

Prophecy

As the term is used in mystical theology, it applies both to the prophecies of canonical Scripture and to private prophecies. Understood in its strict sense, it means the foreknowledge of future events, though it may sometimes apply to past events of which there is no memory, and to present hidden things which cannot be known by the natural light of reason. St. Paul, speaking of prophecy in 1 Corinthians 14, does not confine its meaning to predictions of future events, but includes under it Divine inspirations concerning what is secret, whether future or not. As, however, the manifestation of hidden present mysteries or past events comes under revelation, we have here to understand by prophecy what is in its strict and proper sense, namely the revelation of future events. Prophecy consists in knowledge and in the manifestation of what is known. The knowledge must be supernatural and infused by God because it concerns things beyond the natural power of created intelligence; and the knowledge must be manifested either by words or signs, because the gift of prophecy is given primarily for the good of others, and hence needs to be manifested. It is a Divine light by which God reveals things concerning the unknown future and by which these things are in some way represented to the mind of the prophet, whose duty it is to manifest them to others.

DIVISION

Writers on mystical theology consider prophecies with reference to the illumination of the mind, to the objects revealed, and to the means by which the knowledge is conveyed to the human mind. By reason of the illumination of the mind prophecy may be either perfect or imperfect. It is called perfect when not only the thing revealed, but the revelation itself, is made known -- that is, when the prophet knows that it is God who speaks. The prophecy is imperfect when the recipient does not know clearly or sufficiently from whom the revelation proceeds, or whether it is the prophetic or individual spirit that speaks. This is called the prophetic instinct, wherein it is possible that a man may be deceived, as it happened in the case of Nathan who said to David when he was thinking of building the Temple of God: "Go, do all that is in thy heart, because the Lord is with thee" (2 Samuel 7:3). But that very night the Lord commanded the Prophet to return to the king and say that the glory of the building of the temple was reserved, not for him, but for his son. St. Gregory, as quoted by Benedict XIV, explains that some holy prophets, through the frequent practice of prophesying, have of themselves predicted some things, believing that therein they were influenced by the spirit of prophecy.

By reason of the object there are three kinds of prophecy according to St. Thomas (Summa II-II:174:1): prophecy of denunciation, of foreknowledge, and of predestination.

- In the first kind God reveals future events according to the order of secondary causes, which may be hindered from taking effect by other causes which would require a miraculous power to prevent, and these may or may not happen, though the prophets do not express it but seem to speak absolutely. Isaias spoke thus when he said to Ezechias: "Take order with thy house, for thou shalt die, and not live" (Isaiah 38:1). To this kind belongs the prophecy of promise, as that mentioned in 1 Kings, ii,30: "I said indeed that thy house, and the house of thy father should minister in my sight, forever", which was not fulfilled. It was a conditional promise made to Heli which was dependent upon other causes which prevented its fulfilment.
- The second, that of foreknowledge, takes place when God reveals future events which depend upon created free will and which he sees present from eternity. They have reference to life and death, to wars and dynasties, to the affairs of Church and State, as well as to the affairs of individual life.
- The third kind, the prophecy of predestination, takes place when God reveals what He alone will do, and what he sees present in eternity and in His absolute decree. This includes not only the secret of predestination to grace and to glory, but also those things which God has absolutely decreed to do by His own supreme power, and which will infallibly come to pass.

The objects of prophecy may also be viewed in respect to human knowledge:

- when an event may be beyond the possible natural knowledge of the prophet, but may be within the range of human knowledge and known to others who witness the occurrence, as, for instance, the result of the battle of Lepanto revealed to St. Pius V;

- when the object surpasses the knowledge of all men, not that it is unknowable but that the human mind cannot naturally receive the knowledge, such as the mystery of the Holy Trinity, or the mystery of predestination;
- when the things that are beyond the power of the human mind to know are not in themselves knowable because their truth is not yet determined, such as future contingent things which depend upon free will. This is regarded as the most perfect object of prophecy, because it is the most general and embraces all events that are in themselves unknowable.

God can enlighten the human mind in any way he pleases. He often makes use of angelic ministry in prophetic communications, or He Himself may speak to the prophet and illuminate his mind. Again the supernatural light of prophecy may be conveyed to the intellect or through the senses or the imagination. Prophecy may take place even when the senses are suspended in ecstasy, but this in mystical terminology is called rapture. St. Thomas teaches that there is no suspension of the sense activities when anything is presented to the mind of the prophet through impressions of the senses, nor is it necessary when the mind is immediately enlightened that activity of the senses should be suspended; but it is necessary that this should be the case when the manifestation is made by imaginative forms, at least at the moment of the vision or of the hearing of the revelation, because the mind is then abstracted from external things in order to fix itself entirely on the object manifested to the imagination. In such a case a perfect judgment cannot be formed of the prophetic vision during the transport of the soul, because then the senses which are necessary for a right understanding of things cannot act, and it is only when a man comes to himself and awakens from the ecstasy that he can properly know and discern the nature of his vision.

RECIPIENT OF PROPHECY

The gift of prophecy is an extraordinary grace bestowed by God. It has never been confined to any particular tribe, family, or class of persons. There is no distinct faculty in human nature by which any normal or abnormal person can prophesy, neither is any special preparation required beforehand for the reception of this gift. Hence Cornely remarks: "Modern authors speak inaccurately of 'schools of prophets', an expression never found in the Scriptures or the Fathers" (Comp. Introduct. in N.T., n. 463). Neither was there ever any external rite by which the office of prophet was inaugurated; its exercise was always extraordinary and depended on the immediate call of God. The prophetic light, according to St. Thomas, is in the soul of the prophet not as a permanent form or habit, but after the manner of a passion or passing impression (Summa II-II:171:2). Hence the ancient prophets by their prayers petitioned for this Divine light (1 Kings 8:6; Jeremiah 32:16; 23:2 sq.; 42:4 sq.), and they were liable to error if they gave an answer before invoking God (2 Samuel 7:2,3).

Writing on the recipients of prophecy, Benedict XIV (Heroic Virtue, III, 144, 150) says: "The recipients of prophecy may be angels, devils, men, women, children, heathens, or gentiles; nor is it necessary that a man should be gifted with any particular disposition in order to receive the light of prophecy provided his intellect and senses be adapted for making manifest the things which God reveals to him. Though moral goodness is most profitable to a prophet, yet it is not necessary in order to obtain the gift of prophecy." He also tells us that the angels by their own natural penetration cannot know future events which are undermined and contingent or uncertain, neither can they know the secrets of the heart of another, whether man or angel. When therefore God reveals to an angel as the medium through which the future is made known to man, the angel also becomes a prophet. As to the Devil, the same author tells us that he cannot of his own natural knowledge foretell future events which are the proper objects of prophecy, yet God may make use of him for this purpose. Thus we read in the Gospel of St. Luke that when the Devil saw Jesus he fell down before Him and, crying out with a loud voice, said: "What have I to do with thee, Jesus, Son of the most high God?" (Luke 8:28). There are instances of women and children prophesying in Holy Scripture. Mary, the sister of Moses, is called a prophetess; Anna, the mother of Samuel, prophesied; Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, by a Divine revelation recognized and confessed Mary as the Mother of God. Samuel and Daniel as boys prophesied; Balaam, a Gentile, foretold the advent of the Messiah and the devastation of Assyria and Palestine. St. Thomas, in order to prove that the heathens were capable of prophecy, refers to the instance of the Sybils, who make clear mention of the mysteries of the Trinity, of the Incarnation of the Word, of the Life, Passion, and Resurrection of Christ. It is true that the Sybilline poems now extant became in course of time interpolated; but, as Benedict XIV remarks, this does not hinder much of them, especially what the early Fathers referred to, from being genuine and in no wise apocryphal.

That the gift of private prophecy exists in the Church is clear from Scripture and the acts of canonization of the saints in every age. To the question, what credence is to be given to these private prophecies, Cardinal Cajetan answers, as stated by Benedict XIV: "Human actions are of two kinds, one of which relates to public duties, and especially to ecclesiastical affairs, such as preaching, celebrating Mass, pronouncing judicial decisions, and the like; with respect to these the question is settled in the canon law, where it is said that no credence is to be publicly given to him who says he has privately received a mission from God, unless he confirms it by a miracle or a special testimony of Holy Scripture. The other class of human actions consists of those of private persons, and speaking of these, he distinguishes between a prophet who enjoins or advises them, according to the universal laws of the Church, and a prophet who does the same without reference to those laws. In the first case every man may abound in his own sense whether or not to direct his actions according to the will of the prophet; in the second case a prophet is not to be listened to" (Heroic Virtue, III, 192).

It is also important that those who have to teach and direct others should have rules for their guidance to enable them to distinguish true from false prophets. A summary of those prescribed by theologians for our guidance may be useful to show practically how the doctrine is to be applied to devout souls in order to save them from errors or diabolical delusions:

- the recipient of the gift of prophecy should, as a rule, be good and virtuous, for all mystical writers agree that for the most part this gift is granted by God to holy persons. The disposition or temperament of the person should also be considered, as well as the state of health and of the brain;
- the prophecy must be conformable to Christian truth and piety, because if it propose anything against faith or morals it cannot proceed from the Spirit of Truth;
- the prediction should concern things outside the reach of all natural knowledge, and have for its object future contingent things or those things which God alone knows;
- it should also concern something of a grave and important nature, that is something for the good of the Church or the good of souls. This and the preceding rule will help to distinguish true prophecies from the puerile, senseless, and useless predictions of fortune-tellers, crystal-gazers, spiritualists, and charlatans. These may tell things beyond human knowledge and yet within the scope of the natural knowledge of demons, but not those things that are strictly speaking the objects of prophecy;
- prophecies or revelations which make known the sins of others, or which announce the predestination or reprobation of souls are to be suspected. Three special secrets of God have always to be deeply respected as they are very rarely revealed, namely: the state of conscience in this life, the state of souls after death unless canonized by the Church, and the mystery of predestination. The secret of predestination has been revealed only in exceptional cases, but that of reprobation has never been revealed, because so long as the soul is in this life, its salvation is possible. The day of General Judgment is also a secret which has never been revealed;
- we have afterwards to ascertain whether the prophecy has been fulfilled in the way foretold. There are some limitations to this rule: (1) if the prophecy was not absolute, but containing threats only, and tempered by conditions expressed or understood, as exemplified in the prophecy of Jonas to the Ninivites, and that of Isaias to King Ezechias; (2) it may sometimes happen that the prophecy is true and from God, and the human interpretation of it is false, as men may interpret it otherwise than God intended.

It is by these limitations we have to explain the prophecy of St. Bernard regarding the success of the Second Crusade, and that of St. Vincent Ferrer regarding the near approach of the General Judgment in his day.

CHIEF PARTICULAR PROPHECIES

The last prophetic work which the Church acknowledges as Divinely inspired is the Apocalypse. The prophetic spirit did not disappear with the Apostolic times, but the Church has not pronounced any work prophetic since then, though she has canonized numberless saints who were more or less endowed with the gift of prophecy. The Church allows freedom in accepting or rejecting particular or private prophecies according to the evidence for or against them. We should be slow to admit and slow to reject them, and in either case treat them with respect when they come to us from trustworthy sources, and are in accordance with Catholic doctrine and the rules of Catholic morality. The real test of these predictions is their fulfilment; they may be only pious anticipations of the ways of Providence, and they may sometimes be fulfilled in part and in part contradicted by events. The minatory prophecies which announce calamities,

being for the most part conditional, may or may not be fulfilled. Many private prophecies have been verified by subsequent events, some have not; others have given rise to a good deal of discussion as to their genuineness. Most of the private prophecies of the saints and servants of God were concerned with individuals, their death, recovery from illness, or vocations. Some foretold things which would affect the fate of nations, as France, England, and Ireland. A great number have reference to popes and to the papacy; and finally we have many such prophecies relating to the end of the world and the approach of the Day of Judgment.

The more noteworthy of the prophecies bearing upon "latter times" seem to have one common end, to announce great calamities impending over mankind, the triumph of the Church, and the renovation of the world. All the seers agree in two leading features as outlined by E.H. Thompson in his "Life of Anna Maria Taigi" (ch. 18): "First they all point to some terrible convulsion, to a revolution springing from most deep-rooted impiety, consisting in a formal opposition to God and His truth, and resulting in the most formidable persecution to which the Church has ever been subject. Secondly, they all promise for the Church a victory more splendid than she has ever achieved here below. We may add another point in which there is a remarkable agreement in the catena of modern prophecies, and that is the peculiar connection between the fortunes of France and those of the Church and the Holy See, and also the large part which that country has still to play in the history of the Church and of the world, and will continue to play to the end of time."

Some prophetic spirits were prolific in the forecasts of the future. The biographer of St. Philip Neri states that if all the prophecies attributed to this saint were narrated, they alone would fill entire volumes. It is sufficient to give the following as examples of private prophecies.

(1) Prophecy of St. Edward the Confessor

Ambrose Lisle Philipps in a letter to the Earl of Shrewsbury dated 28 October, 1850, in giving a sketch of English Catholic history, relates the following vision or prophecy made by St. Edward: "During the month of January, 1066, the holy King of England St. Edward the Confessor was confined to his bed by his last illness in his royal Westminster Palace. St. Ælred, Abbott of Rievaulx, in Yorkshire, relates that a short time before his happy death, this holy king was wrapt in ecstasy, when two pious Benedictine monks of Normandy, whom he had known in his youth, during his exile in that country, appeared to him, and revealed to him what was to happen to England in future centuries, and the cause of the terrible punishment. They said: 'The extreme corruption and wickedness of the English nation has provoked the just anger of God. When malice shall have reached the fullness of its measure, God will, in His wrath, send to the English people wicked spirits, who will punish and afflict them with great severity, by separating the green tree from its parent stem the length of three furlongs. But at last this same tree, through the compassionate mercy of God, and without any national (governmental) assistance, shall return to its original root, reflower and bear abundant fruit.' After having heard these prophetic words, the saintly King Edward opened his eyes, returned to his senses, and the vision vanished. He immediately related all he had seen and heard to his virgin spouse, Edgitha, to Stigand, Archbishop of Canterbury, and to Harold, his successor to the throne, who were in his chamber praying around his bed." (See "Vita beati Edwardi regis et confessoris", from manuscript Selden 55 in Bodleian Library, Oxford.)

The interpretation given to this prophecy is remarkable when applied to the events which have happened. The spirits mentioned in it were the Protestant innovators who pretended, in the sixteenth century, to reform the Catholic Church in England. The severance of the green tree from its trunk signifies the separation of the English Church from the root of the Catholic Church, from the Roman See. This tree, however, was to be separated from its life-giving root the distance of "three furlongs". These three furlongs are understood to signify three centuries, at the end of which England would again be reunited to the Catholic Church, and bring forth flowers of virtue and fruits of sanctity. The prophecy was quoted by Ambrose Lisle Philipps on the occasion of the reestablishment of the Catholic hierarchy in England by Pope Pius IX in 1850.

(2) Prophecies of St. Malachy

Concerning Ireland

This prophecy, which is distinct from the prophecies attributed to St. Malachy concerning the popes, is to the effect that his beloved native isle would undergo at the hands of England oppression, persecution, and

calamities of every kind, during a week of centuries; but that she would preserve her fidelity to God and to His Church amidst all her trials. At the end of seven centuries she would be delivered from her oppressors (or oppressions), who in their turn would be subjected to dreadful chastisements, and Catholic Ireland would be instrumental in bringing back the British nation to that Divine Faith which Protestant England had, during three hundred years, so rudely endeavoured to wrest from her. This prophecy is said to have been copied by the learned Dom Mabillon from an ancient manuscript preserved at Clairvaux, and transmitted by him to the martyred successor of Oliver Plunkett.

Concerning the Popes

The most famous and best known prophecies about the popes are those attributed to St. Malachy. In 1139 he went to Rome to give an account of the affairs of his diocese to the pope, Innocent II, who promised him two palliums for the metropolitan Sees of Armagh and Cashel. While at Rome, he received (according to the Abbé Cucherat) the strange vision of the future wherein was unfolded before his mind the long list of illustrious pontiffs who were to rule the Church until the end of time. The same author tells us that St. Malachy gave his manuscript to Innocent II to console him in the midst of his tribulations, and that the document remained unknown in the Roman Archives until its discovery in 1590 (Cucherat, "Proph. de la succession des papes", ch. xv). They were first published by Arnold de Wyon, and ever since there has been much discussion as to whether they are genuine predictions of St. Malachy or forgeries. The silence of 400 years on the part of so many learned authors who had written about the popes, and the silence of St. Bernard especially, who wrote the "Life of St. Malachy", is a strong argument against their authenticity, but it is not conclusive if we adopt Cucherat's theory that they were hidden in the Archives during those 400 years.

These short prophetic announcements, in number 112, indicate some noticeable trait of all future popes from Celestine II, who was elected in the year 1143, until the end of the world. They are enunciated under mystical titles. Those who have undertaken to interpret and explain these symbolical prophecies have succeeded in discovering some trait, allusion, point, or similitude in their application to the individual popes, either as to their country, their name, their coat of arms or insignia, their birth-place, their talent or learning, the title of their cardinalate, the dignities which they held etc. For example, the prophecy concerning Urban VIII is *Lilium et Rosa* (the lily and the rose); he was a native of Florence and on the arms of Florence figured a *fleur-de-lis*; he had three bees emblazoned on his escutcheon, and the bees gather honey from the lilies and roses. Again, the name accords often with some remarkable and rare circumstance in the pope's career; thus *Peregrinus apostolicus* (pilgrim pope), which designates Pius VI, appears to be verified by his journey when pope into Germany, by his long career as pope, and by his expatriation from Rome at the end of his pontificate. Those who have lived and followed the course of events in an intelligent manner during the pontificates of Pius IX, Leo XIII, and Pius X cannot fail to be impressed with the titles given to each by the prophecies of St. Malachy and their wonderful appropriateness: *Crux de Cruce* (Cross from a Cross) Pius IX; *Lumen in caelo* (Light in the Sky) Leo XIII; *Ignis ardens* (Burning Fire) Pius X. There is something more than coincidence in the designations given to these three popes so many hundred years before their time. We need not have recourse either to the family names, armorial bearings or cardinalatial titles, to see the fitness of their designations as given in the prophecies. The afflictions and crosses of Pius IX were more than fell to the lot of his predecessors; and the more aggravating of these crosses were brought on by the House of Savoy whose emblem was a cross. Leo XIII was a veritable luminary of the papacy. The present pope is truly a burning fire of zeal for the restoration of all things to Christ.

The last of these prophecies concerns the end of the world and is as follows: "In the final persecution of the Holy Roman Church there will reign Peter the Roman, who will feed his flock amid many tribulations, after which the seven-hilled city will be destroyed and the dreadful Judge will judge the people. The End." It has been noticed concerning *Petrus Romanus*, who according to St. Malachy's list is to be the last pope, that the prophecy does not say that no popes will intervene between him and his predecessor designated *Gloria olivæ*. It merely says that he is to be the last, so that we may suppose as many popes as we please before "Peter the Roman". Cornelius a Lapide refers to this prophecy in his commentary "On the Gospel of St. John" (C. xvi) and "On the Apocalypse" (cc. xvii-xx), and he endeavours to calculate according to it the remaining years of time.

(3) Prophecy of St. Paul of the Cross

During more than fifty years St. Paul of the Cross was accustomed to pray for the return of England to the Catholic Faith, and on several occasions had visions and revelations about its re-conversion. In spirit he saw the Passionists established in England and labouring there for the conversion and sanctification of souls. It is well known that several leaders of the Oxford Movement, including Cardinal Newman, and thousands of converts have been received into the Church in England by the Passionist missionaries.

There are many other private prophecies concerning the remote and proximate signs which will precede the General Judgment and concerning Antichrist, such as those attributed to St. Hildegarde, St. Bridget of Sweden, Blessed Anna Maria Taigi (the "three days' darkness"), the Curé d'Ars, and many others. These do not enlighten us any more than do the Scriptural prophecies as to the day and the hour of that judgment, which still remains a Divine secret.

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