

Catholic Identity: Giving Prophetic Witness to Hope

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Introduction

I have been asked to conclude our conference with a theological reflection on our identity as a Catholic health care ministry. For this, I have chosen the themes of *prophetic witness* and *hope*. Using scripture, theology, history

and art I will attempt to bring into greater focus our self-understanding as a ministry of prophetic witness that is source of hope in our world.

The place of hope in understanding Catholic identity was developed by the late Joseph Cardinal Bernardin in his 1995 pastoral letter, *A Sign of Hope*, a pastoral I was

privileged to have some small part in helping to write. In his pastoral, Cardinal Bernardin reminds us that hope does not always carry an object – we do not always hope *for* some *thing*. Hope can also be understood as an underlying confidence about life and our ability to live it, a confidence that carries us through trials and tribulations, joys and merriment.

St. Patrick, in his famous *Breastplate*, echoes this when he proclaims: “I *arise* this day through

the strength of heaven.” He did not just get up or roll out of bed – ‘I *arise* this day.’ There is some reality that makes it possible to arise, to push forward with or despite whatever is happening around us. This reality is hope.

We are called, Cardinal Bernardin writes, to give our patients an experience that strengthens *their* hope, *their* confidence in life. St. Peter exhorts us to be ready to give answer to those who ask the reason for *our* hope (1 Pt 3, 15). Our identity is to give others a caring experience that can be the reason for *their* hope.

What has not been critically developed in discussions of Catholic identity is the notion of ‘prophetic witness.’ Giving prophetic witness touches on the *way* we give an experience that leads to hope. Our identity is not simply

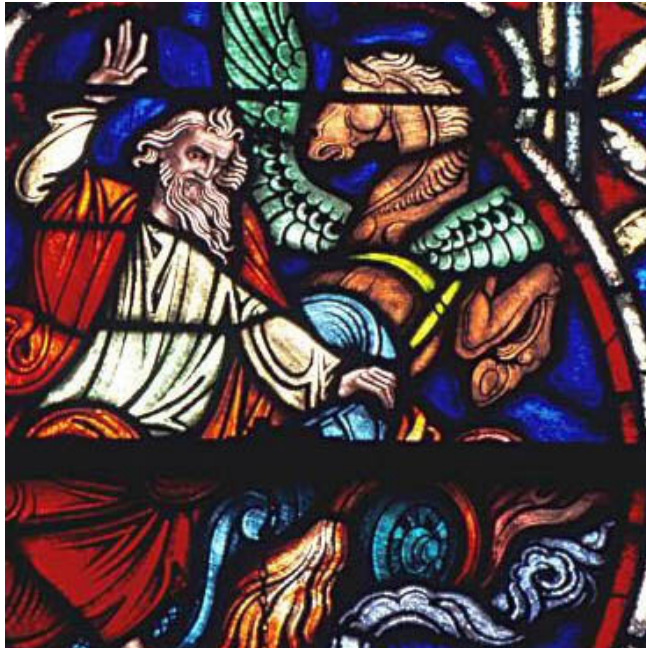
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grounded in the fact *that* we give others an experience that will strengthen confidence in life. The *way* we give that experience is also fundamental to who we are. This way of giving

hope can, I believe, be properly described as ‘giving prophetic witness.’ By that I mean it is a constitutive part of our identity as a ministry to give others an experience that strengthens their hope in the same way that the prophets strengthened the hope of the Hebrew people. It is not enough that we give people *any* experience that strengthens hope. We must do so in a way that can properly be described as being prophetic; our ministry is to give ‘prophetic witness’ as the basis for hope.

What does that mean, then, to give prophetic witness?

When we think of the prophets, a typical image usually comes to mind; an elderly man, scraggly beard and an aura of drama – Elijah perhaps, dramatically crossing the heavens in a fiery chariot (as in this stained glass window at



Sacred Heart Church in New Jersey). The prophet Jonah (seen here from an 8th century church in Italy) bravely preaching repentance to the King and his court may also come to mind.

The image we have of the prophets is shaped largely by biblical accounts we read of their lives, and the theme of judgment that runs through their message. There is the story of David and Nathan from the 2nd Book of Samuel. While the King is speaking to a representative of the Ammonites, the prophet Nathan comes in, takes a sword from a soldier, and lops the Ammonite's head off. He chastises David for entering into treaties rather than putting his trust in God alone, and then walks out of the room leaving a stunned Richard Geer and a bloody mess behind him. That is the prophet: the

uncompromising and unrelenting judge.

We have the account of the Prophet Isaiah in Chapter 7 (7, 10-14) saying to King Ahaz – 'is it not enough that you weary the people, must you also weary your God.' Ahaz does not want a sign from God, but the prophet is going to give him one anyway – 'a virgin shall conceive and bear a son.' The prophet is not someone easily deterred from pronouncing his judgment and completing his mission.

Our image of 'prophetic' seeks to capture those characteristics of strength, determination and uncompromising fidelity, such as in this 16th century painting of John the Baptist at the Gallerie del'Accademia, Venice. (c.1545) There is no question that being prophetic in this way, the challenging judge with a strong and determined commitment to one's message and beliefs can be a source of hope for others.



I think in my own country of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., whose strong, unflinching judgment against racial inequality and belief in the dream of equality continues to bring hope to many. We might think as well of people like Granville Sharp, whose judgment against slavery led him to become a leader of the movement to abolish the slave trade in England in the late 1700's. As part of his campaign against the slave trade, Sharp's convictions were published in a series of stinging accusations of hypocrisy against the American founding fathers during the Revolution in 1776. He later worked with others to establish settlements like the one in Birchtown, Nova Scotia as a place where freed slaves and free blacks who fled the American colonies could live in hope of a better future.

There are images that probably do not come to mind when we think of prophets. This 17th century painting of John the Baptist (found at The Hermitage in St. Petersburg, Russia) is an



anonymous composition influenced by the work of the 17th century Italian artist Michelangelo Caravaggio. In preparation for this talk I shared some of the art I am using with colleagues for comment. This one engendered a

good deal of comment. I was told it displays too much youth and vulnerability, too much gentleness to be accurate of a prophet. It was wondered by another if this painting was perhaps a little too risqué, a little too immodest for a prophet. One person even told me this Baptist's characteristics are too feminine to be realistic – a woman told me that. Her comment speaks I think less to sexism than it does to the stereotypical image we have of a prophet. We need something a little more desperate, a little more frenetic to capture that 'voice crying out in the wilderness.' Still, for many I am sure, Caravaggio's vision – or at least his imitator's vision – falls short.

We expect someone more leathery; someone with a more tragic dimension.

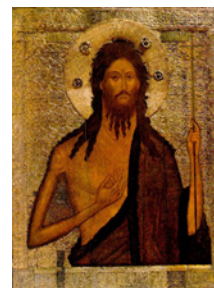
Why is that? Why is our image of a prophet so secure that we can tell immediately what is and is not a realistic artistic presentation? I think it is not just because of the image we derive from reading about them in the scriptures, but also and more importantly because of what it is we think the prophets are doing. As I mentioned above, we see the prophets as announcing

God's judgment against injustice and deceit – and so they do. But there is more to being prophetic than pronouncing God's judgment and proclaiming one's convictions.

Rather than thinking of the prophet solely or even primarily in this way, biblical scholars such as Gerhard van Rad, Jesuits James Walsh and Richard Clifford, and Enrique Nardoni offer a different perspective.¹ Prophets may be much more accessible to the average person, and much more engaged in day to day life than we might imagine from this 16th century icon from the Moscow School (at the State Museums of the Moscow Kremlin) what with them eating locust and wild honey and wearing sheepskin.



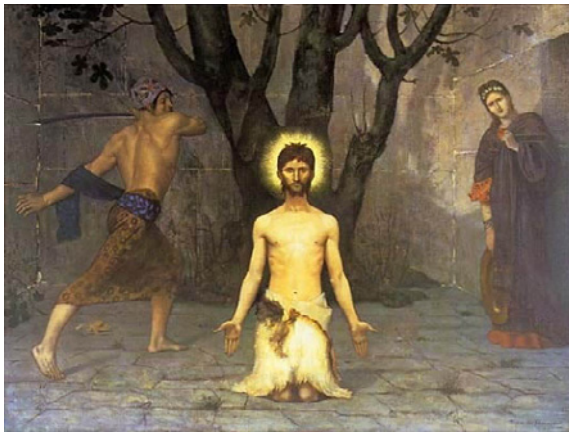
To better understand the prophetic nature of our identity, we need to fully and I think newly understand what it means to be prophetic. We



need to rediscover those other aspects of the prophetic that allow a richer variety of unexpected images, such as the original 17th century Caravaggio rendering of the Baptist (at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City) – (I think no one will be

surprised that Caravaggio has been described as 'the most revolutionary artist of his time) – or de Chavannas' late 19th century *La Décollation de St. Jean Baptiste* (at the Barber Institute of Fine Arts in Birmingham, England).

Who is a prophet? A prophet is someone sent by God to give witness to the people on God's behalf. We know that. But, give witness to *what* exactly? Our common understanding is that the



prophet gives witness to God's judgment, as well as to God's truth, God's law. But, that is not the all of it.

In the Book Sirach, we read that Yahweh our God has no favorites, but at the same time is not unduly partial to the poor (Sir 35, 12-13). God is partial towards those who are poor, meaning, for Sirach and the prophets, that God is both concerned about the poor, and committed to doing something on their behalf. Who are these poor? They are the *anawim*, a biblical term that embraces "the poor," "the afflicted," "the humble," and "the meek." They are "the lost and forgotten ones" of Matthew 5, (verses 3 and 5), and "the remnant" mentioned by the prophet Zephaniah (Zeph 2,3; 3, 12-19).

For the prophet, the poor to whom God is partial can be described as those whose future has been put at risk. The poor are those whose future is at risk because of their poverty, or because they have been widowed or orphaned; they are those whose future is at risk because they have leprosy or are blind or are Samaritan – the poor are those at risk because they are considered ritually impure. Yahweh our God is not unduly partial to those whose future is at

risk. Our God is concerned about them, and committed to doing something to better secure their future.

This partiality toward those whose future is at risk, with its concern and commitment to action on their behalf, is what the prophets understood by the term 'compassion.' Compassion here is more than the literal sense of 'suffering with others.' Compassion in the prophetic literature is about partiality; compassion is about concern for the poor and a commitment to act on their behalf to secure for them a better future. *God's* compassion refers to *God's* partiality; that is, to speak of *God's* compassion is to speak of *God's* concern for those whose future is at risk, and his commitment to intervene on their behalf. That is where the prophet comes in.

The prophet is one sent by God to give witness to that compassion. The prophet is the one who comes to make sure the poor know of God's concern for their plight today, and know of God's intention to do something about it for the future – most often, through the prophet himself. The prophet gives witness to God's compassion by sharing that *same* concern for the poor, and that *same*

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commitment to secure for them a better future. In giving this witness to God's compassion, the prophet gives the poor a reason to hope. Having witnessed, having experienced God's compassion through the prophet, the poor have reason to hope.

The way in which prophets give witness to God's compassion with which we are most familiar is the one we have already seen: the prophet as the spokesperson of God's judgment without any embarrassment about his beliefs and convictions: Amos blasting the local women as 'cows of Bashan' as he rails against

injustice; Dr King railing against inequality in his “I have a dream speech.” This is *one* way of being prophetic; confidently proclaiming God’s judgment and one’s own convictions is *one* way of giving witness to God’s compassion, and it is a source of great hope to the downtrodden.

What is important to note here, and what scholars such as Claus Westermann want to emphasize,² is that the judgment of the prophet is not really against sin, nor is he giving witness to abstract principles like justice or equality, or even to a set of convictions or beliefs. When Amos rails against injustice, he is not so much giving witness to justice as he is giving witness to God’s compassion for those whose future is at risk today due to injustice. To secure a better future, he pronounces his judgment and demands justice. When Dr. King rails against

racial inequality, he is not so much giving witness to the principle of equality as he is giving witness to God’s compassion for those whose future is at risk today because of inequality. To secure a better future, he pronounces his judgment and demands equality.

Prophetic witness is to God’s compassion for people whose future is at risk today for some real and concrete reason – the judgment of which the prophets speak is really a witness to God’s concern in the present and God’s commitment to secure a better future. If they rail against injustice and inequality it is because at that moment in that situation, injustice and inequality are the threats to the future. This point is subtle to be sure, but it is central to understanding our Catholic identity as a prophetic ministry. Prophetic witness is always



to God's compassion for the poor at a certain moment because of a certain threat, and God's commitment to act for a better future. We are most familiar with this witness being given through the prophets' unflinching judgment and the upholding of their convictions.

There are many examples of giving prophetic witness to God's compassion in this way in our heritage. Mother Emile Gamelin gave prophetic witness in Montreal in 1843 – as well as the

founders of all our religious congregations. In my own country, "Mother Jones," the late 19th century 'angel' to the mine workers along with Father John Mitchell, the first President of the United Mine Workers union and a thorn in the side of President Theodore Roosevelt; Dorothy Day, co-founder of the Catholic Worker Movement along with Peter Maurin who emigrated to the United States from Saskatchewan in 1909; Rev. Dr. Moses Coady, with his cousin Rev. Jimmy Tompkins, pioneered popular education and community organizing especially for the disadvantaged at St. Francis Xavier University in Nova Scotia in the 1950's; Msgr. William Irwin of Edmonton, founder of Catholic Social Services in 1961, who gave prophetic witness by 'walking the talk' long before that expression became a cliché; and Dr. Nuala Kenny whose untiring commitment to the health care ministry and health care reform in Canada continues to today.



Being prophetic is not just about judgment and values. It is also about intimate care giving – it is about giving tangible, concrete and intimate expressions of such profound concern to any person at any moment, on any day, that it changes that person's life.

One other example, if I may take one from Europe, is Roger Casement. Born in Ireland, Casement played a leading role as British counsel in Africa in exposing the forced labor and other atrocities taking place in the independent state of the Congo, and bringing international pressure to bear on King Leopold II of Belgium to end these practices in 1908.

I make mention of Casement here because, after retiring in 1911, it suddenly occurred to him that after all his work to secure a better future for the Congolese, his own native Irish were not free. Despite ill health, he became an Irish patriot and worked for Irish independence during World War I. Casement reminds us that, like charity, giving prophetic witness sometimes begins at home. Sometimes we need to give ourselves a witness of God's compassion so that we might not lose our reason to have hope.

If prophetic witness is giving witness to God's compassion, then boldly announcing judgment and proclaiming our beliefs in justice, equality and human dignity may not be the *only* way for us to give prophetic witness in our ministry. Indeed, there is at least one other way found in the scriptures, another way of giving witness to God's compassion and thereby giving a reason to hope – care giving – the loving concern expressed for an individual in a way that responds to their immediate need in that immediate moment. Being prophetic is not just about judgment and values. It is also about

intimate care giving – it is about giving tangible, concrete and intimate expressions of such profound concern to any person at any moment, on any day, that it changes that person’s life. In this way too, prophetic witness is given and hope is possible – people who cannot secure their own future have an experience that gives them a reason to hope for their future.

Part of our identity is to give prophetic witness to God’s compassion through our intimate human encounters with the poor – the anawim whose future is at risk. We know we are called to be compassionate in our care – many of us have compassion as a core value. But for many of us I suspect, thinking of care giving as ‘prophetic witness’ in the proper sense of the term may be a new idea. Is there, we might ask, additional biblical support for this understanding than what we have seen so far?

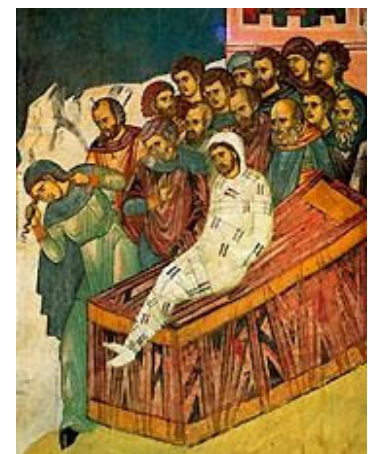
We do find such support in the work of such scholars as Claus Westerman, to whom I made reference earlier, whose work examines the prophetic ministry of Jesus from the point of view of the prophets of the Old Testament.³ Westermann demonstrates convincingly that what we do in care giving in a more intimate setting is every bit as prophetic as proclaiming the truths we hold and believe to be true. Allow me here to take a few examples from Westermann’s work, and to integrate them into the insights we have gained from other scholars I have used to bring this understanding of prophetic witness into greater clarity.

We can begin with the wedding feast at Cana. It is a simple story of Jesus being at a wedding of friends with his mother, and the host runs out of wine. It is also an embarrassing situation. Running short on wine does not have the drama or profound theological development of the Sermon on the Mount to be sure, but it is an example of prophetic witness. The point of the story is not the running out of wine and the miracle that follows. The point of the story is Jesus’ compassionate response to human,



social embarrassment. ‘They have no wine’ his mother says. ‘What is your concern to me – my hour has not yet come’ is Jesus’ reply. But, as we discover, his hour has indeed come – the time for his prophetic ministry to begin – but not with a sermon on the importance of planning ahead or the virtue of temperance. He secures the future reputation of his host by supplying wine. In doing so, others put their faith in him – not as miracle worker but as someone whose prophetic witness to the Father’s compassion inspires hope.

We see more in the account of his raising of the widow’s only son. In the text we read that Jesus, coming upon the funeral procession, is moved with compassion – the Greek used here is *splagchnizomai*, meaning literally to sense a physical yearning in one’s spleen – it is to feel grief in one’s gut. Jesus is physically shaken by the sadness of what he sees, and his compassion for the widow astonishes the crowd.



At this moment, Jesus is giving prophetic witness to God's compassion – but, not, at least not at this sad moment by speaking about the blessedness of those who mourn for they shall be consoled – this is not the time for even such inspiring words as these. Jesus gives prophetic witness by allowing himself to be demonstrably moved by another's sorrow. So threatened is this widow's future by her grief and loss – notice in this icon that she is tearing her hair out in her grief – that Jesus moves in a surprising way.

Defying the ritual taboo against touching a corpse, Jesus reaches out to embrace the dead son. His compassion does not allow him to be constrained by ritual or tradition from involving himself to secure a future at risk – and in so doing, he gives an experience that engenders hope. The raising of the widow's son is a perfect example of God's compassion as a loving intervention in life's darkest moments; it is a perfect account of his power to transform, even shatter, the seemingly inevitable routines of life and death, a power that gives hope.

Finally, we find prophetic witness in the account of the raising of Lazarus. Here we see two very important elements of being prophetic in the way we are describing it today. Recall that in



the Gospel account Jesus has two intimate conversations about Lazarus' death – one with Lazarus' sister Martha, and then a second almost identical conversation between his sister Mary. Jesus does not address the crowds at Bethany; he does not at this time give a discourse on the resurrection and the bread of life. Jesus' concern at this moment is for two people whose grief over the loss of their brother makes them poor – puts their future at risk.

This is not unlike what we see elsewhere in the Gospel, such as after Jesus' resurrection when Mary, so distressed she cannot see or think straight and thinks she is speaking to the gardener, hears her own



name spoken. Prophetic witness is not always directed to society as a whole, but as often in intimate settings to individuals whose future is at risk for very personal reasons.

A highlight of both conversations is the complaint, "Lord, if you had been here my brother would never have died." How often have we heard a similar complaint as health care providers: "if only you had been in the room; if only you had responded more quickly to the bell; if only you had run that test, if only...." I cannot speak for Catholic health care here in Canada, but I know that in the US a typical response to a complaint, even in Catholic health care is, "We are sorry that your experience did not match you expectations." Those are in fact the exact words Major General George Wrightman, the man in charge of Walter Reed Army Hospital in Bethesda, MD, said to the

grieving wife of a soldier testifying to Congress on how horrible conditions are at that facility. Imagine for a moment Jesus saying those words to Martha and Mary: 'I am sorry your experience of my miraculous powers did not meet your expectation. Perhaps you need to lower your expectations, Martha, so you are not so disappointed.'

This kind of defensive language does not and cannot give prophetic witness. For his part, Jesus says nothing, and in his silence we find a bold proclamation of God's compassion. He does not defend himself, try to divert the criticism or turn it back on the complainer as some might do. He says nothing – he listens silently and bears the burden of their grief. And in so doing, he gives prophetic witness to compassion: he shows concern for the poor and a commitment to act.

And hope is born.

Conclusion

Allow me to move toward some concluding comments with the question posed by Sr. Doris Gottemoeller, a Sister of Mercy, at a CHAUSA colloquium I recently attended: "How do we retain our unique identity in a pluralistic world?" This morning, I have proposed the short answer: engender hope in others, society and individuals, by giving prophetic witness to the poor. Our identity is that of giving witness always and everywhere, on issues great and small, in the market place and in intimate personal encounters, to God's compassion by demonstrating through our own actions our God's concern for those whose future is at risk, and commitment to securing one that is better.

However we give that prophetic witness, we know it is not a benign activity. For everyone whose future is at risk for some reason, there will be those whose own future is more secure for that exact same reason. "Good news for the poor," someone once said, "is bad news for the rich."

Jeremiah is called the 'sad prophet' for a reason – being tossed into a cistern to quiet his preaching against a war is only one example of what he suffered. John the Baptist was beheaded in part for proclaiming moral virtue. Roger Casement, to whom I made mention earlier, was ultimately hanged – and as he did earlier, offers an interesting insight – the same prophetic witness he gave that was worthy of praise when given to the Congolese in 1908, was judged as treason when given to the Irish in 1916. You just never know how giving prophetic witness will play out.

Jesus went to the cross because, according to John Howard Yoder, he was a true prophet in the Old Testament tradition: he proclaimed a Jubilee Year at the beginning of his public ministry in the Gospel of Luke (4, 16-22) – a year of favor for the poor that they might secure a better economic future.⁴

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Giving prophetic witness through the intimacy of care giving can be equally dangerous. Westermann reminds us that in John's gospel, it is the raising of Lazarus that triggers the plotting to have

Jesus killed (Jn 11, 53). His expression of compassion in this intimate setting, Westerman writes, is too much for the leaders of the day. George Bernard Shaw said of Mahatma Gandhi, "His death shows how dangerous it is to be good.' We can say the same thing of

Jesus, or anyone else giving prophetic witness in this way.

We should not underestimate the threat securing a better future through intimate care giving can be to those whose future is otherwise secure. Whether we are proclaiming our beliefs or involved in the intimacy of care giving, giving prophetic witness carries risk – perhaps that is part of reason prophetic witness inspires such hope.

However we give it and whatever the risks, prophetic witness ultimately is a work of the heart. Prophet witness flows from a heart possessing the same compassion as our God, and committed to witness to it in the same way as did the prophets of old. (Our identity is that of a health care ministry that has no favorites, but is not unduly partial to all those whose future is at risk. We are a ministry that does not need to defend itself, and so can listen to another's complaint and be moved by their grief; a ministry that is characterized by an attentiveness that notices people and events around us; a ministry that willingly challenges convention on the one hand and is unwilling to fear what others may think of us on the other.)

We give prophetic witness when we defend the rights of the unborn and call for just access to health care for all, and when we build hospitals and medical facilities that are environmentally friendly; we give prophetic witness when we admit medical error, apologize and ask forgiveness; we give prophetic witness when, instead of discharging a stroke patient home alone, pay the costs of sending him back to his family in Mexico – and when we stand up to the criticism that in doing so we are wasting resources on illegals. We give prophetic witness with our programs to ensure all children are immunized as well as when we support and demand health care reform at the state, provincial and federal levels; we give prophetic witness when we establish clinics to provide sexual abuse evaluations for children, from newborns to teenagers, and when we establish

programs for former gang members to have their offensive tattoos removed so they can more easily reintegrate into society; we give prophetic witness when we are open to controversial responses to some of the poorest among us, such as heroin maintenance programs for those who cannot stay clean on their own and for whom methadone is not an option. We give prophetic witness when we make quilts available to patients and families at end of life, and commit ourselves to make sure no one dies alone, and when someone from housekeeping pushes the cleaning cart to the side, takes the hand of a confused elderly woman and brings her first to the correct elevator and then to the correct floor so she can find her husband's room. We give prophetic witness in so many ways – you can name them better than I. Sometimes we suffer as a result, sometimes we win praise – sometimes we get both, at the same time, for doing the same thing – but always giving hope when we do.

When we minister in these ways, proclaiming our values and giving care, we retain our unique identity as Catholic health care providers in this pluralistic world. When we minister in these ways, we give prophetic witness to our God's compassion, and the poor of this world, whoever they are and whatever the risks to their future, have a reason to hope.

Footnotes

- 1 See for example Gerhard van Rad (1965) *Old Testament Theology* New York: Harper & Row; James P. Walsh, SJ (1983) *The Mighty from Their Thrones* Philadelphia: Fortress Press; Enrique Nardoni (2004) *Rise Up, O Judge: A Study of Justice in the Biblical World* (2004) trans. Sean Charles Martin. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson.
- 2 Claus Westermann (1998) *The Gospel of John: In the Light of the Old Testament*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publications.
- 3 Westermann (1998).
- 4 John Howard Yoder (1994, 2nd ed.) *The Politics of Jesus*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans