

Opening the Heart to Listen: Becoming Mystics and Prophets Today

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I would like to begin my reflection with an image presented to us by Luke in the Acts of the Apostles. This is the image of Mary and the women gathered in deep prayer with the apostles and disciples as they awaited the birth of a new beginning, a new Pentecost—the birth of the Church. If we understand mysticism as the “spirituality of the direct experience of God”, a kind of knowing which goes beyond intellectual understanding, I believe that it is this particularly unique mystical experience of those gathered in the first assembly that brought about the explosion of the Holy Spirit in their midst. This direct experience of God goes beyond mere “rituals” or “belief”; but marked by love, true understanding and acceptance of one another, yet not confined to some sort of “emotional experience” alone.

I suppose it is difficult to describe this mystical experience in plain language. That is why biblical authors as well as spiritual writers through the ages try to capture this experience by using metaphors such as that of the vine and branches describing how one’s union with God (“Remain in me, as I in you.”) brings about fruitfulness in the mission.

From the gospels we see how the disciples in the Early Church came to realize more profoundly the inextricable relationship between contemplation and action, between mysticism and prophecy. In his Letter to the Galatians, Paul reached the mystic state of losing his "self" when he testified saying: “I no longer live, but Christ lives in me!”(Gal. 2.20). This is but the beginning of many other testimonies in the Early Church. Every century has been influenced by Christian mystics telling us that mystical experiences are available to anyone who disposes oneself to the Divine action of God. But many of these experiences simply come and go and are not translated into prophetic action because without the lasting experience of God, mysticism loses its prophetic edge.

Just as the mystical experience of those gathered in the first assembly cannot be confined within the walls of the Cenacle, their direct experience of God loosened their tongues to proclaim the power of God in their lives and in history, impelling them to go out and to fear no longer in proclaiming the good news and in giving witness to the Spirit of Jesus to peoples and in places needing God’s healing and transforming message. We can therefore say that Christian mysticism is about nothing else but the transforming union finding its deepest expression in the following of Christ in prophetic witness and mission. The most characteristic form of “religious experience” in the Bible, as Martin Buber has pointed out, is not realization or rapture, but vocation and mission.¹

I. The Story of Lydia's Conversion: God Opened Her Heart to Listen (Acts 16:11-15,40)

For our reflective consideration this morning, let me use the story of Lydia, a woman convert to Christianity as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, to serve as our present-day icon of our religious vocation as mystics and prophets of today's world. In preparing for this conference, I had to discern in my choice of a woman figure from among the many women in Scripture, who could serve as a model for religious life today. In returning to the Pentecost scene where women were present yet rendered absent in most of the account of the Early Church, I was inspired to take the story of Lydia who was a key figure in Paul's social network—one of the pivotal sisters in the faith. We shall do a brief rereading of her story and from it draw insight about her process of conversion, which presupposes an experience of mysticism leading to prophetic witness and action.

The story of Lydia is located during the period when the Jesus movement was spreading into major cities in the Diaspora. The idea that women, especially those with considerable economic independence, were drawn to Christianity has based its evidence from the Acts of the Apostles, where specific reference is made of the conversion of Lydia at Philippi. Questions about her identity, her motivation, and her process of conversion and mission to the Philippian Church can be considered in restructuring her story.

The brevity of Lydia's story and its lack of historical authenticity make its significance easy to overlook² as she fades into obscurity once Paul's initial mission was accomplished. We first listen to Paul's account of this extraordinary event, and do a brief re-reading of her story.

We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, ¹²and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city for some days. ¹³On the sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there. ¹⁴A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. ¹⁵When she and her household were baptized, she urged us saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home." And she prevailed upon us.

...After leaving the prison they [Paul and Silas] went to Lydia's home; and when they had seen and encouraged the brothers and sisters there, they departed. (Acts 16:11-15, 40 NRSV).

Rereading Her Story

The account begins with the itinerary of Paul during his second missionary journey. He comes to Philippi in response to a dream he had where a Macedonian man appeared to him urging him to come across to Macedonia to help them (cf. Acts 16:9-10). Yet, it was a group of women, not the Macedonian man in the dream, who were the first ones to show their attraction to Paul's preaching and to Christianity itself. While in the city Paul and Silas go to a designated place of prayer, outside the city gate by the river on the Sabbath day (16:13). What is this place of prayer by the river outside the city gate?

The "place of prayer by the river" carries with it a deep symbolic meaning

connected to our Christian vocation. The symbolism does not only refer to the Jewish tradition of meeting “by the river” for ritual ablutions;³ but also helps us recall initially the baptism by John the Baptist. It was by the river Jordan that John was baptizing the people and where Jesus received his own baptism from John (Lk 3:22). We can say for certain that this was a profound mystical moment for Jesus, a direct experience of the presence and affirmation of his identity by God.

It is important to note in this passage that a gathering is made up solely of women reminding us of the women who stood by the cross and who were the first witnesses of the resurrection. Lydia and her circle of women were not only assembled just anywhere, but in a “place of prayer by the river outside the city gates”, where the preaching and their consequent conversion happened. The gathering of women in this ‘place of prayer’ indicates a community of faith already in existence before the arrival of Paul and Silas. Who were they?

The text identifies Lydia first and foremost by her religiosity—as a ‘godfearer’ or ‘worshiper of God’. As a technical term, the first century ‘godfearers’ were Gentiles who were attached to Judaism without being numbered among the proselytes.⁴ As partial converts to Judaism,⁵ the ‘godfearers’ had a clearly defined form of faith and life. They observed the ethical instructions of the Jews, the Torah, and also went to synagogue worship, taking part in common prayer. The fact that this place of prayer was outside the city gates indicates that there may not have been a synagogue in Philippi then. Being ‘godfearers’, Lydia and her community had a basic religious foundation to receive the Christian teachings. “The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul” (16:14), preparing her and her household to receive the baptism of Jesus Christ. “After having heard Paul and Silas, Lydia was eager to be baptized together with her whole household” (16:15a).

The most powerful effect that baptism had on Lydia was her capacity to speak, urgently saying to the missionaries, “If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay in my home” (16:15b). Thus with full voice Lydia gives a real expression of the radical and prophetic ethos of the Jesus tradition, which included the practice of equal and just regard for one another and a sharing of one’s home and possessions, deep values that would serve later on as radical expressions of one’s following of Christ in religious life. The latter, in fact, was the original ideal of poverty: a just distribution of goods expressed in an act of generous giving.

Lydia’s house becomes the cradle of the first Christian community in Philippi as attested in verses 16:15 and 16:40. Her enthusiasm and spirit of hospitality were authentic expressions of her conversion to the Spirit of the Gospel. Thus her own life of obedient listening to God, the fruit of her contemplative spirit and her faithful application of the teachings of Christ become a strong foundation for the house church of Philippi to flourish.

It is fitting that her story should end with a note of authority: ‘And she prevailed upon us’ (16:15c). Part of the practice of hospitality during that time was to offer a safe haven for one’s guests, especially when there was an immediate possibility of real danger to them. This is confirmed in 16:40, where Lydia’s home figures again as a place of hospitality when she took the risk of welcoming back to her home Paul and his companions after their release from prison.

In Lydia’s story, the contribution of women to Christianity is not to be ignored. Christian women did not have to leave their home for the sake of the gospel; on the contrary they made their homes the center of Christian praxis.⁶ Lydia’s home, the first house church in Philippi served as a model for a ‘contrast community’, where those who came and shared their faith and resources as a community tried to live according to their baptismal confession and the spirit of Christian hospitality.

II. The Conversion Process: Awakening the Mystic and Prophetic Spirit

The best way to speak of mysticism is to understand the process of conversion; and the best way to comprehend conversion is to observe the convert. Perhaps our rereading of Lydia's story has sparked a reflection in us about the meaning and consequence of a deep spiritual conversion. Perhaps too we must have begun to imagine what her conversion experience was like. It may have made us think of our own human experiences of conversion. The lines telling us of Lydia's conversion story may be very few, but they are enough to serve as a window through which we can peer into her inner self. This will enable us to catch a glimpse of what might have been her spiritual experience of conversion and baptism, which led her to live a life of faithfulness and commitment to Christ.

Here I would like to use the basic meaning of conversion according to Bernard Lonergan, which is: "a shift in one's orientation towards life." This shift, I believe, happens when the person experiences in one's depth a divine touch, a prompting of the Spirit, that enables the person to choose and to act for the sake of something or someone greater than oneself. A basic mystical experience, i.e., a direct experience of God, of oneness with God and God's creation is like a "coming home to oneself", an experience of a new birth, a new sense of identity, call and mission. Perhaps this was like the experience of Jesus at his own baptism by the river Jordan. Perhaps, this too was the experience of Lydia and her companions at their own baptism.

Based on Lydia's story, what elements of conversion can we draw? To be more precise, what goes on within the person during the conversion process? Since conversion involves much more than a moment, it is a process which involves long periods of time and interrelated causes and effects. It involves relationships that in some way slip from the control of the convert, as well as moments of inaction and repression, postponements and sufferings, and decision-making.⁷ All of these are woven into the person's life story. The actual conversion process itself is much more complex than it is often perceived, as it is not a once-and-for-all kind of experience. It is, in fact, ongoing, a lifetime process of deepening one's baptismal commitment and witnessing to it, which is what religious life essentially is. The complexity is to be found principally in the fact that conversion occurs in several phases or stages. Perhaps we can try to trace the inner dynamics that happen in stages from the few verses we have of Lydia's story.

The Movements and Phases of Ongoing Conversion

(1) The first phase is an *experience of darkness or confusion*, an awareness of emptiness that needs to be filled, of thirst that needs to be quenched, of questions that beg for answers; yet there does not seem to be anything or anyone who could satisfy these needs. For some, this phase manifests itself in an experience of incongruities—in oneself or in life itself. In other words, deep and authentic conversion experiences do not just come about as experts in this field tell us.

The incongruities of our present state build up to the point where they become intolerable. Questions suppressed, decisions postponed too long, realities ignored, items of personal agenda tabled once too often, whatever it may be, they mount up and bring us face to face with the realization that things have got to change.⁸

Although these incongruities of life may be experienced in varying degrees, they do not necessarily lead to conversion. However we believe that almost all

experiences of deep conversions seem to be preceded by some kind of difficulty, crisis, and questioning. In other words, the beginning stage of conversion is an experience of inner conflict in search of a resolution⁹ or an experience of aimlessness that seeks direction. It is clear from the above description that the convert-to-be, as a precedent to one's decision to convert, is already experiencing some form of inner turmoil and crisis which intensifies, prompting the person to seek change or some kind of resolution. Even one's spiritual life, if any, is affected by such an experience of inner conflict. Patterns of spirituality that used to be meaningful would suddenly lose its significance. They no longer speak to one's experience of life; neither do they keep pace with one's expanding horizons. The situation cannot remain the way it is. Change has to happen. The experience of confusion or darkness becomes the opportunity and impetus for change and growth. A Chinese proverb says it all: 'Crisis is opportunity.'

What precipitated the conversion of Lydia and her household? From our rereading of Lydia's story, we saw that she and her circle of women were 'godfearers' or 'worshippers of God'. As such, they were already attracted to the Jewish faith, particularly by the ethical implications of the Law and some ritual practices such as common prayers. Sabbath after Sabbath, they would have looked forward to gathering together as a community to support one another in their practice of faith and in their everyday struggles. But were mere observance of the law and ritual practices enough to feed their hunger and thirst for deeper meaning? As Gentiles, certain elements of the Jewish faith were impossible for them to live by, such as circumcision, the practice of ritual laws and the strict observance of the precepts of the law expounded caustically by the Jewish scribes.¹⁰ Therefore their non-observance of some of these elements may have marginalized them within the Jewish faith. As studies have shown, Jews seemingly had an ambivalent attitude toward 'godfearers' and that even despite the degrees to which these people adopted Judaism; social inequality between them and the Jews seemed to have been an ongoing fact of life.¹¹ Would such a situation of prejudice and inequality be enough to cause inner conflict in Lydia and her companions? Most probably, yes. But they would have continued to endure the prejudice and inequalities if they had not found an alternative in what the missionaries were offering them.

As a faith community of women, meeting 'outside the city gates' seems to point to the experience of being marginalized by the mainstream religion. Despite that they were faithful to God and bold to go beyond the culture of hospitality where women cannot just welcome male strangers. There was something prophetic about them, even though they may not have been aware of this before they heard the liberating message of the Gospel.

If we were to put ourselves in the place of Lydia and her community of women, what would be the deep longings and yearnings of our heart? What incongruities do we begin to be aware of in our personal faith life or in the living our of religious vocation? Lydia and her little community of faith met Sabbath after Sabbath to engage in religious rituals which perhaps may have for a time satisfied their deep longings, yet realized that these external practices were not enough. How much of our various observances and the external practices of religious life and spirituality fill the void and satisfy our deepest longings and thirst for meaning in our lives? What is lacking? Like Lydia and her faith community, what kind of liberating message do we need to hear in order to be true to our vocation and ourselves?

Lydia and her community must have shared common experiences and vision of life that bonded them as a faith community even before the arrival of Paul and Silas. Considering the situation of the world, what is needed in our communities to meet the

challenges from the world that tend to undermine the formation of faith communities in mission and fidelity to it?

The encounter of Lydia and the women had with the Christian missionaries made them realize that some things have got to change, that they could no longer remain as 'godfearers' and be treated like second-class citizens in the Jewish religion. They were awakened to their deepest desire and longing, the fulfillment of which Christian faith was offering them.

(2) This is the second movement, the *phase of awakening*. This is when one's spirit is awakened by the touch of God, priming it to listen intently to the Word of life. Here, the mystic spirit is awakened. Listening, not merely hearing, opens us up to our inner longings and desires. Interestingly enough, according to the historical framework of religion, the growing energy of Christianity has always been drawn from primal spirituality.¹² This primal spirituality is often expressed through the language of desire, inner yearning and search for meaning, eagerly awaiting the fulfillment of one's longing. In the words of the Song of Songs, the beloved anticipates: "I sleep, but my heart is awake. I hear my love knocking. 'Open to me, my sister, my beloved, my dove, my perfect one'..." (Songs 5:2).

Based on the experiences of women, especially those from the third-world and Asia, the paradigm that speaks to them of conversion is more the 'awakening' type. In this there is an experience of a gradual yet strengthening and deepening unfolding of the mystery and meaning of one's faith and an interpenetrating connection to that which is the source of life. Conviction is born out of such an interior experience of having one's hunger for meaning satisfied. In fact one author describes conversion as a multi-faceted and never-ending process of spiritual formation wherein the Spirit plays many roles.¹³ It is an experience of the 'awakening' of the self to the Spirit's promptings in all facets of one's life. This itself is already an experience of mysticism because only the Spirit can touch the heart directly, to awaken it and to await its fulfillment in union and communion.

We can only guess that such might have been Lydia's inner experience.

Although this is not explicitly expressed in the narration of her story, we can somehow infer this based on the premise that the primal search for meaning is as old as humanity itself.¹⁴ How did the awakening stage come about in Lydia's conversion experience? Her life of faith as a "worshiper of God" prepared her heart to accept God's liberating message and enabled her to listen. As if to emphasize this point, the narrator mentions twice in a single verse the word 'listening': 'A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us... The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said...' (16:14). The experience of deep desire or longing opens our deepest self to the action of God in our life. This is what God did to Lydia—God opened her heart, which in its biblical sense is the innermost self of the person, the center of one's personality, not just the seat of emotions. In biblical spirituality, the heart is considered the place of prayer, the locus of divine encounter. For true conversion to happen, one's decision to change must stem from the heart. With her heart opened to the Word, Lydia's only response was to submit herself to God by seeking baptism, and in accepting it, to live the mystic state by gradually losing herself in Christ. As Lydia is showing us, our listening and contemplation on God's word will enable us as religious to become "the midwives of new consciousness, the heralds of suppressed or previously unsuspected human possibility."¹⁵

This awakening phase does not only stay on the personal level. It's not the case of God and me alone. In the conversion experience, this phase enables us to see what is happening around us and what needs changing to hear God's call for us.

According to Schneider's:

The prophet is part of the people to whom he or she is sent, nurtured from birth in the religious and social wisdom of that people, product of its history, participant in its prayer, inheritor of its dreams, victim of and sometimes even sharer in its sins and errors. It is because the prophet is one with the people that he or she can speak for this people to God and for God to this people.¹⁶ Our prophetic spirit cannot be awakened unless we are immersed in the life of the people in a particular place and time enabling us to interpret the concrete situation in contemplative stance before the world in the light of God's dream for the people and the whole of humanity. Listening to the voice of God, reading the "signs of the times" (see Mt. 16:13), and focusing the Word of God in the present are the defining features of prophecy.¹⁷ Mysticism is an integral part of our prophetic witness and vocation. Just as Jesus' prophetic vocation was rooted in and expressive of his intense contemplative prayer life,¹⁸ it is through contemplation that we are able to see the world and the people we are called to serve from God's perspective. Contemplation and mysticism require a growth in one's capacity for discernment and critical thinking in the quest for the authentic self. Discernment based on attentive listening, not submission to the will of another, is the essence of prophetic obedience in religious life.¹⁹

Full participation in the spirituality of Jesus would have to include some experience of our oneness with people and with the universe for Jesus experienced all of nature, including humans, as God's creation.²⁰ The "place of prayer by the river" where Lydia and her community of women gather thus becomes a symbol of the unifying power of prayer—a unity with one another in a community of faith and oneness with the whole of creation.

It is worth noting that religious in Asia, animated by their deep conviction of the oneness of creation are becoming aware of the urgent need to live and work in a manner which fosters: (a) participation and harmony among all people; (b) healthy personal and interpersonal relationships, (c) reverence for the earth, and (d) integration of spirituality and technology on behalf of the gospel. This emerging spirituality can also be described as a spirituality of wholeness and global interconnectedness.

Let us ask Lydia to help us recall those moments of spiritual awakening, when in the midst of the darkness of our seeking, we experienced God's word touching us and opening us up to receive God's grace. What and when were these moments in our life, in our religious life and mission?... after a time of crisis?... an experience of God's healing touch and forgiveness?... or while watching contemplatively the sunrise or sunset?... or a community experience of radical reorientation in mission? What kind of awakening is happening in our communities in front of concrete situations of injustice, violence and devastations?

As a faith community in mission, what situations and events in our region, country, and world are awakening us, calling us to deeper prayer and to discern our prophetic action?

(3) What follows after the awakening is the ***phase of prophetic action***, an experience of an initial impetus of faith, a sudden surge of inspiration which brings about enthusiasm and desire to put one's new-found conviction or belief into action. This frequently effusive change in one's attitude and values is what we commonly call a conversion or a transformation. We usually have this phenomenon in mind when we think of conversions. In our rereading of Lydia's story, we saw that the immediate effect of her baptism was her capacity to speak and express the movement of her heart, consequently putting her faith into prophetic action. This tells us that:

“The task of the prophet is to bear witness to God, by word and work, to God’s people in a particular context or historical situation.”²¹ Once her heart was opened, her home was opened too.²² As Lydia gives witness to us, her generous hospitality was her spontaneous and immediate prophetic action, a sign of her commitment to Christ and his gospel.

In today’s fragmented world, which is characterized by different levels and degrees of homelessness, our mystic spirit, our sense of “belonging to God” must open us up to others and to the world, to offer ourselves, our communities and our planet earth as a hospitable place for humanity and the whole of God’s creation. We are all called to contemplation, to fidelity and fruitfulness, to prophetic witness; and as a faith community in mission we are impelled to give corporate witness to the charism of prophecy.²³ For instance, many of us are called to mission in areas where there is greater threat of violence and terrorism, tensions among religious traditions, a resurgence of religious and ideological fundamentalism, environmental exploitation, and sensitivity to other situations and forms of human conflict. All the more we are called to stretch our hearts to create a place for people who do not share our belief, our values, our culture, our background, and points of view. How can we listen with an open heart, willing to understand where the other is coming from? This is the true spirit of hospitality. It is not abrogated when there is danger or differences, but only at that moment proves itself to be genuine hospitality.²⁴

I believe that it is part of our mystical-prophetic vocation to make hospitality happen, for our generous expression of this virtue to include the realization that our entire fragile earth, not just the “river” is indeed sacred, a true “place of prayer”. Through our mystic spirit, we allow to emerge in our consciousness in front of devastations brought about by global warming and other forms of manipulation of nature, sensitivity to the ecological question and a dawning awareness that for spirituality to be authentically mystical and prophetic, it must also be truly ecological. Our mystic vision will enable us to see ourselves as part of a sacred, interconnected whole.²⁵

Yet, we cannot be hospitable unless we are truly “at home” with ourselves and with one another. This “at-homeness” is manifested through our capacity for selfintimacy, a deep awareness of who we are before God and of everything that we are and have as coming from God. Together with this basic awareness, the law of nature also urges us to generously provide for the stranger who has no place to lay one’s head. In other words, when we become more “at-home” with ourselves, we become more welcoming of others. We come to realize that there is energy within us to reach out to others.

The Gospel therefore challenges us to revitalize our communities to be places where we can learn the language of understanding, to seek ways of bridging the gaps with other people, especially those who belong to our communities. What can touch the hearts of people is the transforming presence of God which happens within a community where stories of life are shared, where songs are sung, where prayers are raised, and where doors are open to welcome the homeless and the stranger. I can imagine that this was the kind of faith community experienced by Lydia and her group of women.

As a consequence Lydia was able to harness the strength of her character and her gift of leadership to advance the Christian faith within her household and eventually the Philippian community. Her experience of God’s direct action in her life impelled her to express her prophetic action within the concrete social location of love of neighbor by opening her home to her visitors: “If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home.” Her words remind us of Jesus’ instructions

to the 72 disciples sent on mission in Luke 10 where coming and staying in households were part and parcel of their mission. Like the house that becomes the center of the new believing community in Luke, the house of Lydia becomes the cradle of the Christian community in Philippi.²⁶ Her urging message “come and stay at my home” reminds us as well of the hospitality extended to the Risen Christ by the two disciples on their way to Emmaus where the two urged Jesus to stay with them in their house at the close of a day’s journey; and Jesus subsequently “entered” their house in order “to stay” with them.²⁷ The striking parallelism between the invitation of the Emmaus disciples and that of Lydia suggests a mystical and thus Eucharistic nature of the hospitality.²⁸ As faith communities in mission, we are called to recover and express the close link between the Eucharist and the spirit of hospitality. We are called to live with deep gratitude our mystic faith and to give witness to the oneness of the Body of Christ among our lay sisters and brothers.

If I were to open my heart and home as Lydia did, who will I invite to come and stay with me in my community? In what way can we make our communities centers of hospitality and encounter with God? What do I identify as concrete blocks in myself and in my community for the expression of the true spirit of hospitality? Following the example of Lydia, how do we foster a spirit of hospitality —welcoming, sharing, and invitation — particularly to those who have no faith, to those who have ceased being involved in the practice of their faith, and to those who belong to other faiths.

Although the narration of Lydia’s story ended with her having prevailed over the missionaries to stay in her home, we can just imagine how the process of conversion continued in Lydia’s life. In fact the narrator is silent again about her, except in 16:40 where the Philippian portion of Paul’s second missionary journey ends at her home, which has then become the house church in Philippi. Even the Letter to the Philippians makes no reference about her. I find the silence in the texts after this brief event rather symbolic in our discussion of the process of conversion, because the next stage is indeed a phase of silence.

(4) This is called the **quiet phase** where time is needed for contemplation. A frequent and faithful entering into the heart to listen and discern God’s word in the world is necessary for prophetic action. For change brought about by conversion to have its deep and lasting effect on the person, a quiet phase is necessary after the ebullient stage. This is a time of reflection, of withdrawal and moments of aloneness, a time for making sense of what has happened, a time of testing the authenticity of one’s mystical experience and the depth of one’s conviction to engage in prophetic action. This is the time of internalizing the values put forth by the newly accepted and deepening faith.

The prophetic task requires friendship with God, an authentic intimacy with God. It is in this intimacy when a deep friendship is developed in quiet moments and where one learns to share heart to heart with God and begins to see and hear from God’s point of view. This can be gleaned in the vocational call of Mary and Jesus. They were called by God to their special mission in some kind of intense, transformative, revelatory religious experience that scripture presents as an “inaugural vision” or a prophetic call.²⁹ They heard this call in the silence of their being. While it is often difficult to find the silence and stillness which are vitally necessary for spiritual self-discovery and contemplation, the depth and complexity of contemporary spiritual hunger requires the mystical.³⁰ It is this intimacy with God that eventually overcomes the possibility of the prophet’s resistance to both speech and action, which are born of quiet contemplation.³¹ Ruffing muses with these questions: How else does one hear God’s word spoken in the heart or in dreams and visions? How else can one

be confident it is God's word and not merely one's own? Then comes up with this assertion: "The mysticism of the prophets is what frees their imaginations and desires from the defining and constraining power of the world as it is, the world as it stands."³²

Today as ever before, we are faced with a new challenge and a consequent invitation to return to mysticism, an experience of being in close contact with the divine, and to be touched by God's spirit. In the Church and among religious, there is a strong attraction to learn from other religious traditions and Asian spiritualities that teach a unifying and integrated experience of mystical practices. It has become clear for the churches and the Religious in Asia that triple dialogue—with the poor, with cultures and with religions—is a creative way of being church. The practice of silence enables us to listen in dialogue. So taken up with the demands of the mission and being caught up by the "production oriented" expectation of religious life, somehow mysticism has been a neglected part of the religious lifestyle. Prayer has become stale and routine, no longer experienced as the breath of life of the Spirit. The lack of contemplative prayer in members of a community has contributed to the breakdown of faith communities in mission to the extent that the religious community can become the primary source of discouragement and disappointment for its members. There has to be coherence between the prophet's message and the prophet's life.³³ The supposed faith communities lose its prophetic edge in the process. Studies have shown based on interviews of religious in different parts of the world that the experience of God in personal prayer or through daily events and relationships with people constitutes the primary source of faith renewal and perseverance of religious commitment.³⁴

This simply highlights that mysticism is an integral part of our prophetic witness and vocation. It is through contemplation that we are able to see the world and the people we are called to serve and minister from God's heart, from God's perspective. The prophetic way of living in a religious community must be highly conducive to the ministerial exercise of the prophetic vocation of focusing the Word of God in the concrete situations in which they minister.³⁵ Contemporary needs challenge us to see that there is no division between mysticism and the prophetic dimension of the spirituality of consecrated life. There is no antagonism between the mystic and the prophet; prophets were mystics and mystics were prophets.³⁶

If we were to stay with Lydia and her household after the missionaries have left and return to our everyday life and work, how could our prophetic vocation be sustained and deepened? What are the everyday noises—both inner and outer—that block us from entering into silence or distract us from God's presence? It is necessary to identify these noises so that we can begin to bring them to inner stillness.

(5) This quiet phase then leads to the fifth and final movement, which is the **integration phase**. Here, the person makes the substance of the conversion an integral part of one's being. The period of silence and withdrawal has provided the time to make sense of what has happened, to integrate the change of attitude, perspective and belief into one's history and life, and to form a synthesis of all the parts of the mystical and prophetic experience of conversion.³⁷ Contemplation and mysticism require a growth in one's capacity for discernment and critical thinking in the quest for the authentic self. An ongoing life of prayer is important in this stage, to discern continually the action of the Spirit in one's life. Prophetic speaking and acting do not have the advantage of hindsight precisely because it is addressed to "what is happening" right now. Thus the more contemplative the person is, the more one can make appropriate prophetic action even without the privilege of long periods of prayer. This phase will enable the person to enter again into the community of faith

and to put that faith into action based on one's conviction. The prophetic task is to focus the Word, the proclamation of the Reign of God, directly on and in a particular situation.³⁸

In many parts of the world, especially in Asia, leaders of Catholic Religious congregations, more recently in India, have decided to let environmental concerns shape their lifestyle and activities. This was a fruit not only of discussion but also of periods of prayerful consideration of how religious must respond to the challenges of our times. The leaders have resolved to examine the moral and religious imperatives in their lifestyle including "insensitive use of natural resources" and a tendency to destroy habitable lands in the name of development.³⁹ The congregational leaders in their final document state that "greening consecrated life is the most demanding theme, and it has to be incorporated into every aspect of religious life."⁴⁰

We may never know what happened to Lydia and her household after the departure of Paul and his companions. But one thing is certain: the mere fact that the church of Philippi grew and flourished in her generation⁴¹ is enough testimony of the depth of Lydia's conversion and her commitment to continue the mission of Christ. The example of Lydia and her faith community gives religious life a sense of hope that in spite of the many challenges besetting us today—such as decline of vocations, aging, problems in community life, new challenges in the mission, and so on—if and when we truly listen to God's word, our hearts will be opened to listen deeply to how we may renew our baptismal commitment in the context of religious life. As a renewed focus on the new responses to mission is emerging, we are challenged to invest our spiritual and material resources in service for the poor/marginalised as well as for structural change on behalf of God's people. Truly, all who read Lydia's story can judge her fidelity in remaining faithful to the Lord and his mission up to the very end.

Just as Lydia responded to God's call to live her baptismal commitment, what calls do we hear today urging us "to fill situations of darkness with prophetic light and to dwell courageously in new horizons"?

Conclusion:

Thus our sensitive rereading of Lydia's story and conversion as well as our subsequent discussion of the five phases of the conversion process have challenged us to reflect more deeply upon our religious call to be mystics and prophets in today's world. As religious we are called to be more attentive to the presence of the sacred in our own inner journeys, in the lives of others, and throughout the whole of creation. Recognising contemplation as a way of life for the whole church, we religious will see our communities and ourselves as centers of spirituality and the experiences of God. Just as the first Christian community in Acts — who gathered together in deep prayer as they awaited the birth of a new beginning — experienced an impelling force of the mighty wind (Acts 2:2) that emboldened them to engage in prophetic action of proclaiming and witnessing to the Word to the ends of the earth, we too are called to live our religious commitment in the same pattern as we continue Christ's mission in our world today. May the insights we have gained through our rereading of Lydia's story be the beginning of a new Pentecost in our religious life today. May it be an impetus for us who are today's disciples to recognize and acknowledge the great number of women who continue to take on the prophetic task for the church to flourish in a world that has suffered so much division, violence, exploitation, and disillusionment. The Spirit is the power within and around us that enables us to live out our ongoing conversion experiences as Lydia did and thus offer our generous

hospitality as a sign of God's presence and reign in our midst.

ENDNOTES:

- 1 Janet Ruffing, rsm, editor, *Mysticism and Social Transformation* (Syracuse: New York: Syracuse University Press, 2001), pp. 7-8.
- 2 David Lertis Matson, *Household Conversion Narratives in Acts: Pattern and Interpretation* (New York: Continuum Publishing, 1996), p. 136.
- 3 According to the footnote on the Baptism of Jesus in the Jerusalem Bible.
- 4 Susanne Heine, *Women and Early Christianity: Are the Feminist Scholars Right?* (London: SCM, 1987), p. 83.
- 5 A. Thomas Kraabel, "The Disappearance of the 'God-fearers'" in *Numen* 28 (1981), pp.113-126. The author questions the existence of this group, long accepted by New Testament scholars. Kraabel posits that the god-fearers function merely as a Lukan literary device to show how Christianity moved from its proclamation within Judaism to become a Gentile religion.
- 6 See Heine, p. 93.
- 7 David K. O'Rourke, OP, "The Experience of Conversion" in Francis Eigo, OSA, ed., *The Human Experience of Conversion: Persons and Structures in Transformation* (Pennsylvania: Villanova University Press, 1987), p.9
- 8 David K. O'Rourke, OP, *A Process Called Conversion* (New York: Doubleday, 1985), p. 34.
- 9 See O'Rourke, "The Experience of Conversion", p. 10.
- 10 See Heine, p. 84.
- 11 Florence M. Gillman, *Women Who Knew Paul*, *Zaccheus Studies: New Testament* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1992), p. 36. The author cites as one of her sources G. H. R. Horsley, *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity. A Review of Greek Incriptions Published in 1976, 1977, 1978*, 3 vols. (North Ryde, N.S.W.: Ancient History Documentary Center, Marquette University, 1981-83). The reference is *New Docs 1977*, p. 27.
- 12 Andrew Walls, "Origins of Old Northern and New Southern Christianity" in *Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), pp. 68-75.
- 13 Elizabeth Dreyer, "Images of the Spirit: Renewing Source for the Spiritual Life" in the *New Theology Review*. An American Catholic Journey for Ministry, Vol. 11, No. 4, Nov. 1998, p. 29.
- 13
- 14 Dairmuid O'Murchu, *Reclaiming Spirituality: A New Spiritual Framework for Today's World* (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 1997), p. vii.
- 15 Daniel Maguire, *The Moral Core of Judaism and Christianity: Reclaiming the Revolution* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), p.166.
- 16 Sandra Schneiders, IHM, "Call, Response and Task of Prophetic Action", Part two of a five-part essay, "Religious Life as Prophetic Life Form" in *NCR*, Jan. 4, 2010.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Sandra Schneider's, IHM, "What Jesus Taught Us About His Prophetic Ministry", Part three of a five-part essay in *NCR*, Jan. 6, 2010.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 See Maguire., p. 168.
- 21 Sandra Schneiders, IHM, "Tasks of Those Who Choose the Prophetic Life

Style” in *NCR*, Jan. 7, 2010.

22 John R. W. Stott, *The Spirit, the Church and the World: The Message of Acts* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1990), p. 263, as quoted by Matson, p. 147.

23 See Schneiders, “Tasks of Those Who Choose the Prophetic Life Style.”

24 Ivoni Richter Reimer, *Women in the Acts of the Apostles: A Feminist Liberation Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), p. 124.

25 Albert Nolan, *Jesus Today* (Philippines: Jesuit Communications Foundation, Inc. 2006, published in the Philippines by arrangement with Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY 10545-0308), p. 42. Many scientists, the best known being Stephen Hawking, went to work trying to trace the evolution of the universe which later became known as the new creation story.

26 See Matson, p. 148.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

29 See Schneiders, “Call, Response and Task of Prophetic Action.”

30 Kathleen Coyle, SSC, “Prophetic Mysticism: The Call to Live Prophetically” in *EAPR*, Vol. 45, no. 2 (2008), p. 1.

31 See Ruffing, p. 9.

32 Ibid.

33 See Schneiders, “Tasks of Those Who Choose the Prophetic Life Style.”

34 Maxi Fernando, “The Trajectory of the Asian Religious Vocation” in *RLA*, Vol. XI, No. 3, July-September 2009, p. 32.

35 See Schneider's, “Religious Life as Prophetic Life Form”.

36 See Nolan, p. 72. The author refers to David Tracy, “Recent Catholic Spirituality: Unity amid Diversity” in *Christian Spirituality: Post-Reformation and Modern*, vol. 3 (London: SCM 1990), pp. 160-70. He also cites Philip F. Sheldrake, “Christian Spirituality as a Way of Living Publicly: A Dialectic of the Mystical and Prophetic,” *Spiritus: Journal of Christian Spirituality* 3, no. 1 (2003), pp. 24-27.

Nolan acknowledges the mystico-prophetic tradition, a term being used more frequently in Christian theology and spirituality as a way of recognizing the Judeo-Christian roots of the unity of both mysticism and prophecy.

37 See O'Rourke, p. 10.

38 See Schneiders, “Tasks of Those Who Choose the Prophetic Life Style.”

39 UCANews.com, Tuesday, Oct. 20, 2009,

<http://www.ucanews.com/2009/10/05/religious-add-green-vow-to-consecrated-life/>.

Retrieved 2009-10-18.

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40 Ibid.

41 See Gillman, p. 34.