

“Apostles, Prophets, Evangelists”

SAINT PAUL TELLS US that Christ set up certain offices of service for His mystical body, the Church. Those entrusted with these offices are responsible for guiding and protecting the Church, thereby ensuring that each member can grow to mature faith and proper knowledge of God. Paul lists five such “roles of service for the faithful”: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers.

“And his [Christ’s] gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, for the equipment of the saints, for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:11–13). In this chapter we will look briefly at the offices of apostles, prophets and evangelists as they functioned in the early Church and as they still function today.

In apostolic times the official pastors and teachers of the Church also held the offices of apostle and evangelist. The

apostles—as well as Saints Luke and Mark, the two evangelists who were not also apostles—were the first bishops of the Church. They were part of the magisterium.

Gradually others began to function as apostles and evangelists, a number of whom were not official pastors or teachers. Over time, in fact, these offices became more charismatic in nature. The Holy Spirit bestowed on individuals who were not necessarily part of the formal hierarchical structure the gifts necessary to accomplish certain tasks in the Church. Apostles, prophets and evangelists spoke God’s word with striking power or acted in God’s name in ways that had significant results for their listeners.

CHARISMATIC SERVICE

Apostles

The word *apostle* usually refers to one of the twelve apostles whom Jesus called during His public ministry. This is certainly the primary meaning of *apostle*. The twelve apostles were Jesus’ closest companions and most privileged disciples. After His resurrection Jesus officially sent them forth to preach His gospel message of salvation to the whole world (see John 20:21; Acts 1:8).

Yet all three groups Paul first mentions—apostles, prophets, evangelists—are much broader in scope than we commonly understand them to be. In a secondary sense the title “apostle”—from a Greek word meaning “one who is sent”—applied to persons other than the twelve.¹ These seem to have had an itinerant ministry. They traveled from place to place, helping to establish the Church in various locations. They also seem to have assisted local Church authorities with

the needs of the community, especially in those communities that were just getting organized.

Prophets

The word *prophet* comes from a Greek word meaning "one who speaks before others." It almost always indicates a person who communicates a divine message to others. Like the word *apostle*, *prophet* has both a narrow and a broad meaning.

In its more narrow or technical sense, the word refers to the prophets of the Old Testament. This clearly recognized group is often divided into various categories. Some, such as Elijah and Elisha, are considered "action prophets." They conveyed their messages in bold words and deeds. Then there are the "writing prophets." Of these Isaiah and Jeremiah have been designated "major" prophets, while Amos, Hosea, Malachi and others we call "minor" prophets. The works of the major prophets are longer and considered more significant than those of the minor prophets.

The New Testament applies the title "prophet" in a broader sense to individuals who speak an obviously inspired message or who share wisdom or understanding that can come only from someone who is truly of God. Interestingly, Jesus never called himself a prophet, though many others in the New Testament did, such as the Samaritan woman at the well (see John 4:19).

The First Letter to the Corinthians lists prophecy among the charismatic gifts (see 1 Corinthians 12:10). Those who spoke prophetically, like the broader group of apostles discussed above, were probably itinerant disciples who went from one local Christian community to another as the Spirit moved them. Their prophetic gift, exercised under the

guidance of the Spirit of truth, generally included the ability to deliver an encouraging “word” or message to the community, to discern right from wrong regarding problematic issues and to call the community to faithfulness and reform.²

Evangelists

The title “evangelist” (from Greek, meaning “someone who brings good news”) applies in its more restricted sense to the traditional four Evangelists—Saints Matthew, Mark, Luke and John—the writers of the four Gospels. Since these accounts of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection contain His words and deeds, they are the Good News par excellence. It follows that the four Gospel writers are the evangelists par excellence!

The title also is given to charismatic itinerant preachers who went around to early Church communities and strengthened the faithful by their inspired preaching of the Word of God. The work of the famous preacher Apollos, mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles, is an outstanding example of this ministry:

He was an eloquent man, well versed in the scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus.... He greatly helped those who through grace had believed, for he powerfully confuted the Jews in public, showing by the scriptures that the Christ was Jesus.

—ACTS 18:24–25, 27–28

APOSTLES, PROPHETS AND EVANGELISTS IN THE CHURCH TODAY

The Lord Jesus continues to provide these three roles of service in His Church, though perhaps they are less obvious today as distinct ministries.

Apostles in Today's Church

Many in the Church carry out apostolic commitments as teachers, writers, administrators and other such roles in dioceses and parishes. Consecrated religious speak of their apostolates in nursing or in offering spiritual direction. The Holy Spirit is moving more and more laypeople to give of their time, talents and resources in caring for the poor and destitute in homeless shelters and soup kitchens. Others dedicate themselves to youth work or to pro-life issues.

The Spirit inspires these ministries, whether formal or informal, part-time or full-time. He calls forth individuals to be new apostles in the Church's field of labor.

Prophets in Today's Church

Either by word or deed, prophets proclaim a clear, significant message appropriate for the times. Mother Teresa of Calcutta, for example, was a truly prophetic person in the Church in the latter half of the twentieth century, calling people, by her example, to take action on behalf of the destitute.

Prophets are usually ahead of their times, inspired by the Spirit of truth to sense the direction in which the Church is moving or the great challenges ahead, before events prove them true. This can cause them a great deal of suffering, especially when their contemporaries misunderstand them. But

when the Church lacks a sufficient number of prophetic people, lethargy and stagnation result. People naturally gravitate toward maintaining the status quo rather than embracing a vibrant, Spirit-filled attitude of growth and effort to extend the kingdom of God.

Evangelists in Today's Church

Evangelization in the Church must continue until the end of time, for Jesus has commanded us to preach the Good News to all creation (see Mark 16:15). Jesus calls all members of the Church, from the pope and bishops to the newly baptized, to preach about Him and witness Him to others by words and deeds. Sometimes He gives the Church outstanding evangelizers such as the late Pope John Paul II and Archbishop Fulton Sheen. Their words have had an obvious anointing of the Holy Spirit, a certain power given by the Spirit of truth to penetrate minds and hearts. But all of us must use our natural gifts and talents as well as the supernatural graces God has given us to carry on the Church's ministry of evangelization.

This is the challenge John Paul II set before the Church with his summons to a "new evangelization" in the world: "I sense that the moment has come to commit all of the Church's energies to a new evangelization and to the mission *ad gentes*. No believer in Christ, no institution of the Church can avoid this supreme duty: to proclaim Christ to all peoples."³

This challenge sounds like that of a pope of old issuing a call for a crusade, a holy war. This crusade, however, will not be fought with weapons of violence and destruction but with the weapons of holiness and truth, justice and love. It

will be accomplished in witness to the living, risen Savior of the world and the eternal Father who sent Him "for us men and for our salvation," as we proclaim in the Nicene Creed.

In the pope's view the Holy Spirit will be the one who will guide and coordinate this great work of the new evangelization. In his talks and writings the Holy Father referred to the Holy Spirit as "the active Agent of the Church's evangelizing mission"⁴ and "the principal Agent of the new evangelization."⁵

Let us pray that our heavenly Father will send the Spirit of truth upon the Church again, as He did at that first Pentecost. Let us pray that He will move all of us to proclaim in our words and deeds—in fact, to cry out with our lives—the Good News of salvation: Christ has died, alleluia! Christ has risen, alleluia! Christ will come again, alleluia!

THE SPIRIT'S CHARISMATIC GIFTS

This discussion of apostles, evangelists and prophets has touched on the subject of charismatic gifts. Saint Paul teaches us how the Holy Spirit distributes and uses His charismatic gifts for the welfare of the whole Church. Let us look at three points the Apostle to the Gentiles makes in his First Letter to the Corinthians.

There Is a Variety of Gifts

First he says: "There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit" (1 Corinthians 12:4). Jesus referred to the Holy Spirit as "the gift of God" (John 4:10) because the Father gives Him to us through the Son, as the special gift or fruit of the Son's redemptive mission. But the Holy Spirit in turn is a giver of

gifts. The Church distinguishes two types of His gifts, based on Sacred Scripture.

In the Book of Isaiah, we find reference to the Spirit's "sevenfold" or "sanctifying" gifts: wisdom, understanding, knowledge, counsel, fortitude, piety and fear of the Lord (see Isaiah 11:2–3).⁶ The Spirit gives us these gifts at the moment of our baptism, when we receive our new life in Christ by "water and the Spirit" (John 3:5). All these gifts are present in us as long as we are in the state of grace. They are meant for our personal sanctification and growth in virtue. They make us more receptive to the inspirations of the Holy Spirit and thus help us do good and avoid evil. These gifts grow and develop in us as we mature in our spiritual life.

There Are Gifts for the Whole Church

Saint Paul makes a second point about the Holy Spirit's gifts. He says, "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good" (1 Corinthians 12:7). This leads us to consider the second type of gifts the Holy Spirit gives us—namely, the charismatic gifts. The "common good" Saint Paul is referring to is the growth and development of the Church as a whole. Whereas the sanctifying gifts assist the spiritual growth of individuals, the charismatic gifts assist the well-being of the whole mystical body of Christ.

Saint Paul lists these gifts in a few places in his writings.⁷ His lists, though, are not exhaustive; the Church recognizes many more charismatic gifts. One only has to think of someone like Saint Padre Pio and his gifts of bilocation, fragrance and probably the stigmata. As we have seen earlier, Saint Paul told the Ephesians that God gives His gifts and

roles of service to build up the body of Christ till it reaches its full perfection. These gifts do not of themselves make the individuals who possess them holy, nor are they necessarily an absolute sign of great holiness.⁸

The Spirit Gives His Gifts as He Chooses

The third point Saint Paul makes is that the Holy Spirit bestows His charismatic gifts on those whom He chooses and for His own purposes: "All these [gifts] are inspired by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills" (1 Corinthians 12:11). The Holy Spirit is the "spiritual director" of the Church. He freely gives His gifts to certain individuals, whom He wishes to carry out His purposes in and for the mystical body.⁹ This is why one person may be called to be an apostle, another an evangelist and still another a prophet. Someone may receive two or even all three of these calls.

So it is with the remainder of the charisms. Because different individuals possess different charismatic gifts, the Church as a whole will possess a fullness of the Spirit's gifts. Thus, when needs arise within the community, one or another person will possess the gifts required to meet those needs.

EXAMPLES OF CHARISMATIC GIFTS AT WORK IN THE CHURCH

Someone may possess the gift of "wisdom in discourse." This is a special ability to teach the truths of the Catholic faith with clarity and facility, both to Catholics who are well educated in their faith as well as to those who have received only a little or even no previous religious instruction.

The gift to “distinguish between spirits” allows a person to discern whether something is coming from the Holy Spirit, the devil or an individual’s own human spirit. This is important because the devil tries to come as an “angel of light” (2 Corinthians 11:14), to lead us into evil under the appearance of good.

“Miraculous powers” is another charismatic gift. Someone with this gift is able to edify both believers and non-believers with marvelous signs and wonders. Such miracles can strengthen the faith of those who believe and assist others to be disposed to receive the gift of faith.

All the charismatic gifts are necessary, and that is why the Holy Spirit distributes them as He wills. In the Church community we must all work together in love for God and for one another, in order to bring the mystical body of Christ to its fullness. As Saint Paul also wrote, each has his or her gift. Just as the human body needs ears as well as eyes and feet as well as hands, so everyone’s gifts are important (see 1 Corinthians 12).

When all the members of the Church with their particular gifts work together, the unity of the Church is more deeply expressed, and her work bears more abundant fruit. The Holy Spirit directs this great work! 