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July 15, 2012

The Prophet in the Church

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The Prophet in the Church

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This article was previously published in *The Catholic Advocate*.

Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Sunday Readings for July 15, 2012 for Cycle B:

Amos 7:12-15; Ps 85; Ep 1:3-14; Mk 6:7-13

THE PROPHET IN THE CHURCH

Lawrence E. Frizzell

Last Sunday the readings provided an occasion for reflecting on our attitude toward the hierarchical leadership of the Church. Biblical models provide an important background for appreciating the divine plan for ordering the Christian community. In reflecting on the reading from Ezekiel, we noted that Ezekiel was already a priestly teacher for the people of Judah; the extraordinary situation of exile became the context for his task as a prophet. The passage this Sunday from the prophet Amos draws attention to God's use of people outside the constituted forms of leadership to bear his message.

Although the twelve tribes split into two kingdoms after the death of Solomon, a century or so later God sent Amos from the Kingdom of Judah to Bethel, a center of worship in the Northern Kingdom. He warned the priests and king that their infidelity to the covenant would lead to exile. A messenger of woe is never popular, so Amos was told to return home. Undoubtedly he was grateful that nothing worse befell him!

Amos defended himself by explaining that he was not a "professional" prophet, nor was he a member of a prophetic guild. He was a simple shepherd with an avocation of caring for sycamore trees. "The Lord took me from following the flock and he said to me: 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel'" No prophet is popular in his own country or home town. Amos learned that the prophet is not accepted in a neighboring land either!

In spite of the exile of the ten tribes of the Northern Kingdom in 721 BCE, the great prophets and other teachers of Israel hoped for the restoration of all twelve tribes in God's service. The unity of the people of Israel was expressed symbolically when Jesus chose twelve from among his disciples to collaborate with him. Sent forth in his name, they would proclaim the kingdom of God and extend his healing ministry to those in need. These acts of mercy would herald the new stage in God's plan.

From ancient times Israelite men were commanded to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the three great feasts (Dt 16:16-17). It became customary to set aside business or professional concerns and for groups to travel intent only on preparing for the experience of God's presence in Jerusalem. They would depend on the hospitality of fellow countrymen along the way and lived in utmost simplicity. Jesus presented the mission of his apostles in a similar fashion, declaring that they were not to provide for their daily needs but would depend on the hospitality of those they taught and healed. This exchange of gifts encouraged others to take responsibility for the pilgrims in their midst. The apostles thus learned the importance of establishing relationships of mutual dependence with those whom they were sent to teach and heal. In this way, they manifested a respect for their hosts, giving them an occasion to share their materials goods as God's blessing, just as the apostles were

instruments of God's spiritual gifts. Thus a community would be built up to provide continuity into the future, since the very purpose of this mission was to prepare people for the reception of Jesus' work, making more disciples or learners.

How do the faithful know whether a visiting prophet or apostle is authentic? Throughout the centuries, the Church has insisted that such people present their credentials. The missionary who is in holy orders has not come of his own initiative but has been sent, so ecclesiastical documents substantiate this fact.

But what of a teacher like Amos? Each baptized person has a share in the prophetic, royal and priestly character of Jesus. This gift empowers the Christian to teach by word and example. However, the person's message must be evaluated in the light of the Gospel and the Church's teaching. "If one teaches so as to increase justice and the knowledge of the Lord, receive him as one would receive the Lord" (Teaching of the Twelve Apostles 11:2). This early text (dating between 70-100) also dealt with the problem of exploitation. "Let every apostle who comes to you be received as you would receive the Lord. But he shall not remain more than one day. If necessary, let him remain a second day. But if stays for three, he is a false prophet. And when an apostle departs, let him take only enough bread to last until he reaches his next destination, but if he asks for money he is a false prophet" (11:3). Beware of freeloaders! This openness to fellow-Christians, combined with two principles for assessing their authenticity, deserves our attention as we strive to practice hospitality and receptivity to God's prophet in the world today.