

Imitating the Prophetic Role of Mary Through Prophetic Communication in Nigeria

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Abstract:

This paper is a reflection on the role of Mary as Prophet. The article draws insights from some significant literature on the topic. The article identifies the prophetic roles of Mary, which are contained in the Annunciation, Magnificat, her advocacy for justice, her specific mission, and her apparitions. Further, the article attempts to explain the meaning of Marian Spirituality and recommends the need to develop a prophetic consciousness like Mary. Added to these are some salient tips for communicating prophetic messages.

Keywords: Mary, prophet, communication, Marian, message, apparition, spirituality, church.

1. Introduction

This paper is divided into 7 segments besides the introduction and conclusion. It begins by defining who a prophet is and goes on to identify common traits of prophets; further, the paper explains why Mary is called a prophet and suggests ways of following the footsteps of Mary. More still, the paper highlights some moral crises in Nigeria and emphasises the need to develop prophetic consciousness. In addition, the paper provides some tips for communicating prophetic messages.

2. Who is a Prophet?

In Nigeria, the gift of prophecy has been turned into a joke where any ‘prosperity preacher’ rises and says to a congregation, ‘You will all be millionaires by next year’ and everybody shouts Amen to the prediction, not minding whether the prophecy is from God or not. So many false prophets today are confusing people rather than preaching the message of salvation. Misunderstanding of the concept of prophecy goes beyond the shores of Nigeria. John Oswalt, an American distinguished professor of the Old Testament narrated an experience he once had with his students. He asked them what topic they would want to learn. They were so excited to say they wanted to study prophecy. The Professor was delighted since this was an area of study, he was very familiar with. He prepared his lectures so well and began to teach them about Prophets of the Old Testament, such as Amos, Micah, and Hosea. He observed they were getting bored and their excitement was waning.

He stopped to ask them what the problem was. One of them said: “When are we going to begin prophecy?” At first, the professor could not understand the meaning of the question. Later he understood that what he was teaching them was not what they wanted to hear. All the students wanted to know was prophecies and predictions and end times.

The common understanding of a prophet is someone who can predict the future, a soothsayer or a seer. The role of a prophet goes beyond foretelling the future. Broadly speaking, a prophet is someone whose speech is inspired by God; someone who is an oracle of God and who speaks the mind of God. Old Testament prophets often begin their messages with ‘Thus says the Lord...’ to demonstrate that the word they spoke was not their opinion or a figment of their imagination. In addition, a prophet is one who boldly proclaims the truth as in the case of John the Baptist who was killed for the sake of speaking truth to power. The Apostle Peter says, “No prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke as oracles from God” (2 Peter 2:19).

An article about our Christian faith contained in the Nicene Creed tells us that God the Holy Spirit spoke through the Holy Prophets. The Apostle Peter testifies that prophets were “Moved by the Holy Spirit” (2 Pet. 1:21). Therefore, we believe that God spoke through the prophets in the days of old and he still speaks through prophetic voices even today. In the famous Litany of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the attributes of our Blessed Mother are extolled. One of these attributes of Mary is Queen of Prophets.

3. Traits of Prophets

Some of the salient traits through which we can identify prophets are as follows:

- a) **They are Called for Specific Mission:** God called the Prophet Jeremiah and gave him a job description saying, “See, I have this day set thee over the nations and the kingdoms, to root out, and to pull down, and to destroy, and to throw down, to build, and to plant” (Jeremiah 1:10). Similarly, the Prophet Amos recalled how the Lord called him and told him where he should go and prophesy. He said, “I was no prophet, neither was I a prophet's son; but I was a herdsman, and a gatherer of sycamore fruit: and the Lord took me as I followed the flock, and the Lord said unto me, Go, prophesy unto my people Israel” (Amos 7:14-15).
- b) **Prophets as Contemplatives:** In contemplation, the prophet Elijah discovered God in the gentle breeze (1 Kings 19:12); a quest for contemplative life could have attracted John the Baptist into the wilderness. Therefore, it is not surprising that the spirit of prophecy and “The word of the Lord came to John in the wilderness” (Luke 3:2). The spiritual experiences of Elijah, John, and other prophets are instructive because they remind us that Contemplation and union with

the Spirit precede the communication of prophecy. The Dominicans who have a deep Marian spirituality would say in Latin *contemplari et contemplata aliis tradere* (contemplate and hand unto others the fruits of your contemplation).

- c) **Intimate Relationship between God and His Prophets:** A successful spokesperson is close to the person or leader on whose behalf he speaks. God reveals himself and his message to people who are close to him. God says, “If there is a prophet among you, I, the Lord, make Myself known to him in a vision, and I speak to him in a dream” (Num. 12:6). There is an intimate relationship between God and the prophet, so much so that God divulges things that are unknown to other people. The prophet Amos testifies to this fact: “Surely the Lord God does nothing unless He reveals His secret to His servants the prophets” (Amos 3:7). In addition, the Prophet Samuel asserts, “The Spirit of the Lord speaks by me; His word is on my tongue” (2 Samuel 23:2).
- d) **Prophets as Change Agents:** The message of the prophet is not just to inform but also to transform. A prophet is an advocate of radical change. John the Baptist, like other prophets before him, boldly called on his listeners to change their ways and warned them saying, “The axe is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown in the fire” (Matthew 3:10; Luke 11:29).
- e) **Prophets as Courageous People:** It takes courage to speak the truth. A story that comes to mind is that of Prophet Nathan who was sent by God to King David. The prophet courageously confronted David over his sin of Adultery (2 Samuel 12:1-7). The prophet is the voice of one who cries in the wilderness. He courageously speaks the truth even when he knows the truth, he speaks is unpopular among the majority of his listeners. The prophets were very consistent in their message to the people. The prophet consistently calls people away from idolatry and invites them to live a morally upright life and be at peace with their God.

4. **Why Do we Call Mary a Prophet?**

Mary is a prophet par excellence for several reasons:

- a) **The Annunciation (Luke 1:26-38):** The event of the annunciation is a definitive moment that points to the prophetic role of Mary. Her encounter with the Angel Gabriel is reminiscent of the call of Old Testament Prophets. According to Johnson, “The Annunciation scene is nothing less than a prophetic vocation story on the model of the call to Moses at the burning bush. After questioning, she gives her free

assent, launching her life on an adventure whose outcome is unknown” (Johnson 12). She declared her unworthiness towards the role, which God gave to her, but she did not hesitate to accept the will of God when she said, “*Ecce ancilla Domini, fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum*” (I am the handmaid of the Lord, let it be done to me according to your Word). While the prophets were inspired to speak by the Holy Spirit, Mary was not only inspired but also covered with the Holy Spirit. The Angel said to her, “The Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Almighty will overshadow you” (Luke 1:35).

- b) The Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55):** The Magnificat (Song of Mary) is a revolutionary canticle that prophesies a new social order with the coming of Jesus. In this song, Mary prophesied a new world order. She predicted how the Lord would put down the mighty from their thrones and raise the lowly and how he would feed the starving with good things and send the rich empty away.

It is this new world order that Jesus constantly refers to as the Kingdom of God. He gave parables about how the Kingdom of God will look like and said, “Those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted” (Matthew 23:12; Luke 14:11). In this same kingdom, Jesus says the first will be last and the last first (Matthew 20:16). No wonder, this Magnificat which is a “Great prayer, a revolutionary song of salvation, places Mary in solidarity with the project of the coming reign of God whose intent is to heal, redeem and liberate” (Johnson 12). St. Irenaeus adds that the Magnificat is a prophecy of Mary in the name of the Church” (Carroll).

- c) A Prophet of Peace:** A book entitled, “Mary of Nazareth, Prophet of Peace” affirms Mary as a prophet of peace because her Magnificat calls for social justice (Dear). We can easily link peace with Justice because there is no peace without justice.
- d) She Leads People to God:** The role of the Biblical prophets was to constantly lead people towards God. When Prophet Joel was calling his people back to the track, he said, “Tear your hearts, not just your clothes, and return to the Lord your God.” Mary played this crucial prophetic role when she directed people to Jesus, saying, “Do whatever he tells you” (John 2:5).
- e) She has a Specific Mission:** Every prophet has a specific task or mission assigned to him. The Prophet Jeremiah called the people to repentance, the prophet Amos had a strong social conscience as he

spoke courageously against injustice and oppression of the poor; the prophet Nathan challenged the King to change his ways. Similarly, Mary was given a specific task to be the Mother of the Saviour. Consequently, she conceived Jesus not only in her body but also in her heart by emulating his humility, obedience, and faith.

- f) **She Reminds us of our Covenant with God and our Place as Children of Light:** One of the major roles of the Old Testament Prophets was to remind the people of Israel about the strong covenant they made with God. Whenever they deviated the prophet reminded the people of the special place they occupy among many other nations. Mary plays the same role even today in the lives of Christians.
- g) **The Apparitions and the Prophetic Quality of Her Messages:** The apparitions of Mary put her so highly on the pedestal of prophets. While we do not hear new messages from the ancient prophets any longer, we still receive messages from the Blessed Virgin Mary who appeared in various places, at various times and gave out relevant messages to people. Her apparitions in Fatima in 1917 made the world listen to her prophetic warnings and be conscious of the apocalyptic vision of hell. Her prophetic warnings centred on calling people to pray more fervently and to repent from sin.

Besides the apparition at Fatima, there are many other apparitions of Mary and some of the most internationally renowned places are the earlier apparitions to Bernadette in Lourdes, France in 1858. Many years after the apparition of Fatima, she appeared to the 6 Herzegovinian children in Medjugorje (Bosnia) in 1981. There were other less prominent apparitions in Nigeria in places such as Aokpe in Benue State in the 1990s. These little-known apparitions came also with prophetic messages. During her apparition in New York to Veronica Lueken, she spoke strongly against moral evils such as homosexuality, abortion, witchcraft, and test-tube babies (Horsfall 376). The year 2017 is significant because we celebrate the 100th anniversary of the apparition of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Fatima. Her first appearance in Fatima was on the 13th of May 1917. The year 1917 is memorable because it was the inaugural year of the communist revolution in Russia, which spread to other parts of the world. It was also the 400th year of the breaking away of the Protestants from the Catholic Church in 1517.

Among the special requests, she made at Fatima was devotion to her Immaculate Heart and the consecration of Russia. Apart from the general messages which the Blessed Mother gave at different times of her appearances, there were three major messages which were called the Secrets of Fatima: The first two of these secrets were revealed in the 1940s and they were about the vision of Hell and the prophecy about the end of the First World War. Mary called for prayer and penance for the redemption of souls. She

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instructed people to pray the Rosary daily. The third and last secret was revealed in the year 2000. It was a prophecy about the assassination attempt of Pope John Paul II, which occurred in 1981.

Furthermore, Mary emphasized the power of the Holy Rosary in our salvation journey. St. Maria Lucia, one of Fatima's visionaries reiterated the Rosary's importance. She says,

The Most Holy Virgin in these last times in which we live has given a new efficacy to the recitation of the Rosary to such an extent that there is no problem, no matter how difficult it is, whether temporal or above all spiritual, in the personal life of each one of us, of our families...of the life of peoples and nations that cannot be solved by the Rosary. There is no problem, I tell you, no matter how difficult it is, that we cannot resolve by the prayer of the Holy Rosary (Gress).

Shortly after Mary's apparition, Pope Benedict XV issued an encyclical *Humani Generis Redemptionem*. He re-echoed the prophetic message of the Blessed Virgin Mary about the moral crises in the world. He was deeply concerned about different forms of neo-paganism that have surreptitiously found themselves in the hearts of people.

The Pope said: If...we examine the state of public and private morals, the constitutions and laws of nations, we shall find that there is a general disregard and forgetfulness of the supernatural, a gradual falling away from the strict standard of Christian virtue and that men are slipping back more and more into the shameful practices of paganism" (Benedict XVI). The Pope spoke against the falling moral standards and neo-paganism, which were destroying souls.

We can rightly say that the message of Fatima reinforced the words of the Scriptures and the mission of the Church. According to Fastiggi,

The message of Fatima highlights many central truths and devotions of the Catholic faith: The Trinity, the Eucharist, penance, the Rosary, and sacrifices for the conversion of sinners. There is special emphasis on the Immaculate Heart of Mary, which is a refuge of maternal love for us all and a sure path that leads us to God. In the end, Mary's Immaculate Heart will triumph because Mary is full of God's grace and is all pure. She has the heart of a mother who cares for her children and wishes them to be saved by her divine Son, Jesus (Fastiggi).

The messages of Mary in Fatima were prophetic, timely, and relevant. These messages were aimed at saving a world that was sinking into the quagmire of sin.

5. Following the Footsteps of Mary

We are all called to imbibe Marian spirituality. This spirituality is essentially imitating the virtues of Mary and taking her as a model of the Christian life. Scholars in Mariology assert that as the “First and perfect Disciple of Christ, Mary can be proposed as a model to be imitated by all” (Bossard 449). Thus, people (Lay people, members of secular institutes, religious and priests) in their different states or situations of life can imitate her. Mary is not only a perfect disciple of Christ, but she also “Participates more than anyone in the kingly, prophetic and priestly character that Christ imparts on his people...” (Bossard 455). There are many ancient and contemporary writers on Marian spirituality.

Some theologians such as Wolfgang Beinert distinguish between Marian piety and devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary. According to Beinert:

The formula is this: Marian piety is not identical with devotion to the Virgin; renewal of the latter will not automatically renew the former. Marian piety does not in the first place consist of pilgrimages, images, litanies, Marian hymns ... the essence of Marian spirituality is truly found not in the fact that a person prays to Mary, but rather that person prays like Mary. Mary is never the goal but only the model of Christian existence; in that, she cannot be replaced (Beinert).

Beinert uses two German words to make this distinction: Marian piety as *Frömmigkeit* and devotion to Mary as *Marienverehrung*. This distinction is subject to debate.

The Vatican Council II summarises the meaning of Marian spirituality to prayers and liturgical celebrations. The council states:

In celebrating the annual cycle of the mysteries of Christ, Holy Church honors the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, with a special love. She is inseparably linked with her Son's saving work. In her, the Church admires and exalts the most excellent fruit of redemption and joyfully contemplates, as in a faultless image that which she herself desires and hopes wholly to be (Sacrosanctum Concilium 103).

If Marian spirituality is about imitating the virtues and works of Mary, it goes without saying that as priests and as laypeople, we must contemplate and imitate her prophetic role in the history of our salvation.

6. Moral Crises in Nigeria and the Need for Prophetic Voices

We need prophets in our country Nigeria who are willing to be vocal against the forces of evil and who are willing to work assiduously to change our nation, which is neck-deep in moral crises. Our moral crises are many and

among them are ethnicity and religion, which are used as tools for discrimination.

Ironically, we have a geometric increase in the number of religious institutions, particularly churches. On the contrary, there is gradual retardation of moral character. Further, there is a dangerous trend in the commercialization of churches as churches make money the central focus of their existence.

Another crisis of moral values has to do with the quest for instant wealth. Many people care less about how they acquire their riches and so many people today are ready to go to any length for the acquisition of wealth, even if it means getting rich under questionable circumstances. The worth of individuals is no longer determined by their integrity but by how much wealth they have acquired.

Generally, we are experiencing a serious moral decay that is evident in our communities, workplaces, the church, government, and non-governmental institutions as well as in the field of business. Mahatma Gandhi identified the social sins that affect our world today. Among these sins, those that affect us most in Nigeria are the social sins that promote wealth without work; pleasure without conscience; knowledge without character; commerce without principle; religion without sacrifice, and politics without principle.

7. Developing a Prophetic Consciousness

By baptism, all validly baptized Christians are prophets, but not all Christians have prophetic consciousness. This is to say that most baptized Christians forget or are not even aware of their roles as prophets. Fr. Diosnel Centurion says,

Being a Christian implies being part of a concrete community of believers with a concrete history and culture. It also implies being prophetic. It means having an insight, which enables one to evaluate contemporary trends, and events, assess the consequences of human responses and call the community to repentance and new way (Centurion 54).

Therefore, we ought to read the signs of the times and know when to challenge or speak out against the status quo in our society. A famous quotation of John F. Kennedy which is attributed to Dante (1265-1321) says, "The hottest part of hell awaits those who keep mute in times of great moral crisis" (Kennedy 503; Aligheri 3)

To identify the moral crises that plague our church and society, we need to read the signs of the times. Jesus spoke about reading the sign of the times when he said, "You know how to read the face of the sky, but you cannot read the signs of the times" (Matthew 16:4). A principal aim of convening The Vatican II Council was to respond appropriately to the signs of the times. The Vatican II document accentuated the role of the Church in the modern world

as that of "...Scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the gospel" (*Gaudium et Spes*).

At this juncture, I would like to pose the following salient questions:
Can we be prophets if we cannot read the signs of the times?

Can we be effective prophets if we do not understand our culture? Can we be prophets if we do not understand our national, state, local, and even ecclesiastical politics?

Can we be prophets if we do not have some basic knowledge of economics and even about the business practices around our environment or country?

Can we be true prophets if we are unable to identify and differentiate between the true indices of good development from the symptoms of retrogression?

A true prophet can see clearly what is happening in his/her surrounding, judge all that he sees under the light of the Gospel, and call upon others to act decisively in bringing about the reign of God in the community.

8. Communicating Prophetic Messages

Communication theology focuses on God's way of communication through self-revelation with mankind. Throughout the course of history, God communicated in different ways. The Letter to the Hebrews says, "In various ways, God spoke" (Hebrew 1:1). God communicates even in silence and in his works. The Psalmist elaborates on God's silent communication by singing, "The Heavens declare the glory of God; the firmament proclaims the works of his hands. Day unto day pours forth speech; night unto night whispers knowledge. There is no speech, no words; their voice is not heard; a report goes forth through all the earth, their messages, to the ends of the world" (Psalm 19:2-5).

Communicative Theology is related to communication theology. It is about making God's message and theology intelligible and comprehensible to all. To make the Divine message understandable, the prophets spoke in different ways. Prophet Isaiah communicated his message symbolically and dramatically when he walked naked and without shoes for three years. He acted in this way to warn the Egyptians and Cushites of the impending doom that would befall them (Isaiah 20:2-4). The prophets used figures of speech or a variety of literary genres such as similes, metaphors, allegory, sarcasm, irony, prose, and poetry. Prophet Amos used satires; the prophet Ezekiel used Lamentation (19). Prophet Hosea used a simile to liken the relationship between God and his people to that of a husband and wife.

In modern times we are blessed with a plethora of media of communication. We have more ways in which to communicate the Gospel than the prophets of old. Prophetic messages are useless if they are not communicated properly. As prophets who wish to communicate divine messages, we need to know some basic communication skills that are helpful. These include:

- a) **Clarity:** Good communication requires an intelligible language and God wants his prophets to communicate effectively to their people in a comprehensible language. Moses complained to God that he could not play his leadership and prophetic role because he lacked the power of speech and eloquence. He could not speak clearly as a stutterer. He said, "If you please, my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor now that you have spoken to your servant; but I am slow of speech and tongue" (Exodus 4:10). God knew the importance of clear communication and so he assured Moses, "I will assist you in speaking and teach you what you are to say" (Exodus 4:12). God prepares and sharpens the mouth of prophets to be able to communicate clearly and effectively to the people. The Prophet Jeremiah confirms God's providence in the following words, "The Lord reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, "Now I have put my words in your mouth" (Jeremiah 1:5).
- b) **Context:** Communication should match context. Therefore, a prophet is bound to address the situation of the time, as well as the social ills that impede the progress of people – such as endemic corruption, exploitation, discrimination, etc. Latin American theologians advocated for Liberation theology as a way of transforming the socio-economic and political system that blocked the arteries of development. We also have to study our environment carefully and continue to make our theology relevant to our context.
- c) **Challenging Words:** A prophet challenges his/her listeners towards self-examination. Prophetic communication should be geared towards the restoration of lost moral values. Moreover, the prophet should be a tireless advocate of social justice. A prophet challenges all forces of evil that oppose the reign and manifestation of the will of God in the world. The challenging words of the prophet, like the words of Jesus, should burn within the hearts of his listeners (Luke 24:32). The words of the prophet should also destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God..." (2 Corinthians 10:4-5).

9. Conclusion

We are all called to imitate the prophetic role of Mary, but it is not enough to be a prophet. A more serious challenge is living as a reflection of the one in whose name a prophet speaks. Scriptures describe John the Baptist not only as a fearless preacher but also as a burning and shining example (John 5:29). Pope Paul VI in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* says, "Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses."

Let us imitate the role of Mary by reading the signs of the time and preaching towards a new social order – establishing the kingdom of God in the world. We must learn to see ourselves as the prophetic voices of our generation.

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