

## **Forming for a Prophetic Way of Life in an In-Between Time**

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  - g. Assess members' evolving concern for justice.
  - h. Assess members' capacity for JPIC work and witness.
  - i. Do all this with intercultural sensitivity to reality of backgrounds, contexts for all members of formation community.

### **III. Psychological challenges for formators and new members undertaking this kind of formation:**

- A. Individuals are too busy.
- B. Individuals are too ensconced in middle- to upper-middle class lifestyle.
- C. Formators and leaders are not focused on a prophetic way of life, so are not modeling it.
- D. Individuals still lack skills and developmental maturity necessary for a prophetic way of life.
- E. Individuals are not grounded in a robust relationship with God.
- F. Individuals carry a great deal of psychological baggage.
- G. Individuals do not have a strong relationship with or commitment to the poor.
- H. Individuals do not have a compelling passion for justice.
- I. Individuals have difficulty being open to conversion.

### **I. Introduction:**

What does it mean to form for religious life in an in-between time of "not anymore and not yet", a time pregnant with questions, calling for transforming vision and radical hope?

#### **"Not anymore" and "not yet":**

In the last couple of years, as I've worked with formation groups and listened to formators, a frequent question has been, "What exactly are we forming for?" It is not so clear what religious life will look like in a few years, and, thus, in certain respects it is not so clear what exactly new members are being formed for.

Religious life is “not anymore” as it was when formators were formed, in terms of community life, demands of mission, identity. Candidates are often “not anymore” coming from a traditional Catholic background; increasingly, they come to formation with limited “Catholic” experience, and sometimes with a narrowly circumscribed view of Catholicism to which they cling as it provides security and identity, even at the expense of allowing in data that would broaden and deepen their perspective. The world in which ministry unfolds is not anymore what it was, as change unfolds rapidly in all dimensions of society. In the Church itself, at both local and global levels, we tend to see “astonishing creativity” and movement at the grass roots<sup>1</sup>, and, often, retrenchment and stasis at the hierarchical level

We are “not yet” fully in a new reality, a new understanding of religious life and of its role in the new world. We see that many “forms” and “structures”, within religious life are not anymore as they were, are being reconsidered, are starting to be transformed, while new structures, paradigms, and understandings are emerging in diverse and compelling ways, as religious life as a whole reflects on its identity and role at this time. We are in a time of transition, which can feel vulnerable, disorienting, frightening, and also rich, challenging, filled with opportunity. We are seeing exactly what Margaret Wheatley observes when systems change: they go through a time of uncertainty, of necessary letting go before reorganization into something new is possible.<sup>2</sup>

This in-between time is an **Easter time**, a boundary time of bewilderment and of hope, as so much is necessarily opened to reorganization. Several salient moments of the Easter narrative illustrate some of the core experiences of in-between times—experiences that are present in religious life now.

The **still-dark dawn**(of the first day of the week): For most of the disciples, the Easter experience initially involves a sense of failure, fear, loss of meaning and identity... For them, darkness is still overwhelming the dawn.

The **process of light emerging**: Seeing/hearing in a new way, in the darkness, brings light, recognition, and call to mission. Consider the experience of several disciples: Mary Magdalen is the first to see the unexpected and report it, though at first without fully understanding. Then, when she hears Jesus calling her name, she understands, and is sent. John sees and believes. The apostles in the upper room, in the darkness of the evening of the first day of the week, are “filled with joy at seeing the Lord” and believe. The disciples on the road to Emmaus see Jesus breaking the bread, believe, and run forth in joy.

What does it take to glimpse the dawn reality in the midst of the “still-dark[ness]”? It takes starting to see and hear with the heart.

**The outpouring of the Spirit**: Releases fears, opens eyes, ears and hearts to see and hear in a new way. For the disciples, the Spirit transforms everything, lights fires within them and propels them into a new way of relating, a new quality of community and of mission, despite difficulties. When a new way of seeing leads to a new way of relating to the world, Resurrection and the reign of God truly can be made present.

### **Pregnant with questions :**

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<sup>1</sup> Rosemary Radford-Ruether, “Creativity at the grass roots,” *National Catholic Reporter*, September 7, 2007, p. 23.

<sup>2</sup> Margaret J. Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World* (San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 1999), 13.

This in-between time is a fecund time, pregnant with important questions, that, if they are asked, heard, lived, loved, held, will birth the new time ahead—the time that is “not yet”... Following are a few of those questions:

**Question of listening deeply to God’s call in this time:**

Do we dare to listen deeply (personally and communally) to what God is telling us of who God is in this world at this time? of what God is calling us to? How do we know if we are listening deeply to God? Listening deeply means listening to the call of conscience and to what Martin Luther King, Jr. referred to as the call to conscience. Vocation is a call to consciousness, to awakening, to awareness. It is a call to “both personal authenticity and social responsibility.”<sup>3</sup>

**Questions of identity:** Who am I, now, as a religious, as a minister of the Gospel, as a disciple of Jesus Christ, and as a highly educated woman or man of privilege, as a citizen of this “democracy” that continues to wage an unjust war, that pursues economic and political policies that leave millions destitute and displaced, at home and abroad, and swallow up Earth’s dwindling resources? In this time, more than ever, religious in U.S. must be committed to being global citizens, and to embracing the circumstances and responsibilities of living in the U.S.<sup>4</sup>

**Question of how to respond to the current situation** in a manner deeply consistent with Gospel. In this time, what does it look like to be a Christian, a public minister of the Gospel, faithful to God’s call and poised to respond to the implications of what I see?

**Questions of poverty:** Some especially pregnant questions for religious formation and leadership in the U.S. have to do with poverty. What does it mean to serve the poor while not being poor? The Church can notice the poor, respond to their needs, even opt for them, because it (as an institution) is not poor.<sup>5</sup> To what extent do we [dare to] evaluate our works, structures, institutions from the perspective of the poor, and not only according to how effective/efficient we deem them to be? Guatemalan Jesuit Carlos Cabarrus, writes that feeling “exempt” from the pain of others and yet responsible to be in solidarity with them shames him, the mere presence of the oppressed draws him to finally give a response.<sup>6</sup> What do we do with the reality that we are largely “exempt” from the pain and struggle of those whom we serve in our ministries, and yet are responsible for being in solidarity with them? Do we sit with this question? Do we bring it into formation? Forming, today, for loving and living the questions is mostly about recognizing what the questions are, and about abiding in them, abiding in the contradictions, the uncertainty, the chaos—not running from them, not numbing to them (an option that only the privileged can choose). It also has to do with forming for the moral, social, and political dimensions of vocation, especially for the connection between vocation and social conscience.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> John Neafsey, *A Sacred Voice is Calling: Personal Vocation and Social Conscience* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), xi, 2.

<sup>4</sup> Mary Beth Moore, “Coherence, Companions!” in *The Occasional Papers*, Vol.36, No.2, 18.

<sup>5</sup> Carlos Rafael Cabarrus, *Seducidos por el Dios de los Pobres: Los votos religiosos desde la justicia que brota de la fe* (Madrid, Spain: Narcea, S.A. de Ediciones, 1995), 34.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, p.250

<sup>7</sup> John Neafsey, Interview for PTEV (Programs for the Theological Exploration of Vocation), accessed [www.ptev.org/interview.aspx?iid=11](http://www.ptev.org/interview.aspx?iid=11).

### **Calling for transforming vision and radical hope:**

Transforming vision is not a new vision of God, but **a different relationship to the world**, one based on **seeing differently**, with the eyes of God. Using "God's senses" means becoming **free** for a different way of living life and a different relationship to the world. Living from and into a different relationship with the world becomes a source of radical hope.

Walter Brueggemann reminds us that the prophetic vision does not originate in dreamy fantasies of how the world could someday be a better place. Rather, a prophetic vision begins by taking a hard, realistic look at the condition of things as they actually are right now. It begins with "imagining the real." Forming a worthy dream "depends upon a serious engagement with the truth of the world, the universe as it is, and includes looking at 'things that should not be so.'"<sup>8</sup>

Part of a new vision and radical hope comes from what Cabarrus describes as the experience of being seduced by the God of the poor. How can this experience occur, maybe even flourish, in the U.S. today? Is it part of new members' experience? Is it part of formators' and leaders' experience? How do we enter into, form for a different relationship to the world if we are not seduced by the God of the poor? As the mystic Etty Hillesum wrote before being sent to Auschwitz, "Our times are not made for the small of soul."<sup>9</sup> Transforming vision and radical hope in this in-between time are also definitely not for the small of soul.

## **II. A. What does it mean to be prophetic in this in-between time?**

A prophetic way of life embodies the call of conscience and to conscience. For religious life in the U.S. at this time, a prophetic way of life would include ten qualities.

### **1. Seeing clearly.**

Seeing clearly is about seeing reality with the eyes and heart of God. When we are willing to see this way, we will touch into real suffering, and, with God's grace, will enter into what German theologian and activist Dorothee Soelle calls "conscious inconsolability."<sup>10</sup> Inconsolability is an inevitable consequence of seeing and touching into the disturbing aspects of reality, letting oneself be disturbed, and allowing transformation to move from there. Conscious inconsolability is about listening to the "silent cry" of God that accompanies the long labor necessary to birth new realities.

This mysticism of wide-open eyes leads to a commitment to continue seeing clearly, especially in the midst of a cultural context that will not see. As Jon Sobrino observes, the human capacity for seeing clearly is almost unknown, is "foreign" in the rich world.

Brueggemann reminds us that the primary calling of a prophet is not to be an angry social critic, but rather to be someone who, first of all, is willing to take an honest look at upsetting and unsettling realities that are desired or ignored by society at

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<sup>8</sup> Sharon Daloz Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams*, in John Neafsey, *A Sacred Voice is Calling*, 102.

<sup>9</sup> Patricia McCarthy, "The Greatest Renewal Has Yet to be Undertaken," in *The Occasional Papers*, Vol.36, No.2, 22-23.

<sup>10</sup> Dorothee Soelle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), 154.

large and the powers that be. "On a psychological level, prophetic consciousness requires a willingness to allow into our awareness unsettling truths about 'what should not be so' that we might be tempted to pretend are not there. This sometimes means looking at things we would prefer not to look at and feeling things we would prefer not to feel. The prophet is then called to help others do likewise."<sup>11</sup>

In this time when many are so fascinated with creating online alternative personae for themselves, interacting in virtual scenarios in virtual reality that they cease to really see the actual reality of the world around them, let alone take in the challenges that reality extends, letting oneself be deeply disturbed, abiding in inconsolability, and refusing to choose numbing are prophetic responses. Brueggemann identifies three dimensions of the task of the prophet in a "numbed" social situation.

1. To offer symbols that are adequate to confront the horror and massiveness of the experience that evokes numbness and requires denial...
2. To bring to public expression those very fears and terrors that have been denied so long and suppressed so deeply that we do not know they are there...
3. To speak metaphorically but concretely about the real deathliness that hovers over us and gnaws within us, and to speak neither in rage nor with cheap grace, but with the candor born of anguish and passion.<sup>12</sup>

## **2. Awareness:**

### **a. Making connections.**

In this society, at this time, it is imperative to make the connections between our own

lifestyle choices (from the simplest things like use of electricity, water, and paper, to purchases we make, to patterns of voting and of financial investments) and the impact those have on others near and far, on their quality of life, and on our environment.

As peace psychologist John Neafsey points out, though we may be "good persons," who mean well, justice still requires that we take a hard look at ways that, through our choices and behaviors, we may be unconsciously participating in, supporting, or benefiting from an unjust status quo that gives unfair, unearned advantages to privileged persons in our society and that keeps others at a constant disadvantage. It is necessary to do this in order to break free of cultural and institutional patterns of ignorance and complacency that hold us back from being truly just and compassionate persons.<sup>13</sup> Making the connections must begin with a serious commitment to educate ourselves about the ways the status quo is structurally unjust, the consequences of trade and economic policies and of the ubiquitous reach of the market on people at home and abroad, the environmental impact of our daily choices, and so on. This takes time and effort and may well be a sacrifice for many. Nonetheless, it is fundamental to building a prophetic way of life.

### **b. Global awareness, consciousness as global citizens.**

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<sup>11</sup> Neafsey, op. cit., 103-104; see also the concept of "culpable blindness" in Jon Sobrino, *Where is God? Earthquake, Terrorism, Barbarity and Hope* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004).

<sup>12</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, in Neafsey, *A Sacred Voice is Calling*, 104.

<sup>13</sup> Neafsey, op.cit., 47-48.

Commitment to making the connections gradually fosters an experience of relatedness to all others, in all parts of the world, and of our lot being intimately implicated in theirs. John Woolman, the 18<sup>th</sup> century Quaker abolitionist, described this experience as a form of mysticism rooted in the sense of not being different from the “others,” those who have no possessions, no rights, those of different colors, sex, class, in an inextinguishable longing for oneness.<sup>14</sup> True global awareness means that our personal and collective choices are considered not only for their impact on us and our own, but also for the way they will affect the reality of others at a distance.

### **c. Coherent lifestyle.**

A prophetic way of life involves implementing changes in one’s own lifestyle and encouraging changes in the lifestyle of local communities, so that there be increased coherence between the Gospel message spoken and the life-message conveyed. This means learning the challenges and costs of living in a deeply coherent way.

A religious priest colleague recently shared with me the following example of these challenges. In a wealthy suburban parish with a lively social justice ministry and membership generally concerned about justice, peace, and integrity of creation (JPIC) issues, the religious priests staffing the parish did \$30,000 worth of renovations to enlarge and beautify their friary chapel. Was there any thought of spending a fraction of this money, instead, to install solar panels on the rectory in order to markedly reduce the energy consumption of the rectory? Or of spending that same large sum to install solar panels on the large Church building, thereby generating enough energy to cover the needs of the entire parish complex? Or of sending that money to their religious confreres in Africa to build a school and hospital? A coherent lifestyle is rooted in a continual awareness of the distinction between needs and wants. “We are coherent when we allow our hearts to be permanently broken by the sorrow of our world.”<sup>15</sup> Broken open to see, to love, to move beyond excessive self-focus and self-preoccupation, beyond seeking for comforts and ease, beyond being enamored and constrained by the “market,” by power, by privilege.

## **3. Prophetic spirituality:**

### **a. Is deeply rooted in a contemplative sensibility.**

Staying grounded in love while looking all around with deep compassion, with the eyes of God. Allowing all to flow from deep rootedness in the experience of a love relationship with God, allowing the Spirit of Jesus to shape us so we are never just on a “crusade” of our own, but are humbly—and passionately—moving according to the Spirit’s call and fire. It is necessary to be in right-relationship with God and God’s world, to be intimately attuned to God’s voice, in order to create union and communities of hope, locally and globally.<sup>16</sup> In the words of David Steindl-Rast, “True contemplatives are not

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<sup>14</sup> Soelle, op.cit., 246.

<sup>15</sup> Mary Beth Moore, “Coherence, Companions!” *The Occasional Papers*, Vol.36, No.2, 19.

<sup>16</sup> Maria Cimperman, “God has shouted, ‘Yes, yes, yes!’ Creating communities of hope,” *Horizon*, Vol. 32, No. 1, 4.

dreamers: Their eyes hold a vision, while their hands translate that vision into action.”<sup>17</sup>

It is so important for a prophetic way of life to flow from a deep love for God, for God’s beautiful and vulnerable creation, seeing the miracle it is and being compelled to live, act, and respond accordingly. A problem is that so many individuals carry deep hurts and still-unhealed wounds that it is not easy for them to experience God’s love for them, or to enter into a love relationship with God. Without this kind of grounding, which makes all things possible, it is much more difficult to enter into a prophetic way of life that is joyful and life-giving as well as fully aware of all that is not right. Martyred conscientious objector Franz Jaegerstaetter wrote to his wife from prison, “It’s all about love of God.”

#### **b. Social spirituality.**

A prophetic spirituality is also, necessarily, a spirituality and a prayer that is not only personally focused, on one’s own issues and on one’s personal relationship with God, but socially focused too, actively partnering with God to respond to challenging social realities. Authentic vocation is not just about “me” and my personal fulfillment, but about “us” and the common good. In Frederick Buechner’s familiar words, our callings are found in the places where our “deep gladness” and the “world’s deep hunger” meet. A social spirituality calls for personal and public examinations of conscience that address not just “personal” sin, but also, and so importantly in this country at this time, “social sin.” A prophetic spirituality attends to making this social perspective second nature, bringing it to prayer and to choices discerned and positions taken.

#### **c. Concern for justice, particularly as expressed through the vows.**

Concern for justice (especially as expressed in vow of poverty) is what grounds and unifies the meaning of the vows. For religious, vows are three aspects of one lived experience: the “vow of radicality” in living the demands of the Gospel.<sup>18</sup> What does a concern for justice as the central, unifying aspect of the vows, look like in U.S. religious life today? What does a radical following of Jesus look like here, today?

For Sobrino, the vows demand that the religious be present in the desert, on the periphery, and on the frontier. In the desert, where, in fact, there is no one. On the periphery, not in the center of power, but where instead of power there is helplessness. On the frontier, where it is most necessary to experiment, with imagination and Christian creativity, where the risk is greatest, where the need is keenest for a prophetic presence to shake the inertia that is petrifying the Church as a whole or to denounce sin with greater energy.<sup>19</sup>

#### **d. Embracing downward pull, kenotic consciousness.**

Recognizing and embracing, rather than resisting a downward pull involves willingness to self-empty in the service of transformation, to put oneself on the line. A willingness to die to the illusory attractions of success,

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<sup>17</sup> Rich Heffern, “A school for engaged wisdom,” *National Catholic Reporter*, September 7, 2007, 9.

<sup>18</sup> Cabarrus, op.cit., 15.

<sup>19</sup> Jon Sobrino, in Cabarrus, op.cit., 21.



accomplishment, and recognition of the dominant culture.<sup>20</sup> Dying to the pull of power and self-focus. A willingness to migrate from the secure, often gratifying center to the margins, letting go of personal status and consenting to become "liminal people."<sup>21</sup> This is difficult. It is especially difficult when we serve in positions of influence, power, prominence; how can we be in those positions in a prophetic way, always mindful of the call to self-emptying love?

**e. Openness to conversion.**

Personal and communal openness to the transformative dynamic of the paschal mystery which is essential to making progress in moving into God's kin-dom.

**f. Passionate prayer.**

Untiringly bringing situations of injustice to prayer, not by putting the burden of responsibility on God to fix everything, but by "making God the ally and partner of the exploited." For example, Cesar Chavez and the others responsible for the United Farm Workers considered fasting as nourishment and prayer a "mystical fortification that was regarded as a necessity for their nonviolent resistance. Chavez was a practicing Roman Catholic who prepared himself for every action through fasting and prayer. "Every time he prepared himself, his enemies would say, "Watch out! Cesar Chavez is up to something. He's praying!"<sup>22</sup>

**4. Advocacy.**

A prophetic way of life in the U.S. today requires not only seeing and making the connections, but also using one's voice, resources, and privilege to advocate on behalf of justice and of those without voice. This involves learning the skills for advocating locally, nationally, and internationally, in the community, in institutions, and with government bodies. Whatever one's primary ministry is, some form of direct advocacy should be part of one's prophetic engagement. Resistance is an important dimension of "prophetic" advocacy. As Soelle observes, resistance in the rich world is a challenge, as people are generally overeducated and underempowered: they have knowledge, including about situations of injustice and other problems in the world, but that knowledge has no consequences for action, and leaves them helpless. Growing in resistance means claiming the power given to each of us to see and speak the truth and to refuse to remain impotent in the face of abuses of power and injustice. Resistance is "the step from impotence to the power of the weak."<sup>23</sup>

Examples of resistance include refusing to buy produce (and coffee, chocolate) grown, harvested, or traded in conditions dangerous or exploitative for farm workers; refusing to buy clothes and other items made in sweatshops; living below the taxable income to avoid paying for war; refraining from purchasing any items that are not truly necessary. Inconvenience, sacrifice, drastic limitation of options, loss of the endless assortment of consumer choices. A certain asceticism and

<sup>20</sup> Joel Ripinger, "New membership and the paschal mystery," *Horizon*, Vol. 32, No. 1, 22.

<sup>21</sup> Anthony J. Gittins, *A Presence that Disturbs: A Call to Radical Discipleship* (Liguori, MO: Liguori Publications, 2002), 84.

<sup>22</sup> Soelle, *op.cit.*, 202.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 204-205.

discipline are definitely required! Think about what personal, communal, and institutional resistance might look like in your particular context.

### **5. Reading systems (the capacity to recognize, hold, work with complexity and to understand the structural dimensions or causes of current reality).**

The problems, challenges, dilemmas of our world are highly complex and cannot be adequately addressed if reduced to simplistic “black or white,” “right or wrong” formulations. Being prophetic today requires a willingness and capacity to grapple with complexity intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually, and a refusal to give in to “easy,” often ideologically-driven “packagings” of challenging realities. It also requires learning the skills necessary to “read” systems, to see and understand systemic, structural injustices and oppression in the world and within our own organizations and institutions, and it requires a willingness and ability to be agents of structural conversion.

### **6. Dialogue.**

Being prophetic in this time means being capable of engaging in real dialogue in our polarized world, society, Church<sup>24</sup>; dialogue that is thoughtful, respectful, informed, and not constrained by ideological positions.

### **7. Transforming vision and radical hope.**

As mentioned earlier, transforming vision is not a new vision of God, but a different relationship to the world, one based on seeing differently, with the eyes of God. Using “God’s senses” is at the core of transforming vision and radical hope. Seeing, hearing, touching differently means becoming free for a different way of living life – and this leads to radical hope. Hope is imagining the possible in any difficult situation. In the face of the overwhelming, potentially immobilizing, problems of the world, we need to have, evoke, and offer images of hope that move us to the sense that another way is possible in difficult situations.<sup>25</sup>

Robust hope is grounded in the paschal mystery and its transforming nature. The Spirit is the bearer of divine promise that keeps opening up to a new future.<sup>26</sup> A prophetic way of life is about being bearers of that Spirit, sharing the vision and the hope.

### **8. Leading through uncertainty and turbulence.**

Elizabeth Johnson tells us that we “should not be surprised to find divine agency hovering near to turbulence.”<sup>27</sup> Living a prophetic way of life in this in-between time invites us to trust the Spirit at work in turbulence, to be willing to enter into uncertainty, since it is a necessary phase before any transformation can unfold, and to provide leadership through the uncertainty.

### **9. Compelling quality of community life.**

The key to a prophetic quality of community life is not that, but how we live together.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Maria Cimperman, , “God has shouted, ‘Yes, yes, yes!’ Creating communities of hope,” *Horizon*, Vol. 32, No. 1, 7.

<sup>25</sup> Neafsey, *A Sacred Voice is Calling*, 106-107.

<sup>26</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, “God in an Evolutionary World,” Thirty-Fourth Annual Thomas Verner Moore Lecture, September 29, 2007, Catholic University of America, Columbus School of Law.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Maria Cimperman, *op.cit.*, 7.

## 10. Fidelity.

Being prophetic means staying faithful for the long haul, not tiring of taking a stand, of praying and working for transformation. When we are tempted to doubt our “potential to make a real difference in the world, it is good to remember the story of ‘Nothing More Than Nothing.’”

*“Tell me the weight of a snowflake,” a coal mouse asked a wild dove.*

*“Nothing more than nothing,” was the answer.*

*“In that case I must tell you a marvelous story,” the coal mouse said. “I sat on a branch of a fir, close to its trunk, when it began to snow—not heavily, not a giant blizzard, no, just like in a dream, without any violence. Since I didn’t have anything better to do, I counted the snow-flakes settling on the twigs and needles of my branch. Their number was exactly 3,731,952. When the next snowflake dropped onto the branch—nothing more than nothing—as you say—the branch broke off.” Having said that, the coal mouse scurried away.*

*The dove, since Noah’s time an authority on the matter, thought about the story for a while and finally said to herself: “Perhaps there is only one person’s voice lacking for peace to come into the world.”<sup>29</sup>*

So, fidelity to the journey and to a prophetic way of life means to keep looking and seeing, to continue untiringly using your voice and resources for change. To keep being the snowflake that eventually makes all the difference. And to persevere when it seems that your efforts make no difference. It also means fidelity to the relationship with God—to deepening it, to letting go into God’s great love and letting it hold, mold and transform you; to doing the personal and communal work necessary to remove obstacles to the relationship with God. And, it means fidelity to sisters and brothers in greatest need, and to the environment, which Elizabeth Johnson includes among the new “poor” and oppressed, to which we must extend our passion for justice.<sup>30</sup>

Finally, we are called to fidelity in actively partnering with God so that God’s plan (reign) might more and more take shape among us.

## **II.B. What does it mean to form for a prophetic way of life in this in-between time, in this culture?**

Forming for a prophetic way of life is about forming to be fire! Formation needs to begin lighting sparks. Following from the characteristics of being prophetic just considered above, I’d like to name several important areas to address and give you ten specific tools to foster growth in a prophetic way of life. This kind of formation can be summed up in four words: modeling, exposure, integration, and assessment. Keep these four processes in mind as we go through this section.

### **1. Seeing—with wide-open eyes.**

Form for seeing the world with God’s eyes and for seeing, as God does, what is otherwise usually rendered invisible, irrelevant. Form for “hearing the word of reality”, particularly the reality of social suffering.<sup>31</sup> Form for the capacity to listen to people, to ask them, “What is your experience?” Listening to the personal stories

<sup>29</sup> Neafsey, *A Sacred Voice is Calling*, 159.

<sup>30</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, *op.cit.*

<sup>31</sup> Jon Sobrino, in Neafsey, *A Sacred Voice is Calling*, 27.

and experiences of the poor is the “first step in any authentic commitment to social justice.”<sup>32</sup> In order to listen, to see, we must make space inside—starting by intentionally turning off (at least some of the time!) the noise that usually interferes with really listening and really seeing. That means turning off the television, the internet, the cell phone; unplugging oneself long enough to discover something about God’s perspective.

As formators, you need to give individuals tools for seeing differently and for a different way of relating to the world, to people, to things. You need to form them for “moral imagination,” for the ability to see and understand the world from other people’s point of view, particularly from the point of view of those on the margins, especially those who are pushed to the margins because of policies (local, national, and international) designed so that those who have get more and the others lose the little they have. Form for attending to what happens inside when one starts to perceive reality from this different perspective. Does the costly grace of “inconsolability” settle in?

## **2. Increased awareness: Formation as “concientization”, as an awakening of critical consciousness.**

“Concientization” is Brazilian educator Paulo Freire’s term for the process of empowering others as they become able to “read” and to “author” their reality.<sup>33</sup> It is safe to say that large segments of the U.S. public, in thrall to the numbing effects of the market-driven entertainment/advertising industry, are, in many ways, as unempowered, as unable to consciously “read” and “author” their reality as were the illiterate poor with whom Freire worked. Concientization does not mean a simple change of opinion about reality, a change of individual subjectivity that leaves the objective situation intact. Concientization supposes that persons change in the process of changing their relationship with the surrounding environment and, above all, with other people. Concientization is about “learning to perceive social, political, economic contradictions and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality.”<sup>34</sup>

The following would be important elements of concientization to include in formation:

- a. **Reflecting on the position from which individuals (and communities) make choices/decisions**<sup>35</sup>, on the extent to which choices are made with consciousness for the common good (of those near and far...).
- b. **Encouraging global awareness:** The capacity to really understand global issues in some depth and to situate oneself so that people in other parts of the world truly become kin, whose life reality is profoundly affected by our own choices and decisions here, and by the policies of our government and of other institutions, and by the power exerted by special interest groups.

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<sup>32</sup> Daniel Hartnett, in Neafsey, *A Sacred Voice is Calling*, 13.

<sup>33</sup> See comments about the value of Freire’s work in Ignacio Martin-Baro’, *Writings for a Liberation Psychology*, Edited by Adrienne Aron and Shawn Corne (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 18.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 47.

<sup>35</sup> The geographical position, “class” or privilege involved, awareness of the consequences of one’s choices to concentric circles of belonging from the self at the center, to one’s immediate family/community, to one’s region, country, continent, hemisphere... all the way to the consequences for the Earth, the environment, and for future generations.

c. **Deepening understanding of “first-world” lifestyle**, particularly in the U.S., its implications for rest of world, for the poor, for the environment. Taking serious steps to start making lifestyle changes in the direction of greater justice and sustainability.

d. **Encouraging a commitment to coherence** between proclaimed values and lifestyle choices. This requires a regular, frequent “examen” of personal and communal choices, across lifestyle domains (including food choices, resource use, entertainment/recreation options, investment decisions).

### 3. Intercultural awareness and sensitivity (particularly in formation settings).

How does one form candidates from the so-called “first world” and from the “2/3rds world” together? Is there one “call”, one model for all, or are there different calls; does “resistance” mean different things in different contexts? To illustrate the importance of reflecting seriously on these questions almost as a *sine qua non* of establishing intercultural formation programs, consider the following story, recounted by Soelle. It is the story of the Christian Koinonia community, established in Georgia (U.S.) in the early sixties, as an

- attempt to join together black and white agricultural workers in a kibbutz-like way of life.
- The white participants were primarily middle-class college students. They had
- consciously chosen a lower social status, without career and property. The regional
- blacks, children of the impoverished farm population, could not go along; they
- had just begun to find knowledge, education, and to learn the use of the necessities of
- life. Despite high idealism and goodwill on both sides, the upward mobility
- consciousness of the one group collided head-on with the downward mobility
- aspirations of the other. The attempt failed even though, today, the community
- continues to wrestle with the question of how voluntary poverty is to be lived out.<sup>36</sup>

What about the challenges of upward versus downward mobility among members of formation communities? Of different aspirations depending on the place and lifestyle from which members come? How does one form together candidates from very different backgrounds and experiences regarding, for instance, issues of becoming global citizens and embracing and using privilege for the common good?

It is important to form for interculturality, not just multiculturalism. Multiculturalism implies diversity, the existence of a variety of cultures, each of which deserves respect for its dignity and uniqueness. Interculturality goes much deeper, challenging people to “live together in unity, respect and mutuality...in a world torn apart by disunity attributed to differences. It is the coming together of different cultures working toward the unity for which Jesus prayed... and [the] appreciation of

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<sup>36</sup> Soelle, op.cit., 236.

cultures through a common human experience."<sup>37</sup> True interculturality will stretch mightily all those involved! It will not happen by itself, and requires active participation. Form members to consciously take up this work!

**4. Prophetic spirituality:** It is important to bear in mind that there is a significant developmental piece at play in the emergence and consolidation of such a spirituality. For most people, it is a spirituality that takes form gradually. Still, formators need to consciously encourage members in that direction, particularly by committing to the following :

a. **Fostering a contemplative stance.** Model it! Create time for contemplation, for faith sharing (greatly needed and often longed-for in communities), in which it becomes possible to start seeing and tasting what a contemplative stance is and what it “does” in the life of individuals and of a community.

b. **Forming for movement from private to social spirituality.** Form members for listening to the Spirit calling in a conscience that is uneasy before the state of the world, and particularly of this country.<sup>38</sup> Given the realities around us, our consciences *should* be disturbed—all the time! Form for a habit of considering not only personal “sin” but also social “sin” and even for recognizing one’s own role in it. Form for a habit of coming before God bringing along the situations of injustice, oppression, and suffering of the world, daring to be available as God’s instrument to respond to the urgent challenge of those situations.

c. **Forming for prophetic understanding and embracing of the vows.** Form members for a mission of collaboration with the in-breaking of the Reign of God. A vow involves giving up something that in itself is good and positive for the sake of showing that something of God’s plan, of God’s reign, is still not in place, is being obstructed. So, in this framework, seriously failing a vow profoundly undermines the part of the vow that is about collaborating with the reign of God.<sup>39</sup> This is a subtle and important point. Do you form for *primacy* of the vow of poverty—materially; as an attitude; as the core of a different relationship to the world?

In my work with formation communities, I have been struck by how often there does not seem to be this primacy in people’s lives. There are both structural and personal reasons for failures of coherence in the vow of poverty (forgetting the focus on the reign of God for the poor; level of maturity; ideology/ecclesiology; experience of God; personal aspirations; direct contact with the poor and their struggle; vigor of community life, to name a few).<sup>40</sup>

It has been observed that those who come from backgrounds of comfort, ease, giving in to whims, desires, purchases, and those who come from extreme poverty, that generates instability, anxiety, and creates compensatory needs once the person is in religious life, tend to have a harder

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<sup>37</sup> Chinyeaka Ezeani, “Essential Lines regarding Multicultural formation in the Initial and Permanent Formation,” in *Intercultural Formation for Mission ‘Ad Gentes’*, SEDOS Bulletin, Vol.39, No.5/6, May-June 2007, 124. Emphasis mine.

<sup>38</sup> cf. Neafsey, *A Sacred Voice is Calling.*, 147.

<sup>39</sup> Cabarrus, op.cit. 19.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 56-58.

time with “poverty” than those who come from backgrounds of having enough and of voluntarily choosing austerity.<sup>41</sup>

Explore, in your formation communities, what happens when “poverty” becomes “simplicity.” What does simplicity mean in U.S. religious life today? Can simplicity be prophetic and transformative in a substantial way?

Form for an understanding of consecration through vows that is always for the benefit of the most needy. Alvaro Ramazzini, bishop of San Marcos, Guatemala, reflects:

“Often I ask myself if I really live a life of poverty. The answer is no—I have what I need, and I never suffer hunger like many other people. But this does not mean that I do not try every day to respond to the call to conversion and the need to change. I constantly need to change my mentality and deepen my commitment with the poor. While it is clear to me that I will never become like the poorest of the poor, it is also clear that this process of conversion should lead me to a deeper commitment of solidarity with the poorest people.”<sup>42</sup>

**d. Forming for embracing a downward pull:** This is about forming for the totally countercultural capacity to give up not only material goods, but also certainty, predictability, success, an experience of power, and even a sense of control. To what extent do you intentionally form new members for self-emptying? To what extent do you model it?

**e. Forming for openness to conversion:** This is a real challenge for some, especially when there is psychological rigidity. This lack of inner flexibility and openness is typically rooted in unresolved psychological issues, particularly a sense of vulnerability and fear, including fear that any movement towards change would threaten one’s worldview, identity, certainties.

**f. Forming for humility:** Humility is a countercultural, prophetic stance, especially in this society, at this time, even in many Church contexts. Humility is rooted in right-relationship with God, others, and oneself. Forming for humility involves forming for non-idolatry, sensitizing candidates to recognizing the idolatries in their lives (material, relational, spiritual, ideological)—while recognizing, that, developmentally, some individuals may not be ready or able to relinquish certain “idols” yet. When this is the case, it would be important that the individual could at least acknowledge the idols, the attachment to them, and the value of considering gradually releasing the tight hold on them.

**g. Praxis of formator:** Formators must do their own serious work toward both human and spiritual integration, so as not to be “blind guides” who increase others’ confusion rather than giving help.<sup>43</sup> They must also consistently, gently, and untiringly model a prophetic way of life.

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<sup>41</sup> Cabarrus, op.cit., 59

<sup>42</sup> Alvaro Ramazzini, “Globalization, Poverty, Migration, and Solidarity,” *Signs of the Times*, Vol.2, No.3, 25.

<sup>43</sup> Terezinha Esperanca Merandi, “The Experience of Formation in Different Cultures,” in Manenti, A., Guarinelli, S., and Zollner, H. eds., *Formation and the Person: Essays on Theory and Practice* (Leuven, NL: Peeters, 2007), 288.

**5. Advocacy:**

## a. Form for advocacy:

\*Putting one's own privilege/voice at the service of those without voice, or with greater need...

\*As formator, model being informed about and grappling with issues.

\*Teach a range of advocacy skills.

\*Provide experience in direct advocacy settings.

b. Form for resistance: Resistance as awareness and purposeful behavior directed toward changing system(s). Thoughtful, consistent modeling is essential here, particularly in terms of community-wide acts of resistance, such as products boycotted and products purchased, being informed and intentional about financial decisions (including banks chosen, investments made), taking public stands against injustice and being prepared to face the consequences of those, and so on.

**6. Thinking skills:**

## a. Form for holding and working with complexity and for critical thinking.

Notice when

individuals and the group as a whole are dealing with the complexities of issues, and when they are avoiding them, and falling into intellectually less demanding oversimplifications. Notice when they are able to think critically and to articulate their thought processes, and when they appear unquestioning, and more driven by ideological positions than by careful thinking through of issues. Share your observations with them, letting them know why this is important. Honing these cognitive skills is crucial for bringing an effective voice to dialogue on the complex realities of our world.

b. Form for reading systems, including your own system (in terms of power distribution, voice, authority, boundaries, roles), for thinking about systemic dynamics, and for identifying structural causes of injustice, oppression, abuses of power, and other suffering. Form, too, for specifically reading systems from perspective of the poor: There are important realities that can only be seen and understood from the perspective of the poor, of the margins.

**7. Dialogue:** Form for effective communication skills, for the capacity to hold different perspectives, to listen deeply and to articulate clearly one's own thoughts and positions. Form for dialogue by providing opportunities to practice dialoguing, in community as well as in the context of participation in local and wider issues.

**8. Fidelity:** Form for fidelity in a world that tends to devalue it, for developing a strong sense of commitment to being prophetic even when the cost becomes high. A life of prophetic witness can be difficult in so many ways, and it will frequently be a challenge to stay faithful to the commitment, unless there is deep grounding in the relationship with God, in vision and hope, and in sustaining relationships with fellow-journeymen.

**9. Form for imagination, creativity, and hope:**

Form for the creativity required in seeing beyond prevailing structures (economic, social, ecclesiastical) to new possibilities. Form for being "communal imaginers and dreamers." How discern aptitude for this? It is essential that formation include



some way of drawing out the creative, imaginative, visionary potential in individuals and in the community—or of determining that it is simply not there. If it becomes clear that this potential is not there at all, if a person is attached to cautiously sustaining the status quo at all costs, formators have to courageously ask whether that person is a good fit for religious life today. Formation needs to encourage new (and long-time) members to “to look beyond the self and world as they are right now and to discern a vision of the potential of life—the world as it ought to be and the self as it might become.”<sup>44</sup>

Formation needs to help individuals think “outside box.” Which, by the way, is not equal to “relativism”! Rather, it is about having the mental flexibility to be internally grounded and anchored in a core faith and relationship with God while being free enough to explore and to recognize the Spirit working and calling in unexpected voices, venues, circumstances.

In the past years of working with formation groups, I have found that quite a few individuals entering religious life do not have a great deal of mental flexibility. In some cases, developmental unfolding leads to greater openness in thinking and ability to engage a range of perspectives. In many other cases, psychological dynamics and cognitive limitations make it unlikely that individuals would move beyond the mental rigidity they demonstrate early in initial formation.<sup>45</sup>

## 10. Concrete suggestions for forming for a prophetic way of life:

- a. **Insertion experiences.** Extended, robust, amply processed experiences of living and working in margin situations, with the poor, and entering into their reality, getting to know them, perhaps even maintaining connections with them after the period of insertion. One or two Summer months in a well-appointed monastery in a Latin American capital may not quite do it...! The fact is that when we expose ourselves to the realities of the margins and of the people there, we will risk feeling the pain, fear, anxiety, hopelessness, disorientation that people there experience. For many, such feelings are overwhelming and too threatening to their value-system to be sustained for long. Those individuals will likely struggle with serious insertion experiences, and it will be important for formators to work with them to see if their difficulties are compatible, in the long run, with the kind of freedom and availability needed to be prophetic witnesses as religious. For these individuals and for all those asked to enter into insertion experiences, it is essential to provide thoughtful, solid accompaniment and mentoring to process the experiences well and integrate them in healthy ways.
- b. **Advocacy internships.** Internships, of at least several months’ duration, with an organization doing direct advocacy work, political, educational, social/community, at the local, national or international level, so that members learn skills for understanding systemically the problems of our world and for acting to bring about necessary changes. The goal of such internships would be for members to then apply the advocacy skills in their ministries and communities in addition to whatever involvement they have in direct service ministry. Well-established advocacy groups like NETWORK, Center of

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<sup>44</sup> Sharon Daloz Parks, in Neafsey, *A Sacred voice is Calling*, 100.

<sup>45</sup> For an excellent study of the intellectual, psychological, and sociological characteristics of today’s candidates for ministry, see Klimoski, V.J., O’Neil, K.J., and Schuth, K.M., *Educating Leaders for Ministry: Issues and Responses* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005).

Concern, Pax Christi, Friends National Committee on Legislation, Catholic Committee of Appalachia, to name just a few, would be excellent internship sites.

- c. **Listening to creative voices of prophetic imagination and action:** Creating regular opportunities for individuals and for communities to read, study, discuss the lives, choices, works of individuals like Dorothy Stang, Franz Jaegerstaetter, Marie Dennis, Anthony Gittins, Oscar Romero, Cesar Chavez, Wangari Maathai, Etty Hillesum, Dorothy Day, Helder Camara. Encourage members to allow these voices to become close companions on their journeys and to inspire and sustain their own emerging commitment to prophetic witness.
- d. **Regular community conversations on seeing, making connections, resistance, advocacy.** For example, each week one or more individuals research and present an issue for community discussion. The community then decides on possible stances, responses it might want to adopt in response to the challenges of the issue presented.
- e. **Regular conversations, one-on-one and in community on social spirituality,** on the ways in which relationship with God is unfolding in the context of formation for a prophetic way of life and on the social awareness this requires.
- f. **Regular “lifestyle revision”** (self-assessment individually and communally) of “how am I/are we doing” with choices, decisions, dilemmas encountered, perplexities, regarding justice issues, advocacy, environmental responsibility, to name some primary areas of concern, so that commitment to a coherent lifestyle is not just up to each individual and that person’s conscience—to respond or not and how—but rather is both an individual and a communal responsibility, undertaken with communal support and accountability. Creating space and opportunity for this kind of regular practice of “revision” tends to open a way to reflect not only on one’s own progress in coherence, but also on systemic issues within the local community/province, as well as further opening the way for necessary shifts to occur.
- g. **Regular conversations on the quality of relationship (individual and communal) to brothers and sisters in one’s own religious congregation in other regions/countries,** and to people in one’s own neighborhood, city, region, and country.
- h. **Assessing members’ evolving concern for justice:** Develop ways to assess members’ sensitivity to issues of justice, peace, integrity of creation, and suffering.
- i. **Assessing members’ capacity for JPIC (justice, peace, and integrity of creation) work.** It is crucial to develop a set of specific criteria for assessing the extent to which members have the capacity (spiritual grounding, and intellectual, emotional, and advocacy skills) to meaningfully engage work and witness for JPIC. It would be helpful to assess individuals’ growth in this area at each stage of initial formation, with particular criteria for each stage, and to identify a set of core “*sine qua non*” criteria for members to meet prior to final commitment.

- j. **Do all this with intercultural sensitivity** to the reality of the different backgrounds and contexts of all the members of a formation community.

### **III. Psychological challenges for formators and new members undertaking this kind of formation:**

In order to bring to life the kind of prophetic way of life described above, it is important to identify some of the significant psychological challenges that are often present in formation contexts, so that, having acknowledged them, it becomes possible to think creatively about how to address them, increasingly making way for the Spirit's fire to take hold.

**A. Individuals are too busy** (with studies or ministry). Formation programs are so "full,"

so tightly packed with scheduled activities, that there is "no time" to seriously explore questions of prophetic lifestyle.<sup>46</sup> In the context of initial formation, this tends to be a more frequent problem in men's communities, particularly where men are studying for the priesthood and carrying substantial academic loads. In women's initial formation communities, sometimes there is the problem of not being "busy" enough, with women who had been involved in numerous ministries of different kinds prior to entering, suddenly finding themselves with "too much" time on their hands, and experiencing this as decreasing their sense of focus on and participation in prophetic witness. In both cases, formators need to work in an ongoing way with members to establish a healthy balance that ensures adequate time available for both contemplation and action. Of course, this is often a real challenge, but one not to be avoided! If members cannot seem to strike a balance, it is important to consider this, as the habits and patterns established in initial formation will, to a large extent, be the ones carried over into life and ministry as a professed member.

**B. Individuals are too conditioned by the dominant culture and too ensconced in U.S. middle- to upper-middle class lifestyle**, are not inclined to examine it, to "see it" clearly, to relinquish certain habits and comforts. As long as there are one million religious world-wide living "first world" lifestyles, can the transformative fire of a new way of being in and with the world be fully available?

**C. Formators and leaders are not focused on a prophetic way of life**, so they are not really modeling it, especially in the details of daily life and in drawing attention to structural/systemic issues contributing to injustice and suffering (within their own systems and in the larger world).

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<sup>46</sup> And what time is left over is often taken up by the internet or the television. It is important to see with wide-open eyes this situation of busyness and then of "resting" with electronic media. Allowing ourselves to be swallowed up by busyness and then, so easily, numbed by the media plays into deeply-rooted dynamics whereby the prevailing societal system counts on good people's not being *available for seeing clearly*, for reflecting and for then challenging the status quo.

**D. Individuals still lack the skills** (especially for communication, for handling complexity) **and developmental maturity** (cognitive, emotional, relational, spiritual) necessary for a prophetic way of life. There is a “triad” of psychological characteristics that could be considered fundamental for the possibility of living in a prophetic way and for being a vibrant, effective religious today:

\*Maturity

\*Personal experience of God-as-Abba, of the God of Jesus

\*Personal relationship/bond with poor and their struggles.

It is of concern that, too often, one does not see the entire triad present in members, and sometimes one does not see any one of its components present. It is necessary to have reached a certain level of maturity (particularly in “first world” contexts) in order to personally have an experience of the God of justice who invites us to solidarity with the concrete poor, and through them with Jesus, and who enables us to put our personal desires and comforts in second place.

**E. Individuals are not grounded in an intimate, robust love relationship with God.** Often, there is “no time” to cultivate such a relationship, and no modeling of what it might look like. In many cases, still-unhealed relational, emotional wounds and negative images or experiences of God make it difficult or impossible to build an intimate, loving relationship with God.

**F. Individuals carry a great deal of psychological baggage,** not yet addressed or worked out. So many new and long-time members carry significant psychological issues, often still unworked. These include histories of trauma, abuse, neglect; long-standing struggles with anxiety, depression, addictions; personality difficulties. It will be difficult for individuals and communities to fully embrace a prophetic way of life until necessary healing work is done (in members, as well as in formators and leaders).

**G. Individuals do not have a strong relationship with or commitment to the poor.** This can be due to lack of experience relating directly with the poor; to personal background and history (social, economic, relational) which make it difficult to establish such a relationship and which, in fact, may create compensatory needs for comforts, possessions, recognition; to modeling that does not place value and emphasis on this relationship and commitment.

**H. Individuals do not have a compelling passion for justice.** This, too, can be due to issues in one’s personal background and history; to “not seeing” the realities of injustice and suffering clearly, particularly to an inability to see the structural causes of injustice; to a spirituality focused primarily or exclusively on a personal relationship with God without a sense of being called and sent as a (prophetic) instrument of God to build God’s reign, especially in situations of suffering and injustice.

**I. Difficulty being open to conversion.** This is particularly an issue in individuals who are psychologically “rigid” (and, typically, psychologically fragile, despite what is often an appearance of being strong and quite sure of oneself). These individuals easily experience any kind of movement

towards change or shifting as a potential threat to their worldview and perceptions, and, thus, to their identity. In other cases, individuals who are not particularly “rigid” psychologically, nonetheless have difficulty being open to conversion because of other unaddressed psychological issues which, consciously or unconsciously, they prefer not to confront, thereby foreclosing on the possibility of growth and integration offered through the process of conversion. Openness to conversion is also difficult when individuals are too tired, too stressed, or too numb to notice the extent of their conditioning by—and captivity to—the values of the dominant culture, as promoted by the television, internet, catalogs, advertisements, and so on. If one is not awake and aware, conversion will not be likely to happen.

#### **IV. Conclusion:**

The realities of the world make it urgent, now, to say “Yes” to the call to a prophetic way of living and to form and prepare others for such a life. It is also absolutely necessary to discern whether the women and men being invited into religious life today have the basic “stuff” it takes to grow into this way of life. Equally crucial is discerning whether the women and men entrusted with formation and leadership are open and ready to truly be models of a prophetic lifestyle.

The Quakers describe the mystical, prophetic life as having three qualities: boundless happiness, absolute fearlessness, and constant difficulty.<sup>47</sup> May these be the foundation of your prophetic life in this time, and may the Spirit be with you in it!

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<sup>47</sup> Soelle, *op.cit.*, 298.