

Notes for a Prophetic Lay Community guided by the Spirit of God

Fr Nicolas' Talk to the CLC General Assembly 2008 Fatima, August 17

Introduction — Greeting

I forgot when it happened. I was finishing a period of my life: two years of studies in Rome or six years of service at the East Asian Pastoral Institute in Manila. Someone told me that the CLC Community in Japan, where I was returning, had asked Father Provincial to assign me as their Ecclesiastical Assistant. Maybe they were very desperate and wanted to secure a Jesuit, any Jesuit. But the Provincial had other plans and the Japanese CLC were protected from me. My contacts with CLC (CVX for others) were sporadic and not very frequent, although they were never cut off. And, of course, I never thought that I would be here today addressing the General Assembly. And I have to say that I do it with great pleasure.

I want also to say that I am very impressed. I have read some of your recent key documents. I have had access to your sharing, reports and exchanges. I have met some of your representatives and members of the Executive Council. And I never fail to me impressed by the vision, the dedication and the depth of humanity that I find in all of them. I congratulate you all for this level of human life and of Christian commitment. [I have to confess that I had to search in your Statutes or General Principles for the right terminology regarding leadership for CLC. I wanted to know how you call your leaders. I opened the Principles and read: "The Three Divine Persons". I did not need long to realize that I was reading the wrong page. It was far down the pages that I found Assembly and Executive Council, and President, etc.

It is also a factor in the comfortable joy I have today to know that we share so much, from the basic directions of Ignatian spirituality, to even some structural elements of your system of leadership. This is a far cry from the time when in High School I formed part of the Marian Congregation of the Jesuit School in Madrid.

Much has changed since I last related to CVX/CLC.

The reading of the letters of communication from the Executive Council to the Members is fascinating. The recommendations from the Assembly in Nairobi are, no doubt, epoch-making. I read: "We felt confirmed in our call to become a lay apostolic body that shares responsibility for mission in the Church" (Nairobi 2003). This is simply extraordinary for a community or an organization of Lay Persons. The reason is that such a statement coming from a process of discernment has enormous consequences for the CLC and for all its members. And it is precisely this that you want to deepen in this Assembly of Fatima.

This important change in the awareness of the CLC Members happens – providentially – at a time when other epochal changes are also taking place. There was a time in the world when strong, gifted and visionary individuals made the difference in Church and Society.

To a certain degree, this continues to be true, even if at a lesser degree. All ages and generations have known some individuals that have had great influence for good or for evil. A gifted person never fails to influence others.

But times have changed and now we can see and experience how whole Groups, Movements, Communities, Collaborative Projects and the like make the difference. If an

individual aims at real social change, his first question will be how to mobilize others, how to practically create such movement of thought, motivation and vision that change becomes a possibility.

That, at a time like this, your Communities "feel confirmed" in a shared mission is one of God's responses to the growing need of our world for concerted and enlightened action on behalf of people, justice and reconciliation.

We can translate the above observation into ecclesiastical terms. There was a time when it was the role of Priests, Religious and other officially approved Ministers to set the tone of Church Life and give directions in every relevant sector of the life of the Church and Faith. But also here times have changed. We are getting used to live our faith and our charity with greater spontaneity coming out of our experience and training in the discernment of the movements of the Spirit. We respect Lay leaders as we did clerics in the past; we read the writings of lay theologians, we are inspired by the life and the testimonies of lay couples, of consecrated lay persons, of people who have found ways of holiness where before we only looked for secular "good life". The laity and the groups they form are being heard and accompanied with awe in the many new journeys that they have created.

There was a time, finally, when the preached and the written word had the edge in our lives. We come from a long and very rich tradition in which words were all important and faith, in the words of Saint Paul, entered our hearts mediated by the "hearing" — *Fides ex auditu*. There is something in the "hearing" that reaches depths of the person that other senses do not reach. All our cultures passed through an "audial" stage that coincided in great part with the most original testimonies of humanity and of God's communication to humanity. This continues to be true and we see real crowds of people gathering to listen to the Holy Father, his words and through them have a glimpse of God's revelation.

And yet, those of us who have been alive a long time, or who have also been blessed with long and deep contacts with the East of Asia have experience the strong emergence of "sight" in the search for deeper life and truth. The present generation finds many people who are tired and disappointed with empty words, campaign promises, dispirited and anemic homilies, words and words and words that, quoting again Saint Paul, are only clatter, sounding brass, or clanging cymbals. People today want to "see" what they "hear". They want to see "living words". The preacher and the prophet are under scrutiny. That is why there is so much interest today in the living testimony of committed laity, couples who, through the years, have transformed difficulties, differences and conflicts into testimonies of greater love, Christian fidelity and creative hope. The eye has become an inseparable companion to the ear.

Can we, as a Community, live a Prophetic Vocation?

Whatever the analysis of recent change, its motivation, its process and evolution might be, we have in our midst a new awareness and a new reality. We felt confirmed that God wants us to be "an apostolic community sharing mission in the Church".

But this mission, in good Biblical and Church Tradition, has to be a Prophetic Mission, done and carried out in the name of God and under His Guidance. And we can meaningfully ask ourselves: Can we be really prophetic? Not long ago several scripture and spiritual writers were writing books and articles in which the big question was: "Where are the Prophets?" This question is particularly relevant when addressing a community. Can a Community — like

an Institution — afford to be prophetic?

Most probably the answer is here, in our midst, in your midst. You have chosen as one of the key phrases of this Assembly: "The Disciples rejoined Jesus and told him all they had done and taught" (Mk 6:30)

Of course, not all are prophets. Maybe some among you... Or, at least, sometime, at certain times ... Not always ..., not on all fronts ...

But maybe — and this is far more important — this is the time for Prophetic Communities ... and I feel that you are decidedly moving in this direction

And if this is the case, we can say again that Saint Ignatius is the Master that we need at this time. Let us consider some points around the question: What is it that makes or defines a Prophet? What does the Bible tell us about Prophets?

- The Prophet SEES the world with the Eyes of God. --- We have seen and contemplated this in the Incarnation. "The Three Divine Persons..." (Now I am in the right page!) Ignatius is not timid at all when he contemplates the world ...
- The Prophet LISTENS with the Ears, the Hearing of God. God listens to the voice, the crying out, the anguished clamor, the outcry of the people. God hears the people when they ask for justice, when they suffer pain and loneliness and oppression...
- The Prophet FEELS with the Heart of God. We see how Jesus' insides churn, how he is moved to the depths... And the same we read about the God of the Old Testament... He cries and suffers with the sufferings of, (and here we can evoke the language of the Bible) "My Daughter", "My people", "My beloved", "My Family"... God is near, feels empathy and communion with his poor people. Compassion is his first response.
- Then the Prophet SPEAKS the Word of God. And we know that this is a word of mercy, of compassion for those who suffer... and a word of Conversion and Solidarity for those who can do something about that suffering. (We leave for another time to make a deeper analysis of this Word, which is not only an utterance with the mouth, but a living word that affects reality and changes it).

The Ignatian process and the Holy Spirit.

➤ Less than one month ago we witnessed the great experience of the World Youth Day in Sydney, Australia. 250.000 young people from all over the world. In a sense something parallel to this gathering here took place.

➤ At the heart of that Gathering, the Holy Father spoke of the Holy Spirit. He felt the need of a Catechesis of the Holy Spirit.

➤ Well, this is our theme as well. Ignatius did not have a good theology of the Holy Spirit, because at that time Catholic Theology was on a different line of reflection.

➤ But Ignatius had the EXPERIENCE of the Holy Spirit and the METHOD to help us have the same living experience. The spirituality of the Spiritual Exercises is a practical and concrete expression of that missing Theology (missing in theory, living in practice)

➤ The whole process of the Exercises on which we feed our hearts prepares the person (the soul, he would say) to come close to Jesus and do his doings:

- It prepares us to SEE as we were saying that the prophets see.
- It prepares us to HEAR what the Lord hears from the poor and the suffering
- It brings us to FEEL what Christ and God feels of reality, of good and evil
- It teaches us how to DISCERN in the middle of so much and such intense feelings with human and historical reality
- It sustains us as we come to DECISIONS about how to respond and contribute to that reality that we have become a part of
- It moves us to ACT, to DO according to what the Spirit has moved in us
- And it opens our mouths so that we can SPEAK what is happening.
 - Tell him what we have done and taught, and
 - Tell people of the sweetness and Goodness of the Lord

The Challenges of doing this in Community and as Community

➤ We were asking a minute ago whether it is possible to be prophetic in community.

➤ There is no theoretical answer. There is only a practical answer. It is possible IF AND WHEN ... Allow me to say a few words about these "If and When". But, first, let me remind you that you have made an option to become an Apostolic Community and share your mission in the Church. In other words, you have made an option to become a prophetic, missionary community, as community. The challenge, thus, is not theoretical, but practical: How to become one such living apostolic community. And maybe here this simple reflection about prophetic living might help:

➤ To be prophetic ALL OF US have to be LISTENING people. Listening to the People-Listening to the Word of God – Listening to the soft musings of the Holy Spirit. Ignatius gives us so many directions so that we can know when those three listening modes become one. Because when they become one we change and become aglow in joy, hope and consolation... Saint Thomas Aquinas wrote that in the experience of Faith there are two words: The outside word that is given to us in the Scriptures – and the inner word that the Holy Spirit puts in our hearts. When these two words come together we reach a very deep communion with the Lord. But for this to become a Community experience, we all have to be LISTENING...

➤ In order to be prophetic ALL OF US have to be SEARCHING. There is no prophecy without DISCERNMENT. "Fast food-like" conclusions are only the expressions of False Prophecy. Ignatius was so convinced of this. That is why he was always ready to test, and test again his conclusions...lest he had missed some important fact, or feeling, or motion of the Spirit. An apostolic and prophetic community is a community of very humble, ever-searching believers.

➤ That means that a prophetic community lives in the healthy tension of being in need to RECEIVE, because the gift of the Spirit — as Benedict XVI said — is never conquered, but is always received in humble thanksgiving. You can see how far we have to be from any kind of spiritual fundamentalism. Our security goes hand in hand with our humility; it is not based on possession but on the ongoing awareness of living in God's mercy and love, the gift of

gifts. This is also the tension of DISCERNING, of SEARCHING and DECIDING. It may sound like a contradiction: How can we be humble and decisive at the same time? That is precisely the point of discerning, because when the Spirit comes to our community our fears are gone and we know what God wants from us.

➤ Now, if this is the spirit in which we as a community discern and decide, it is clear that the recently coined expression "MEN/WOMEN WITH OTHERS" is not something added to the more traditional expression of Arrupe's "MEN/WOMEN FOR OTHERS", but that, on the contrary, it can even be more original and radical for CLC that has opted to be an Apostolic Community.

➤ ALL the members are invited to have EYES to SEE. You also know that you, as lay people, very often see what we priests do not, or cannot see.

➤ ALL the members are invited to HEAR... what priests and clergy often do not hear. It is amazing, as a curiosity, how "hearing" can also be culturally conditioned. Who can hear a coin falling in a busy street? Or your own name whispered ten meters away? Hearing is a discerned operation.

➤ ALL are invited and called to FEEL the pain and the suffering of others. The Third week of the Exercises trains us to feel with the pain of Jesus, the Other. It was the great Bishop Saint Hilaire de Poitiers who said: "Sanctior mens plebis quam cor est sacerdotum" (Fourth Century).

➤ ALL are called to DISCERN, DECIDE, and use their HANDS and FEET for action, service and compassion.

➤ Being a Prophetic Community for Shared Mission becomes a possibility if we dare take the challenge and move in Ignatian style to the Will of God.
Priority Importance of Formation for all

➤ All the above remarks and reflections lead me to the obvious conclusion that our greatest priority as CLC has to be the Formation of our members. This is the priority of priorities.

➤ In the recent weeks I have visited a few Cardinals of different Congregations in the Vatican. (Part of my job, I guess). Well, when I met Cardinal Rylko, Prefect of the Congregation for the Laity, he told me right from the start how happy he was with CLC; and he underlined repeatedly, "because of the serious formation they give to all its members".

➤ You remember how Saint Ignatius did not think that every person can profit from the Spiritual Exercises in the same degree. He was not elitist, but he knew that there is need of a basic capacity, an openness of the mind and the heart that prepares the person to be sensitive and responsive to the encounter with God and the guidance of the Spirit. Real education, in this sense, is to be measured by the ability to open the minds of people for greater and deeper realities.

➤ It is in this area where our main field of cooperation is. We Jesuits are extremely happy to see that the gifts of Ignatius are yours, are spreading and move beyond Jesuit circles and control. What Ignatius did was at the service of the Gospel, which is never owned by anyone. It is our joy to see the gifts of Ignatius become a shared patrimony for the good of the

Church and the World.

- We will have to work together for Formation in depth. A Formation that will include, naturally:
 - Theology, Psychology, Anthropology... anything that helps people grow as persons and as believing persons in love
 - But, mainly, the formation has to be in the Life of the Spirit, so that we all
 - master the tools to become interiorly free
 - for real discernment of God's will
 - for docile and joyful familiarity with the ways of the Spirit
- I really hope that we can work together in this important priority
- And I also hope that you, members of the CLC, help us Jesuits go deeper into the same Spirituality.
- Remember, that we are only a part, a very small part of the Body of Christ, of the People of God, of the Church of all. And it will always be a joy to serve all.

Conclusion

My gratitude for this invitation and for whatever form of cooperation that we will have in the future. Our task is big, but it is mostly deep, a task in which and through which we hope to build in each other the Body of Christ and share with each other the guidance and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

Something to look forward to and to thank the Lord for.

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