even life were renounced. Such radicalised idea of poverty also acted in solidarity with the poor as well as functioning as a prickling conscience for the

¹² Keen, 1968, p. 150.

¹³ Southern, 1970, p. 35.

¹⁴ "Without the towns the friars would never have come into existence; without the universities they would never have become great." Southern, 1970, p. 273.

¹⁵ Spiritual exegesis (allegorisation) was once highly esteemed prior to twelfth century. But the medieval piety took a greater interest in its literal meaning and the historical aspect of salvation. See Vandenbroucke, 1968, pp. 243-282.

¹⁶ Frugoni, 1998, p. 20.

¹⁷ Southern, 1970, p. 274.

wealthy in society. By embracing poverty as the primacy of Christian discipleship and thereby having great importance for salvation, it challenged the status quo of what was of ultimate importance in this life.

In their espousal of poverty as a way of life, the Franciscans were giving a voice to the voiceless (the poor and the lepers); reviving a basic truth of the Bible in the face of wealth in Church and society; and it also gives a hope and future for those socially neglected. In these three senses, the movement was prophetically challenging and offering an alternative to the social and religious conventions.¹⁸

The organised church did not stand with folded arms but had attempted to return to the pre-crisis ideal¹⁹ through some higher unity of administration.²⁰ For example, in the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, Pope Innocent III try to formalise the reforms engendered by new religious movements with some success although the pressure reappeared for more extensive reforms.²¹ Even after being granted official recognition, as Paul Sabatier observed about the Franciscans, an inevitable tension between *the religion of the spirit* and *the religion of authority* continued to be problematic.²² The end result was that the usual apparatus of the organised church had found it increasingly difficult to restrict or control the spread of radical ideas in urban areas.

¹⁸ Brueggemann, 1988, p. 13.

¹⁹ Southern defines the Catholic ideal of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries this way: "The ideal ... was a society of disciplined and organised clergy directing the thoughts and activities of an obedient and receptive laity – kings, magnates, and peasants alike." 1970, p. 38.

²⁰ On a political front, the State also wanted to unify the church in matters of law and doctrine for its own political aims. It failed because such a position "continually mingled foreign political opinions, interests, and powers with the life of the Church." See Troeltsch, 1960, pp. 209-10.

²¹ Bolton, 1983, p. 15. Legally, Innocent III was bound by the canons of the Fourth Lateran Council to admit no new orders. See also Chenu, 1968, p. 239.

²² Cited by Lawrence, 1994, p. 29.

A SHIFT IN SPIRITUALITY

Even within the incorporated religious orders²³, spiritual dynamism was not a matter of organisational control. The shift in medieval spirituality proved to be far-reaching than merely trying to keep up with the new intellectual climate. Monasticism, characterised by withdrawal from the world (more contemplative than apostolate), had hitherto been the recognised way by which Christian could achieve a holy life for God. The monastic emphasis on *vita angelica*, that observance of religious and contemplative life, had been challenged to become *vita apostolica*, that of returning to the examples of Christ and the apostles.²⁴ Although the monks of the twelfth century would argue that they were following the example of the apostles in monastic terms, nonetheless the critical shortfall was on its apparent lack of engagement in proselytism or pastoral care.²⁵ Moreover, monasticism had assumed an institutional form that it could not lay claim to model with any accuracy the life of Jesus and the apostles.²⁶ The very rule of poverty, which should have characterised the economic and spiritual monastic life, was no longer holding. The actual prosperity of individual monasteries brought a sharp contradiction to the rule of poverty.

The Franciscans came at a critical time of fulfilling those very roles – the contemplative and apostolate going hand in hand.²⁷ The Franciscan friars had also lived their life of extreme poverty publicly as compared to the cloistered monasteries. This implied a sharp rebuke of the monastic rules.²⁸ More than that, individual encounters and experiences with the divine were acknowledged and valued. The gospel and the primitive church arouse Christian individualism in breaking out in opposition to the materialised institutional monasticism with great indifference and hostility.²⁹ Albert of Mantua³⁰ exemplifies this Christian individualism by

²³ The Church did not absorb but counteracted heretical groups through its network of monasteries and parishes. Failing that, violent force may be used, as was the case with the Cathars. See Lawrence, 1994, pp. 4-8.

²⁴ Bolton, 1983, pp. 19-24.

²⁵ Bolton, 1983, p. 67. See Chenu, 1968, pp. 202-238, a helpful chapter on “Monks, Canons, and Laymen in search of the Apostolic life.”

²⁶ Bolton, 1983, p. 22.

²⁷ Vandenbroucke, 1968, p. 321.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 283.

²⁹ Troeltsch, 1960, 357.

his preaching and converting³¹ with no apparent institutional affiliation. He seems to be an itinerant preacher, who goes about his way from city to city conducting mission and making substantial converts.³² According to McDonnell, the Franciscan movement “was concerned with personal experience, the direct relation between the human soul and Christ, and also with evangelism of a more personal kind.”³³ The impact was precisely such an appeal to the soul of the individual, to reach out to its maker in hope and gratitude – it was sheer simplicity.³⁴ This all happened because the populace was more concerned with the spirit than with the form.³⁵

The brief sketches of the two forces demonstrate the serious challenge to the immemorial understanding of Christian living. This new challenge also provided a framework in which to understand the radical emergence of the Franciscans. Lawrence is certainly right to see the Franciscans as appearing at a time of deep religious crises in the twelfth century as the traditional assumption of the Christian life were being put into question by the religious needs of an urban and secular culture.³⁶ They appeared at such a time as this to provide a prophetic alternative of evangelical poverty to the traditional sacerdotal and sacramental way of Christian living. Nevertheless, there are inherent dangers in any vision that identifies predominantly with a single issue.³⁷

³⁰ He is named in the chronicles of the city of Bologna under the year 1204. See Southern, 1970, p. 273.

³¹ Conversion does not mean simply a conversion from secular occupations to life in a religious order. According to Southern, what was intended here is some kind of interior conversion from a formal to an effective religion (1970, p. 274).

³² This was happening under the noses of the episcopacy in the cities.

³³ McDonnell, 1967, p. 24.

³⁴ Keen, 1968, p. 156.

³⁵ Bolton, 1983, p. 36.

³⁶ See above.

³⁷ It is important to bear in mind that for the Franciscans; there are also other values but that poverty is the dominant and obvious one.

INHERENT DANGERS OF THE FRANCISCAN MOVEMENT

The Exclusive Rule of Literal Poverty

What was unique about the Franciscans' emphasis is that poverty is made the exclusive mark of its spirituality.³⁸ The main emphasis of the friar minors was total poverty, symbolised in following the gospel precepts to sell everything and give to the poor. It was seen as a literal imitation of Jesus' words and works. Therefore, poverty was the goal towards which their greatest effort was directed.³⁹ The rule clearly marks out the boundary between members and non-members. Despite the debate on whether the main feature of the Franciscans was humility or poverty or both simultaneously remains unresolved,⁴⁰ it cannot be denied that the most obvious characteristic is the rule of poverty understood in total renunciation of material possession. It is in the sense that the inherent danger of it is to be understood.

Is this literalism the only way of interpreting the gospel messages? One needs only to examine the Beatitudes in Matthew 5 to realise that spiritual poverty was implied there.⁴¹ The emphasis here is surely on a particular spiritual attitude.⁴² There are many aspects to the biblical view of poverty. For example, some people are poor because of their sin. Or those who suffer material loss because of the fallenness of the world. The most important counter-balancing truth, being the spiritual attitude towards poverty.⁴³ It can be clearly perceived that there exists a real danger in allowing one's pious interpretation to develop into a preoccupation. This engrossment has a flip side to it. What about devoted wealthy Christians? Are they necessarily less spiritual? Certainly, wealth can be a serious

³⁸ For the Dominicans, poverty was adopted as an essential but secondary ingredient – only to preaching – in their apostolic life.

³⁹ See Southern, 1970, pp. 281-2, and Lawrence, 1994, pp. 33-4.

⁴⁰ Nimmo has argued that Francis (and thereby as a rule also determined the movement) had understood the rule of poverty in both a material and spiritual sense (1987, p. 12). The latter is his act of total act of obedience. Whilst Moorman sees humility as the most characteristic feature of Francis' life rather than poverty even though Moorman admits that poverty is the most obvious one (1963, p. 25). Bolton has argued for a separation between Francis as a lone figure and the movement he engendered (1983, pp. 72-73).

⁴¹ "Blessed are the poor in spirit," (5:3). See also Harries, 1992, pp. 12-26.

⁴² Harries, 1992, p. 13.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

impediment to spiritual progress as had been taught by the Franciscans and the Scriptures. Yet, this is not the same thing as needing a total renunciation as though riches are a plague to be avoided. This is an extremely rigid position that allows little room for alternative ways of living the rule. It was this rigidity and exclusivity that led to the breakdown of the movement eventually. This can be seen in the paradox of poverty.

The Paradox of Poverty

The paradox of poverty is another danger created by a literal observance of poverty. The rule was liveable and maintainable by a small band of men with the direct influence of the charismatic leader. However, movement presented organisational problems when the fraternity expanded to thousands who lived far and wide. With the expansion, practical needs of the movement came to the fore and had to be met to ensure the survival of the order. Being a highly esteemed order, it produced preachers and priests. Naturally, the questions of organising development came to the fore. How are they supposed to learn and study when no books or rooms are permitted? How can books and rooms be acquired without funds? This sort of progress had created a dilemma for the Franciscans. It was this indecision that forced the provincial minister in 1230 (just four years after Francis' death) to seek an authoritative interpretation of the rule. In effect, the original rule was mitigated and a "spiritual friend"⁴⁴ was appointed to act as a trustee with power to receive and hold money on behalf of the fraternity.⁴⁵ So in effect, adopting as their ideal poverty in the midst of corporate possessions solves the problem.⁴⁶ Herein lies the paradox of poverty: it is easy to be poor by chance or even by personal choice, so difficult by policy.⁴⁷ By giving poverty such legitimacy, it is in

⁴⁴ An official position created.

⁴⁵ Lawrence, 1994, pp. 39-42.

⁴⁶ A contemporary movement of the Franciscans, the Dominicans whose original vision was a fixed determination to be poor, but as time progresses, they had begun to have corporate possessions. The reader should note here that the Dominicans used poverty more as a method of apologetics, as can be seen in the Dominic's attitude at the time of the repression of the Albigenses in 1206. See Vandenbroucke, 1968, p. 320. Another thing to note is that Dominic by no means borrowed the ideal of absolute poverty from Francis as is sometimes assumed. The ideal of poverty would have been a familiar concept to a well-read Augustinian like Dominic. See Southern, 1970, p. 273.

⁴⁷ Southern, 1970, p. 288.

fact “only wealth under another name.”⁴⁸ The survival of the order was assured but only at the cost of compromise – a far cry from the original vision of Francis.⁴⁹

A weak sense of the order and tradition of the Church

The Franciscan movement had a weak sense of Church’s order and tradition as it tried to adhere to and preserve the exclusive code of poverty as distinct from the surrounding religious establishments. By nature, prophetic movement is characterised by egalitarian relationships with no formal hierarchy and often has little formal organisation at all.⁵⁰ That being the innate characteristics, the Franciscans shunned the religious orders. One recalled the famous scene in which Francis was put under pressure to join a religious order.⁵¹ To which Francis replies: “don’t talk to me about some rule or other, neither that of St. Benedict, nor of St. Augustine, nor of St. Bernard, nor about any life or way of living other than that which the Lord has mercifully shown and given to me.”⁵² In this way, Franciscans came close to declaring themselves as the only true fellowship of men. Thus, this new apostolic movement was less amenable to the habitual mode of organising. Where does that leave the divine call into the community of his Church? Despite that refusal, the band was moving to form an organisation as it expanded. This is unavoidable. Any visionary movement with great growth needed some form of centralised control even within the movement itself.⁵³ Many problems between independence from and dependence on the Church’s governance had to be overcome before the order finally took the centralised direction and control, which was a long step forward.⁵⁴ The wisdom of the Church had helped to give the unstructured movement an order patterned after similar traditional

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 288.

⁴⁹ Bedoyere, 1962, p. 58, Frugoni, 1998, pp. 58-9.

⁵⁰ Harris, 1998, p. 26.

⁵¹ It should not surprise us that the Church controlled monasteries through a rule. So much so that eventually the degree of control by the centralised authority of the Church meant that any new monastery was required to submit its rule before it could be officially recognised. See Bolton, 1983, p. 35.

⁵² Chenu, 1968, p. 259, n.28.

⁵³ When the movement grew to 3,000 adherents, a meeting was called and some form of organisation was put in place (see Lynch, 1963, p. 38-46).

⁵⁴ Southern, 1970, p. 273.

orders.⁵⁵ Thus, assuring the survival of the prophetic movement with its common divisions of strict, moderate and relaxed. Had the first band of Franciscans found a niche within the community of the organised church, the need for enforced organisation may not have happened.

Dependence on a charismatic leader

So long as Francis was alive, the movement thrived on his charisma as their authority. His followers willingly conceded authority to him. One way of looking at this dynamic is that his followers gave Francis legitimacy. In other words, without the followers, Francis' vision would not have materialised. Thus, it is important to sense the fragility of charismatic leadership. As long as the collective consent to his leadership, the movement would move forward by an extension of his personality (strengths and weaknesses all roll into one). Conversely, should the group cast doubt on his leadership, it would have a fragmentary effect on the entire movement and this was what happened. Precisely because Francis had no well-defined plan but was "animated by great enthusiasm and real sincerity", his relationship with his followers was very informal.⁵⁶ It was on such dependence on Francis' charisma and not any solid plans, that any mistakes, indecision, or such like on his part, would have serious implications for the entire movement. For example, Francis was ambiguous as to where he really stood between his conscience and the properly constituted authority. On the one hand, Francis was utterly convinced that rule was the gospel but on the other hand, he had no desire to break away cleanly from the organised church. This lack of coherence in this matter about where he stood could have encouraged his later followers to work his rule to a moderate position that would embrace a broader range of people's life situations.⁵⁷ Thus, a group that solely depended on a charismatic person to provide leadership would have to contend with his good or bad points.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 1970, p. 283.

⁵⁶ Frugoni, 1998, p. 91.

⁵⁷ Bonaventure, a famous friar minor himself, eventually led the movement and took a moderate position. He was also responsible for reconciling the factious tendencies within the movement. Unfortunately, this was a temporary unity. According to Nimmo, the divisiveness continued until 1517, when under Pope Leo X, the whole order was split into the Friars Minor, and the Conventuals (1987, pp. 2-3).

From a protest movement to a protected movement

It has already been suggested that the wisdom of the medieval Church could lend some forms of organisation to the mendicants. However, due to the lack of coherence in the understanding of the movement in its relationship with the Church, there was the opposite danger of being institutionalised too much that it suffocates the spirit of the movement. One serious consequence of that was an internally divided movement.⁵⁸ The friars minor acted as a protest sect against the Church apparatus. As the movement progresses, the Church was calling for the primitive rule to be revised so as to accommodate other potential followers from other walks of life, as the rule was perceived as being too harsh. The movement complied with the wishes of the Pope so much so that the revision was seen as a compromise. A consequence was that the message of protest was to lose its cutting edge. There was a blurring of boundaries between the Church and the prophetic ministry. Since prophetic sect thrives on presenting itself as an alternative in opposition, the actual bending of scruples was dissolving the prophetic nature of the movement into a melting pot. This had created a fissiparous tendency within the movement. Some of them wanted a return to the purity of the primitive rule and a literal observation of the rule.⁵⁹ Other followers preferred mitigations of all kinds to the rule. Yet, another group favoured a less literal observation of poverty and a more organised form of the apostolate.⁶⁰ The high note on which the movement started had become discordant noises. The protest movement became a protected movement and not all the factious

⁵⁸ The zealous Franciscan Spirituals went their separate way since they saw any accretion to the purity of the primitive as lamentable. Regrettably, in the ensuing years after Bonaventure's death in 1274, there was a bitter struggle between the Spirituals and the moderates. See Lynch, 1968, pp. 40-1.

⁵⁹ There is no consensus whether or not the spirit of Francis' ideal was keep pure or not. For example, Lynch believes that despite the heavy revision, the final rule in 1223 still breathes the spirit of the founder. Conversely, Paul Sabatier contends that little of the original Franciscan ideal survived through the revision. A large body of hagiographical writing causes such a situation. The serious critical problem lies in disentangling the pious fiction from genuine eyewitness report, and distinguishing the original from the derivative. It is not the intention of this work to sift through all these hagiographies but to show the considerable difficulty in determining with certainty Francis' thinking on church matters.

⁶⁰ Lynch, 1967, p. 41.

elements came under the Church and unfortunately the freedom from control had led to a number of deplorable scandals and lawsuits.⁶¹

Despite the misfortunes of the movement, one has to recognise that there is “indeed a pattern of decline and renewal in human affairs, there will always be challenges on grounds of principle to the prevailing”⁶² status quo. This would be the situation be it the church or the Franciscan movement. This circle of “form, deform, reform, deform and reform yet again”⁶³ makes good sense only when each remains open to the alternative voices so that the prophetic vision is taken most seriously. The Franciscans also needed to heed the call of the organised Church to listen to the wisdom of her predecessors. This mutuality is needed to keep the prophetic voices on one hand from being fossilised and on the other to continue its relevancy to the changes and chances of society.

CONSEQUENTIAL LESSONS FOR THE CHURCH TODAY

In the section, I have direct and indirect consequential lessons for today’s church. Some sub-headings have immediate connection with the identified inherent dangers and some do not. However, the latter is still drawn from the prophetic movement as a whole. There is also a conscious attempt to learn from the positive and the negative ramifications of the movement.

A canon within a canon

There is always an inherent danger in identifying the Christian faith with a single issue. In the case of the Franciscans, it was poverty. It was the failure of perceiving this issue within the larger framework of the whole counsel of God that caused the danger. This exclusive and rigid emphasis can find its parallels in churches today. A specific example might be the prosperity gospel. This doctrine teaches that poverty is a curse and wealth a blessing. This is the reversal of the Franciscans emphasis, no doubt. Nonetheless, this single identification with wealth as divine approval is just as harmful. Harries has already indicated in his book that the wealth could

⁶¹ Bolton, 1983, p. 110.

⁶² Nimmo, 1987, p. 658.

⁶³ Bolton, 1983, p. 11.

become a rival to God himself.⁶⁴ Similarly, those who are poor are not an indication of divine curse as has already been alluded to. Such identification with a single issue, the Church is in danger of being preoccupied with one preferred approach of interpretation. Thus, it results in a canon within a canon.

Resistant to change

There is also a danger of the Church not listening to a radical and charismatic leader. A prophetic vision by definition is almost always challenging and upsetting since it gives a radical alternative to the prevailing state of affairs. The Church would certainly see this figure as a maverick that does not fit neatly to the current structure of things. In this scenario, the Church is determined to conserve and preserve the past and is therefore resistant to change. Yet, prophetic figures are people who are reformers as far as the past is concerned and are therefore pushing and agitating for change.⁶⁵ The Church could diminish the prophetic voice by isolating it or the prophetic group could break away from the Church to form a sect. Either way would be detrimental to both since mutual spiritual benefits eluded both. The Church should be open to change and should not extend conservatism to areas where diversity is justifiably common. We can have a uniform creed but not a uniform personality or outlook. Differences and therefore changes are inevitable.

Biblically, Jesus combined uniquely the conservative and the radical. He is conservative as far as scriptural orthodoxy is concerned and is radical in his scrutiny of everything else. For example, Jesus swept away all the human customs, which had separated the social outcasts of his time from the rest of society. Interestingly, this was the situation of the medieval Church. Unchallenged, the Church could assume that the society and her are one. This was not to be so for much longer. The Franciscan gave a voice to the voiceless of society and the Church needed to hear and embrace that. Conversely, the Church should be careful not to accept any prophetic voices uncritically. Since one strong claim of a prophetic vision is a monopoly of religious truth, the Church should test the vision over time to ascertain its real lasting value for the whole of the Church. For

⁶⁴ Harries, 1992, p. 28.

⁶⁵ Stott, 1978, p. 27.

example, with regard to integrating the prophetic movement into the hierarchy, Innocent III did not decide immediately. He decided instead to wait and see what form the new community might take.⁶⁶

A charismatic church leader

The Church whose pastor is very charismatic also stands to attract a large following. Due to dynamic personality, people are drawn to the person and perhaps not to God. The attendance continues to soar so long as the leader is there. He⁶⁷ could develop into a cult personality. As it was, arguably with Francis, any contemporary charismatic pastors bring into the church his strengths and weaknesses. The gifts the leader brings with him will benefit the Church but what about areas in which he has nothing to offer. If that were the case, the Church would develop according to his strengths and underdeveloped in conformity with his lack. A leadership team is helpful to provide a more holistic approach to Church life. Moreover, the large following the pastor had engendered may also disappear with him, should he be relocated. By spreading the focus over a number of good lay leaders, it could minimise the tendency for a cult personality from developing. Alternatively, there may be people who are not willing to follow the leader, as the case may be, the same or new group could support and help the leader face the truth honestly and “entrusted himself to the one who judges justly” (1 Peter 2:23).⁶⁸

This rejection of charismatic leader is not unusual as the episode in John 6 reveals. Jesus was extremely popular with people and so had many disciples. However, he knew many of his followers were with him for different reasons. As the story unfolds, it became clear that many left Jesus when the people could not take up the real cost of following him. Jesus takes the focus away from himself as the charismatic leader to the stark reality of the cost of discipleship. He was not interested in the numbers of followers who would turn away. Jesus wanted them to know the full implication of following him. This is an appropriate episode for any charismatic leader to take stock. John the Baptist loses popularity as Jesus gains his. John understood the role he had to play for the coming Messiah

⁶⁶ Bolton, 1983, p. 69.

⁶⁷ I am using ‘he’ in a generic sense.

⁶⁸ Warren, 1990, p. 129.

was soon to come to an end. He simply says “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30).

Keeping in step with changes

The church should be aware of the tendency for a vision to become comfortably and conveniently established as an ideal. This idealisation produced an unrealistic expectation that the society will remain much the same. This was the state of the medieval Church before the outbreak of urbanisation. The vision has to be renewed and reinterpreted for the changing nature of society. There is little use in maintaining an original vision that has lost touch with people at large. Likewise, the message of the Franciscans, being a town movement, was naturally acceptable to the people of the developing towns of the time, enabling them to find an apostolic satisfaction for their spiritual needs.⁶⁹ The vision is only as relevant as the society is in need for it.

Within the movement despite the turbulent history, it is better to see the different groupings as divisions to accommodate dutiful dissensions. Since unity cannot be forced or enforced, it seems more appropriate to include friars who disagreed conscientiously about observance to come under a different division.⁷⁰ The movement may better served its interests by division at an organisational plane than by factious and disgruntled groups.⁷¹ The things of the Spirit can be organised when the spiritual intent and level is maintained. Ultimately, the spiritual attitude towards poverty is a counter-balanced to the literalism that the Franciscans needed.

Poorly prepared missionaries

There is a consequential lesson for the church in term of her missionary work. Some may have volunteered for missionary service because they felt it was the highest of vocation when in fact, they are neither suited nor called to it. Reapsome relates: “I knew of a youth pastor who lasted less than six months as a missionary to Africa. He admitted that he had been swept along by the evangelical tide that suggested you were half a

⁶⁹ Bolton, 1983, p. 73.

⁷⁰ Nimmo, 1987, p. 657.

⁷¹ Nimmo, 1987, p. 658.

Christian at best if you didn't go overseas as a missionary.⁷² This is exacerbated by a strong tendency to see missionaries as martyrs, in the sense of giving up home, families, comforts, and even their lives, not only by others, but also in their own eyes. No doubt the Franciscans were seen in that light too. The dispute over the correct interpretation of the primitive rule was mainly due to the highest regard people have for the rule and yet were ill suited for it. For example, in 1219, 60 brothers were set out to Germany totally ignorant of the language yet was hopeful of some miraculous means of communication.⁷³ It should not surprise us that the mission failed because they were taken as heretics and was only re-established two years later. The lack of preparation can diminish the credibility of the mission. This shows the need for screening, preparatory training, a period of testing, and personal discipline for any vision to be realised.

Unity of spiritual relationship

One stark contrast to the top-heavy institutional Church is the egalitarian relationships of the Franciscans. The Franciscans were not united by formal hierarchy but by inner unanimity. The true unity, as the Franciscans see it, is inner spiritual unanimity. On an organisational plane, churches could have a forced appearance of outward unity but within it, it could be riddled with factions. Thus, the unity amongst Christians is to be preserved at all costs, not by formal structure but rather respect, tolerance, and love.⁷⁴ Even if this unity meant division at the level of organisation, it is still better served by division at this level than by factious and enforced appearance of unity.⁷⁵

The important lesson for the church to learn to not to build boundaries around particular perception of truth that could lead to the belief that we are perfect and that there is no need for God's craftsmanship.⁷⁶ In so doing, we cut ourselves off from others who are different from us. A

⁷² Reapsome, 1997, p. 263.

⁷³ Bolton, 1983, p. 72. See also Ross & McLaughlin, 1977, p. 59.

⁷⁴ Nimmo, 1987, p. 657.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 658.

⁷⁶ Ashworth, 17 September 1999, p. 1,3

famous epigram will guide us well: In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, and in all things charity.⁷⁷

CONCLUSION

The Franciscan vision was prophetic because the society at that time was in need of it. Urbanisation and the shift of spirituality have prepared the ground, from which the prophetic movement grew and expanded as a spiritual answer to the religious needs of a new culture. The fraternity is not impervious to the shaping of changing needs of society. Over time, this constant confluence of society and vision has necessitated a modified model of the original vision. Another way of looking at his phenomenon is that prophetic vision has to be renewed as it moves into new prevailing state of things. Otherwise, there is little relevance to people of a new milieu.

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⁷⁷ Quoted by Stott, 1978, p. 12.

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