

## **WAKE UP THE WORLD: LIVING OUR PROPHETIC WITNESS**

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Thank you for inviting me to reflect with you on Pope Francis' favorite phrase to religious worldwide: *Wake Up the World!* You, the members of a pontifically-recognized organization representing and serving leaders of men's religious congregations, monastic communities, and religious institutes in the United States, have been pondering this invitation for some years. I notice it was the topic raised at some of your other assemblies and it is a call that we, as Christians, as religious, need to hear repeatedly and continually question what it means – and question if we are awake and alert enough ourselves.

65 years old as an organization, you now represent over 16,000 Catholic religious-order priests and brothers so let us begin by giving thanks – for many years and many lives of devoted and courageous service, especially to those most suffering in the United States and beyond its shores from poverty, injustice, racism and denied access to basic human rights. I admire your primary aims:

- to support the major superiors and their councillors and be a resource for them as they promote greater fidelity and *more effective witness to the Gospel ideal, with special attention to issues of justice and peace;*
- to promote dialogue and collaboration with the conference of bishops, the individual bishops, and other major groups in the church and society;

I applaud your work around the death penalty among other causes. I remember how you stood by the *Leadership Conference of Women Religious* in their time of great trial, coming to Rome yearly to visit the various dicasteries even when you were being ridiculed and shunned. Let us read again the signs of the current times: a world ravaged by the COVID 19 pandemic, threatened by climate change and ecological disaster, a world in which the widening gap between the rich and poor brings consequences of violent protest and heart-breaking stories of mass migration, a world in which the sheer scale of sexual abuse and trafficking is unbelievable, and a world in which all religious systems, including our own, are in deep division, failing to serve, inspire, to bring hope and guide most people. How is Jesus challenging you as CMSM and indeed all religious as expressed in Matthew's gospel *You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times.* Mt 16:3

Monastic life (which we know is where religious life originated) is structured around three essential dimensions: Plato's Beauty, Truth and the Good. It is through these that religious life is called to give meaning to human life in the world. Beauty announces God through aesthetics – mainly liturgy and the arts. Truth is expressed through deepening the knowledge of God in religious studies, as disciples of Jesus, pointing towards the eschatological, being in the world but not of the world. The Good is action for the common good, alleviating the suffering of

those who are poor. However, the majority of religious institutes seem to have abandoned Beauty and Truth to concentrate on action, charity or militancy, and the dangerous tendency in this is to become a kind of NGO.

Consequently, they are becoming irrelevant because one does not have to be religious to be charitable. If consecrated religious want to be prophetic today, we also have to celebrate God's beauty, and search for the truth. We have to develop the ability to move beyond political militancy, beyond being violently for or against (pro or anti) single causes. We have to have compassionate respect for the dignity of every human person, created by God and destined to dwell eternally with God.

When Pope Francis spoke to the religious superiors gathered together in Rome "Wake Up the World", he called us to be prophets, to be witnesses to a different way of doing things, of acting, of living. He also said *prophecy makes noise....* What kind and volume of 'noise' are we as religious making in this uncertain time?

St Paul tells us that our 'noise' must not be *a resounding gong or a clashing cymbal* 1 Co 13 but stem from a patient, kind, humble, reconciling, peaceful, truthful love. We know that such love calls us to listen deeply to our hearts and to trust completely in the presence of the living God accompanying us and pulling (sometimes dragging) us forward, ready to grace us abundantly with the insight and courage we need to act on it. How can we continually choose what nourishes our whole being, immersing ourselves in the love drive away all fears, that helps us to wonder, to dream like the prophets of old, to see every other person as a vulnerable human being as we are and not deny them their rights.

I should like to hold before us two young people who have made their prophetic 'noise' heard and in so doing have wakened many in our world.

The young, Swedish, climate change activist, Greta Thunberg, only 16 years of age, has addressed world leaders and all people on many occasions. Perhaps her most famous challenge is summed up in her three words "HOW DARE YOU?" How dare you ignore the signs of climate change, of ecological disaster, of injustice etc? I don't think the church or we as religious can escape her eloquent and damning criticism and her assertion that "we (the young people of our world) are watching you", that is, noticing and challenging any empty words and lack of action.

"You have stolen my dreams and my youth with your empty words" almost wept Greta Thunberg. How dare you! How dare we hear ourselves and others make excuses or become cynical in the face of blatant disregard for some human values even among ourselves? We know about:

- the acquisition of individual and collective goods/properties; a desire for 'high status' ministries, and a focus on comfort, even luxury in ways of living – none of which heed the cry of the poor;
- the misuse of authority and power by treating adults like children or bullying them as well as a deafening silence about these and other kinds of abuse;
- a negative, competitive spirit between individuals and between congregations;
- one or more of the vows being regarded as obsolete.

The other young woman who spoke centre-stage among you in this country was, of course,

Amanda Gorman, the 23-year-old who delivered the 'noise' of her stunning poem at the inauguration of President Biden about six months ago.

Her poem starts at daybreak, the awakening time, and challenges the 'quiet' we too easily name peace. In it she echoes words of Greta Thunberg:

If we're to live up to our own time  
then victory won't lie in the blade  
but in all the bridges we've made  
that is the promise to glade  
the hill we climb  
if only we **dare**  
for while we have our eyes on the future  
**history has its eyes on us ...**

We will not be turned around  
or interrupted by intimidation  
because we know our inaction and inertia  
will be the inheritance of the next generation.  
Our blunders become their burdens  
but one thing is certain:  
if we merge mercy with might,  
and might with right,  
then love becomes our legacy  
and change our children's birthright ...

When day comes we step out of the shade,  
aflame and unafraid.  
The new dawn blooms as we free it  
for there is always light,  
if only we're brave enough to see it  
If only we're brave enough to be it.

Let us pause for a few moments to wonder at and ponder such a powerful call to us to wake up ourselves and to awaken others, mostly through our actions.

From my graced position in Rome, I hear expressed hopes for the future. They include the following:

- to embrace our call to discipleship as religious men and women in the church of the 21<sup>st</sup> century especially in these challenging times;
- to risk expanding our mission, collaborating with our stakeholders and partners and other religious and people of goodwill;
- to evaluate how we are present to others through our community living and ministries and explore better ways for us to be with and meet the needs of God's people;
- to become more committed to personal and communal sacrifice in order to share more of our resources with those who have less;
- to adjust our governance models to fit our particular realities, and in doing so bear witness to processes of synodality, reconciliation and dialogue called for by Pope Francis;

- to attract men and women to religious life and to be open to new ways of sharing our various charisms with lay people, especially our Associates.

As a young girl I was challenged by one of your presidents, John Kennedy, when he said the right question to ask is *what can I do for my country?* In similar vein, what can I do for poor people around the world, my wounded and broken church, my probably elderly and frail congregation, the vulnerable members of my local community? This, I believe, is waking up the world. It is loving my neighbour as myself, which is expressed eloquently in the African saying, *I am because we are and we are because I am.*

How can we nurture that concern and care of all peoples as a gardener nurtures an exquisite plant? I think of our gardener in Rome, who knows how to bring a dying orchid back to life by knowing just how much light, water and nutrients it needs and where to put it so that it will flourish again. How do we assess what we need to offer to tend and mend the wounds of our world and planet, to restore its intrinsic beauty? We aware of the sexual abuse cases, the victims and the accused or perpetrators, the cover ups.... We have learnt in the very hard way not to cover up accusations but to examine critically each case without any bias.

Let us remember we are bearers of the dangerous memory of Jesus. In *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis used the parable of the Good Samaritan, the person who saw the wounded man from afar, went closer, got down from his horse, poured oil on the wound, bandaged him, took him to the inn nearby, paid some money and promised to return to pay more. The challenge Jesus posed in his response to the question *who is my neighbour?* It is to *go and do the same!* CMSM, what is the specific challenge you hear? No individual or group can do everything but what is your composite charism, your specific mission as a group of men in America in 2021?

We know that religious life is meant to be a prophetic voice of Christ in the Church and in the world. We remember that when God gave Israel a king, there was also the gift of a prophet. Whenever the king failed, the prophet came knocking at the door, as, for example, when Nathan knocked at David's door in the wake of David's adultery. Think of the doors the religious should be knocking at today – doors of division, poverty, discrimination, confusion, bigotry, despair, any one-focus agenda ... You can add others.

How can CMSM be the thorn in the side when the establishment has lulled itself into indifference and slumber? The role of consecrated life in the history of the Church has been to irritate the establishment when it fails to be the bearer of the dangerous memory of Jesus. Recall the daring stories of most of our founders who fell in love with Jesus and were inspired by the Spirit of God to respond wholeheartedly to the pressing needs of their time. How can CMSM be a prophetic witness in our time, bringing hope to those abandoned in prisons, torture chambers, battlefields, homeless shelters, toxic dumps, poor inner cities ... and smiles to victims of selfish choices? How can enough of us religious leave our comfort zones, our class, race and culture to do the humble service of co-creating the reign of God.

As a woman I must speak about the relationship you have with women in the church and in the wider world. I draw on the work of the theologian, Nantondo Hadebe, at the Institute for Contextual Theology in South Africa, who explores the topic of gender and gender equality in our church. She reminds us that this multi-faceted, multidisciplinary issue often raises feelings of fear and resistance because it challenges the status quo and has the potential for radical transformation. I know you are familiar with the debates around this topic and I do not want to repeat them here. However, in the context of our subject of prophetic witness, surely we must

not ask how dare we speak about the rising marginalization, oppression and violence against women in our world, when their position in our ecclesial system is *characterised by inequality?* *And where there is inequality, there is injustice* [which] has to be confronted and overcome if there is to be justice and freedom for all! CMSM what is your position about the place of women in our world, church...?

Nontando Hadebe encourages both women and men to engage in a basic theological struggle *to make women become intrinsic and visible in all aspects of church life, doctrine, practice and leadership.*

Again, in a few moments of reflection, let us ask ourselves what 'noise' on this issue are we making as religious?

One of the main reasons Pope Francis is admired by many across the world is his obvious joy, his ready smile, his humanity. He has a list of ten short suggestions for a contented life and, one could add, a prophetic presence. I invite you to practice the one or two that jump off the page for you. How can we be signs of hope in these areas?

1. Don't gossip.
2. Finish your meals.
3. Make time for others.
4. Choose the 'more humble' purchase.
5. Meet the poor 'in the flesh.'
6. Stop judging others.
7. Befriend those who disagree.
8. Make commitments.
9. Make it a habit to 'ask the Lord.' "
10. Be happy.

I end with the energizing words of the song, *Wake The World With Dawning Joy*

*Wake the world with dawning joy and gladness!  
work for justice, live in peace,  
claim the Word courageous ...  
wake the world with abiding words of faith.*

*Though the world is locked in sleep,  
let us rise rejoicing!  
One with Christ, his light to keep ...*

The writer and poet, Christian Wiman, speaks of *a crumpled Amen*. I think that our crumpled, rather messy awakenings are better than any deep, dreamless sleep. Let us ask God fervently and insistently to be awakened and so wake up our world. Amen.