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In the Company of Prophets

The story of the Transfiguration has to be one of the most mysterious scenes of the gospel narratives. John Paul II drew upon this episode in his Apostolic Exhortation in order to provide the theological-mystical background for the consecrated life. The scene has been a favorite of religious writers because of the depth of its symbolism and its connectedness with the mystery of the risen Christ. Teilhard de Chardin, for instance, embraced the Transfiguration as a metaphor for the Christian’s ascent into the even deeper mystery of the Incarnation.¹

Understanding the story

The account of the Transfiguration is indeed an encounter with mystery and there are many levels to the story; no Christian writer or preacher is going to exhaust its richness. At one level, the gospel account is actually a creedal statement or a proclamation of faith expressed in narrative rather than doctrinal form. The evangelists are telling us that Jesus is continuous with the plan of salvation revealed within the history of Israel, that he is greater than all of the Old Testament prophets, and that Jesus alone beholds the glory of God.

¹ Teilhard wrote in The Divine Milieu, for example, that “some readers . . . may feel vaguely upset or uneasy in the face of a Christian ideal which lays such stress on the preoccupations of human development and the pursuit of earthly improvements. They should bear in mind that we are still only half way along the road which leads to the mountain of the Transfiguration.” See The Divine Milieu: An Essay on the Interior Life (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), 40.
Whoever listens to Jesus hears God’s voice; whoever lays eyes on Jesus has caught a glimpse of God.

From a strictly narrative point of view, the transfiguration also serves to relieve some of the tension created by the predictions Jesus made about his suffering and death. The story signals to the reader that victory and glory are on the horizon.

It would be a mistake to read this gospel story as if it were a reminiscence of an actual moment during the ministry of Jesus, despite what we read in 2 Peter 1:18 (a letter which the apostle Peter almost certainly did not write). What we have before us in the transfiguration scene is more likely to be a meditation upon or contemplation of the significance of Jesus that is deeply rooted in the religious traditions of the Jewish people. Jesus is the new Israel; he is God’s faithful and obedient son. Standing in the company of Moses and Elijah, Jesus is both a teacher and a prophet; indeed he becomes the symbolic culmination of the law and the prophets. For Christians, Jesus is above all God’s self-revelation, the glory of the Lord in human form.

The heavenly voice, which we also heard earlier at the Jordan river, has most likely been stitched together from several Old Testament texts (from Psalm 2:7, Isaiah 42:1 and possibly Genesis 22:2). The divine declaration is essentially a proclamation on the part of the Church about its faith in Jesus. It occurs to me that the most appropriate place for that voice, however, was neither the baptism nor the transfiguration scenes, but the resurrection itself. Yet an evangelist for one obvious reason could not have inserted the voice there; the tradition realized that there were no witnesses to what happened that Easter morning at the grave. Like a tree falling in a forest, the voice would have fallen on deaf ears.
If we were going to appropriate the transfiguration story in order to shed more light on the nature of religious life, what elements might we want to underline? We could fix our attention upon the two brief sentences “Listen to him!” and “they saw . . . only Jesus.” These few words could frame an understanding of religious life in terms of listening to and fastening one’s eyes on Jesus alone. Or we could follow the Exhortation and highlight the mystical dimension of the scene. Religious, like the three disciples, are men and women who have been called to behold and to contemplate the glory on the face of Christ. The Transfiguration was, after all, a vision. Matthew’s version of the story makes that clear (Matt 17:9).

Moses’ first encounter with the divine mystery took place on Horeb, “the mountain of God” (Ex 3:1). It was there that he came upon the bush that burned yet was not consumed. We learn later in the book of Exodus about the extraordinary intimacy that had developed between Moses and God: “Thus the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend” (Exodus 33:11). But when Moses asked to behold God’s face, he was told that such a vision was impossible:

Moses said, “Show me your glory, I pray.” And he said, “I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, ‘The Lord’; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy to whom I will show mercy. But,” he said, ”you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live.” (Ex 33:18-20)

The similarities between the story of Moses and the transfiguration are striking. On coming down from the mountain, Moses’ countenance had turned bright: “the Israelites would see the face of Moses, that the skin of his face was shining” (Exodus 34:35). Luke writes of Jesus: “And while he
was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white” (Luke 9:29).

Jesus, of course, did not veil his face from his disciples after the revelation on Mount Tabor, although the point of the veil Moses used to cover himself was not lost on Paul: “the people of Israel could not gaze at Moses’ face because of the glory of his face, *a glory now set aside*” (2 Cor 3:7). Paul allegorized the ancient story in a different direction as he contrasted the old with the new. He continued: “And all of us with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit” (2 Cor 3:18). For Paul, the Christian confidently beholds the face of the risen Jesus and is transformed; we become what we contemplate, through the power of the Spirit. Paul does not appear to be thinking here of Jesus’ own transfiguration as recounted by the evangelists but rather the transfiguration of those who love and follow the risen Lord.

But to return to our point about seeing. Elijah, like Moses, never saw God’s face. He was a prophet of great passion and spoke with God; he heard the sound of God’s voice (1 Kings 19:11-14) and was taken to heaven at the end of his career in a chariot of fire (2 Kings 2:11). Yet Elijah was not God’s son the way Jesus was. He never encountered God face to face, although in the baptismal scene neither did Jesus actually see God; he heard God’s address, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased” (Mark 1:11). Perhaps the reason for the prominence of hearing instead of seeing is that

Christian revelation is primarily a revelation of hearing, not of seeing. Although the image of seeing is not excluded . . .
the comparison with hearing is the dominant one in revelation.²

The three disciples did not see God, either. Like the others, they heard God’s voice. Like the others, their encounter occurred on a mountain, and like Moses they experienced God’s presence within a cloud, recalling the glory of the Lord that filled the tabernacle (Exodus 40:34-38). Yet the disciples do not really occupy center stage in the transfiguration scene; they are simply witnesses to Jesus’ glory, for the moment belongs to him.

Still, the scene clearly confers great authority on Peter, James and John; it bolsters their position within the early Christian community, or perhaps more accurately it firmed up the position of those who claimed to succeed them. But in the scene the three disciples strike us more as fearful, uncomprehending spectators than as men being empowered for a life of bold witness. They do not at all come across as men set apart to know and love Christ more intimately than any of the others. Paul, for one, would have objected strongly to any such claim.

Another interesting feature of the story is that the tents Peter was babbling about never got built. In fact, the story reads as if poor Peter was roundly interrupted in mid-thought by none other than God—one more embarrassing moment for the future leader! The permanent place for Jesus and the disciples was not

² Hans Urs von Balthasar, The Christian State of Life (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983), 393. He explains: “That God speaks to us in his personal word is a greater grace than that we are allowed to see him . . . for it presumes that God considers us capable of understanding his word through the gift of his grace” (393-94).
going to be a mountaintop; they could not remain there, however consoling and beautiful the moment. All four of them had to return to everyday life among the people of God. The same thing happened in the case of Moses and Elijah. Moses had to return to teach and to lead, Elijah to deliver God’s word and continue his prophetic mission, Jesus to heal an epileptic boy and resume his messianic journey.

**Living in the company of prophets**

I do not believe that it would be fair to say that all religious are called to be prophets, although I do believe that religious life, like Christian existence itself, is prophetic at its core. The reason is that the radical following of Jesus that lies at the heart of the baptismal commitment all of us make involves bearing witness to the gospel. More often than not, bearing witness to our profession of the gospel takes place in a social and cultural environment that does not fully share our moral vision or religious conviction about the nature and destiny of human beings.

Yet even though not all religious are called to be prophets after the manner of an Elijah, Amos or Jeremiah, each of us does, through our religious profession, express a desire to embody the story of the prophet Jesus. Besides, some religious will indeed catch the fire of the martyrs for justice; zeal for God’s house will consume them (John 2:17). Thus even if individual religious do not consider themselves to be prophets, they may sometimes find themselves living in the company of prophets. And this can become pretty unsettling. I can think of nothing that uncovers the occasional illusion that religious life is supposed to be a peaceful sanctuary safe from the world than the disquieting presence of prophets in our midst. To be a religious is to be called to spend one’s life in the company of
prophets. The disciples must have been caught off-guard on many occasions, not knowing what exactly Jesus would do next to get himself and them in hot water with religious authorities, wealthy landowners, people with ties to Herod, or with Roman officials. If they had thought initially that Jesus’ mission was to bring peace upon the earth, then they were badly mistaken.

The transfiguration story leads us in this direction. Although Moses is usually thought of as the great lawgiver of Israel, both he and Elijah were identified as prophets. It was said of Moses, “Since then no prophet has arisen in Israel, whom the Lord knew face to face” (Deut 34:10). Earlier Moses himself had told the Israelites, “The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people” (Deut 18:15). So too Jesus was identified by the crowds as a prophet, indeed, as the prophet (John 6:14, 7:40). This designation is especially noticeable in Luke’s account of the Transfiguration:

The identity of Jesus as prophet is here made explicit. Whatever the significance of Moses and Elijah in the other Synoptists, their presence in Luke’s story serves to confirm Jesus’ identity as the prophet “raised up by God” to “visit the people” (7:16). Luke’s account makes earlier narrative hints explicit and directs the reader toward Jerusalem, where Jesus will accomplish his “exodus.” The concluding command, “listen to him,” cannot be anything but a deliberate allusion to Deut 18:15 as Luke reads it, and certifies Jesus not only as God’s Son and the chosen servant, but the “prophet like Moses.”3

Because a prophet’s message and conviction are rooted in an experience of God, there is always going to be a mystical

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side to the prophetic vocation. In place of action and contemplation, perhaps we ought to be positing the prophetic and the mystical as the spiritual axis upon which religious life turns.4

One suspects that the encounters which Moses and Elijah had with God were not so spectacular as the biblical narratives suggest. The stories do us no good turn if they tease us into craving mountaintop experiences. The prophetic vocation was more likely to be awakened, not by theophanies, but by intense contact with men and women whose lives were wrecked by the miserable social and economic conditions in which they were forced to live. We hear their cries constantly in the psalms of complaint. The thirst for God can be kindled and nourished in a wonderful way by an awareness of the suffering of God’s people.

The prophetic call was also rooted at times in the conviction that Israel had failed in its covenant obligations. Concern for the things of God was often what prompted the prophets to denounce, chastise and threaten divine judgment. Leaving aside, however, precisely how Moses and Elijah began their careers, perhaps the point to notice is that in the transfiguration story the disciples had suddenly found themselves in the company of three great Jewish prophets. And two things that each of these figures had in common were an intense experience of God and an all-absorbing dedication to God’s people.

No matter how much they excoriate, for the most part Israel’s prophets come across as embodiments of solidarity. Ezekiel, for example, accompanied his people into captivity, while Hosea symbolically married God’s wayward nation. John the Baptist may have died in Herod’s dungeon, but we remember him above all by the Jordan River, with crowds flocking to him from every corner of the country. In suggesting that the transfiguration story invites us to think of religious life in terms of living in the company of prophets, I am simply trying to show from yet another angle that the religious experience which binds us together includes two poles, God and the people of God.

While I would not define religious life as a school for prophets, I think that without prophets religious life as an institution in the Church is finished. We might not find them in every single community, but we must be able to find them in religious life as such. And by prophets I do not necessarily mean pioneers; we have been blessed with many of those. By prophets I mean men and women who experience across every part of their being the life of the people of God. That experience is both intense and effective. The appearance of prophets among us often engenders a great deal of conflict, even in the Church; but God in his mercy is the one who raises them up. Both the Church and the world need them to survive.

Religious life is by no means the only place where prophets arise, but the integrity of religious life cannot be maintained where communities no longer walk in the company of an Elijah, or an Amos, or an Ezekiel, or the prophet from Nazareth (as Luke described him). What a different story we would have inherited if Jesus on the mountain had been found in the company, say, of Confucius and the Buddha, or of Solomon and
Socrates. What a different story if, instead of marrying the people, Jesus had wedded the temple and followed in the priestly footsteps of Zechariah. What a different story if, instead of John the Baptist, Elijah or Jeremiah (Matt 16:14), the people had come to associate Jesus with Judas Maccabeus. The point need not be pressed any farther. The gospel narrative receives its definition from the pattern of Jesus’ life. And so does religious life.

To ascend the mount of the Transfiguration and spend time there is to take a great risk. We might well discover that in the end the spirits of the prophets have set their tents up within our minds and imaginations. Although the Apostolic Exhortation on the Consecrated Life did not adopt this perspective, it could easily have done so. For the religious vows themselves are prophetic markers of a person’s oneness with the people of God.