

FOREWORD

Sometimes a chance remark or question can have profound effects in our lives, and even in history. Such a chance remark was made when the bishop of Hong Kong, Giovanni Timoleone Raimondi, said to Arnold Janssen “Why not team up with Father von Essen?” in starting a German mission seminary. The question changed Janssen’s life. Until then it had never entered his mind that he himself would have to fulfill his deepest wish and dream. “He only wanted to publicize the project, solicit funds, and influence priests to join it.”¹ But it was Raimondi’s question and Arnold Janssen’s subsequent decision that was the origin of the Society of the Divine Word. It was a decision that has affected thousands of lives as members of the Society, and no doubt millions of women and men and young people all over the world. In no way comparable, but with similar effect, was a question asked to me by a confrere a few days after I arrived as an SVD missionary in the Philippines in 1973. He asked me whether I had come to “teach Roman theology, or Filipino theology.” It was a question that caught me totally off guard, but changed my life, and, in retrospect, shaped my career as a missionary and a scholar.²

It was also a chance remark that introduced the term “prophetic dialogue” at the Fifteenth General Chapter of the SVD in 2000. Although the “paternity” of the phrase remains elusive, the phrase emerged, as I remember it, in the context of a rather intense discussion about how we SVDs should characterize our missionary service in the church. Should we speak of mission as “dialogue” or as “prophetic action”? Many, mostly Asians and so a tiny minority in their mission situations, argued for dialogue. Others, mostly Latin Americans imbued with the theology of liberation and ministering in the context of poverty and oppression, argued for a more prophetic stance. Then someone suggested that we might simply say that SVD mission is characterized by “prophetic dialogue”—a perfect compromise that everyone spontaneously agreed to. And so the phrase “prophetic dialogue” came to be, and began its history as a major way of approaching Christian mission thinking and practice. Mission, prophetic dialogue insists, must be rooted in dialogue: openness and respect for the other. And yet it also must be committed both to communicating the Christian message in a relevant and hopeful way, and to a fearless opposition to injustice and oppression in any form.

This volume by current Vice-Superior General of the Society of the Divine Word, José Antunes da Silva, traces both the background of this

¹ F. Bornemann, *Arnold Janssen*, 45. See also J. Alt, *Journey of Faith*, 45.

² See S. Bevens, *Becoming a Global Theologian*.

important phrase in the General Chapters of the Society in the years after Vatican II and before the fifteenth General Chapter in 2000, and then traces the genesis of prophetic dialogue in that important chapter. In addition, da Silva sketches the theological and missiological foundation of the phrase and follows its development in the years after 2000. The result is a masterful and careful history, and an informed and informative theology of prophetic dialogue that offers clarity and depth to the idea that many consider one of the most important missiological developments in the twenty-first century.

I have often marveled at the power of the phrase prophetic dialogue to generate creative and imaginative thinking about mission in our day. Various missiologists and theologians have developed the idea in many ways and in varying circumstances.³ In my own ongoing reflection on prophetic dialogue over the last twenty years (often in partnership with my friend, confrere, and colleague Roger Schroeder), I have realized that prophetic dialogue, as José Antunes da Silva also notes, is rooted in an attitude, even a spirituality, that is itself deeply dialogical. Such an attitude or spirituality is one of respect, openness, discernment, contemplation, and prayer within every situation that a missionary or minister finds herself/himself. In addition, I have discovered that the act of engaging in prophetic dialogue is also a profound act of contextual theologizing. There is no situation of missionary activity that is not the result of a theological judgment, that is not contextual. It is always the result of a personal or communal prayerful discernment that decides on how a minister or a community will act in a particular situation. Engaging in prophetic dialogue, in other words, is a praxis of faith-filled action and reflection in an ongoing spiral that demands continual evaluation.

As a person or a community practices this dialogically-informed spirituality and theological reflection, the result of the discernment involved is always prophetic action. Perhaps the result is a discernment that the practice of interfaith, ecumenical, or secular dialogue is needed in a particular context. Sometimes continued listening or wordless witness is simply the best prophetic action a context demands. But perhaps the prophetic action demands a sensitive communication of the gospel message, or offering a word of hope in a difficult or tragic situation, or telling the truth in a context of an ongoing narrative of a lie or “fake news,” or the confrontation of injustice and oppression. Prophets, Walter Brueggemann has famously written, both “energize” and “criticize.”⁴

³ See, for example, R. Meza, *Toward a New, Praxis-Oriented Missiology*; C. Ross and S. Bevans (eds.), *Mission on the Road to Emmaus*; B. Hinze, *Prophetic Obedience*; T. Noble, *Mission from the Perspective of the Other*.

⁴ W. Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*.

This is always what ministers of the gospel are called to do, but always a result of listening to the Spirit.

What this fine book offers the reader is a firm foundation for the understanding and practice of prophetic dialogue in the context of mission today. Although the idea was introduced originally in a relatively off-hand way, it has proved to be one that has generated a good bit of fresh creative thinking about mission, and is, in my judgment, a powerful and effective way of thinking missiologically in our twenty-first century. José Antunes da Silva's work is important reading for members of the Society of the Divine Word, and our Sisters of the Holy Spirit, both the missionary and contemplative branches. There is no doubt in my mind that paying attention to the process of prophetic dialogue will enhance the way we SVDs engage in mission in today's complex and globalized world. This book will, however, be important reading as well for all those who are committed to ministry in our contemporary church, a church that is coming to more and more consciousness that it is "by its very nature missionary," and a "community of missionary disciples."⁵ I welcome this English translation, and my hope is that it will be appreciated by the many readers that it deserves, leading them to the spirituality and practice of prophetic dialogue.

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Seventeenth Anniversary of the Canonization of
Arnold Janssen and Joseph Freinademetz

⁵ AG 2; EG 24.