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## PROPHETIC MINISTRY IN THE CHURCH TODAY

SACRED HEART CHURCH

DETROIT, MI

NOVEMBER 7, 2007

### INTRODUCTION OF FR. BRYAN MASSINGALE

Fr. Tom Lumpkin

We are especially pleased today to welcome Fr. Bryan Massingale, a priest of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee. Bryan has a doctorate in moral theology from the Pontifical Institute in Rome. He is currently an Associate Professor of Theology at Marquette University. He has also taught at Milwaukee's major seminary. He is currently a professor in the Institute for Black Catholic Studies at Xavier University of Louisiana, and has taught at other institutions, such as Sacred Heart School of Theology and the Maryknoll School of Theology.

Fr. Massingale is Vice-President of the Catholic Theological Society of America and Associate Convener of the Black Catholic Theological Symposium. He is a consultant to the USCCB, providing theological assistance in issues of criminal justice, capital punishment, environmental justice and affirmative action, and an advisor on African American Catholics.

Fr. Massingale is a member of the Milwaukee Archdiocesan Council of Priests, where a talk he gave to the priests of Milwaukee in 2004 got our attention. We have been trying for some time to bring Fr. Massingale to Detroit. We felt that he had some very original insights into what's going on, what's happening in the Church and the world; and that was something we wanted to have him come and be part of our group and share with you. So, it's finally happened that we were able to get him here today.

And he is going to speak to us today on Prophetic Ministry in the Church Today. So, we ask that you welcome Fr. Bryan Massingale.

### MINISTERING TO A CHURCH IN TRANSITION

Fr. Bryan Massingale

Good afternoon. It's good to be with you. I'm on a sabbatical this semester from Marquette; and so when Bishop Gumbleton called, I said, "You're the only one who could get me to break my sabbatical to be with this group." (Applause) But then I had to do some exploring. Elephants in the Living Room is not a common name you hear about a church group. So I did some investigation. I contacted Fr. Clarence Williams, who use to be part of this archdiocese; many of you remember him, know him well. "Just tell me, who are these Elephants?" "They are beautiful people. They are some of the most creative people in the Archdiocese of Detroit. They are the intelligencia of the Archdiocese." (Laughter and Applause) So if you think I have something to live up to? Oh no, because I'm going to call Clarence and give him a report. So you have some big shoes to fill.

Seriously. I am grateful for the invitation to be with you, and for the privilege to share with you some of my thoughts about naming the current moment that we are in in the Catholic Church; and for the meaning for a prophetic ministry, for what it means to be a prophet for a Church in the midst of transition. Now you've heard that this talk originally grew out of addressing the priests' assembly in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee in May 2004. I want to assure you a bit of the genesis of that original thought, which I understand is on the website of the elephants, and it's been serialized on the web and on the internet.<sup>1/</sup> I've never published this, but it's been all over the country; so I will get an email saying, "Thank you for doing this."

### The Talk in Milwaukee

The simple theme in Milwaukee that year was “Ministering to a Church in Transition.” The way it was set up was that the closing presentation was going to be offered by both Richard Sklba, the auxiliary bishop of the archdiocese, and myself. Dick is a scripture scholar, and he was going to talk about the role of prophets in the Old Testament, and I was going to talk about what it meant to be a prophet for today’s Church. I was near the end of a sabbatical. From January to June of 2004 I was on a sabbatical leave from ministry – not a leave of absence from the priesthood, but a regularly scheduled one that priests get. I have to clarify that, because people say that you left and did something wrong; because of the moment we are in; and I’ll talk about that later.

That time was a time of deep transition for me. I was in the midst of discerning a change in ministry, moving out of seminary ministry. I was member our seminary faculty at St. Francis Xavier for 13 years, and for a lot of different reasons, thought I needed to move on. But I was also deeply heartbroken during this time. My mother had died that previous September, after a long illness that demanded our daily attention and care: the care of me and my siblings. I also used my sabbatical to take an informal leave of absence from the Church. As I told my friends, I decided during that time to give the Church a time out – much as we give children who don’t behave a time out. I was heartbroken, not only with personal grief, but also with deep frustration at the direction of the Church – frustrations over many issues:

- Liturgical issues: who can clean chalices, kneeling, standing, bowing, whatever. (Laughter)
- Frustrated over being an African American in a Church which too often would be comforted by my absence.
- Frustrated with the narrowness of incoming seminarians.

So during my sabbatical, I decided to give the Church a time out. I was trying to decide whether I should stay; and if I stayed, not simply as a priest, but as a Catholic, how could I stay as a man of integrity? So in the midst of this sabbatical, two things happened:

- First, I got the invitation to give a final address of the priests’ assembly; (Laughter) and not just any address and any assembly, but to give the final address to an assembly of my brothers. It’s one thing to talk to a group of strangers - when you come in, you helicopter in, you’re kind of wonderful, and you leave; it’s another thing to talk to those who I know and love and fight with, and who also know and love and fight with me. What could I say given my own unease, tentativeness and uncertainty? I decided that I would simply listen to my heart, and speak out of my own pain, my own distress, my own groaning and trust, that something of what I said would resonate with them as well.
- The second thing that happened to me, providentially, just before the address, was a growing sense of peace with the words of the prophet Isaiah, “See, I am doing something new” – on a level that I could not get, and still cannot get fully put in adequate words – the conviction grew in me that, whatever I was experiencing, both personally and professionally, was a stripping away, a pruning, a clearing away. I sensed that the stage was being cleared, so that something new could take place in my life, and through my life, for the life of the Church. I was coming to peace with the following resolution, namely, that if I stayed as a priest, it would have to be in a new way, on my own terms, being the priest that I felt called to be, and the priest I believe the Church needed.

Now, I share all this with you to let you know some of the biographical context out of which the talk proceeded.

### Today’s Talk

This talk, which I shared with my brothers, the priests of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, and which I now share with you. You are only the fourth group to actually hear these thoughts. The first group was the group of priests in the Archdiocese. But after they went back home and told their parish staffs, the lay pastoral ministers of the Archdiocese said, “Why should the priests have this; why don’t you talk to us?” I said, “I’d be happy to.” They told their friends of the Association of Religious Educators, the Director of Religious Education said, “Come talk to us about it”. I said, “Well, it was for priests originally”. They said, “We heard it is okay if you talk to us too.” I said, “Fine!” So you are the only group outside the state of Wisconsin that’s hearing this, which is good, because I look forward to your engagement and to our learning together. I welcome your feedback, as together, we strive to serve the Church we love, at a time when that love is often sorely tried and tested.

Now the original talk is up on your website; so I'm not going to repeat it all. I'm going to repeat some of it, because I still believe it. And I'm sure some of it today is going to be different, because I believe what I said then even more strongly now. The central thesis remains the same; so I'm going to give you, in case you nod off after lunch, I'm going to give you the main points of it, so just in case you wake up, you'll know where we are. (Laughter)

The moment that we are in, in the Church, I say bluntly: the Church is dying! Or to put it more accurately, a given way of being Church is dying.

The second point is: a new Church is being born – a new Church is being born. And so, if we are going to be prophets for the Church in this moment, it requires that we are hospice ministers for the Church – that we are hospice ministers for the Church – helping the Church to die well, so that a new Church can come to be.

Now, you've got the talk. So if you fall asleep, you haven't missed anything. Also, they'll be a video tape as well.

### Being a Prophetic Minister

We're going to talk about being a prophet, so we'll have a clear understanding of what a prophet is. My definition is this: The prophet is both a key observer of the signs of the times, and also acutely attuned with the heart of God. So a prophet has one heart that is attuned to the times in which the prophet lives, and another that is deeply attuned with the heart of God; and out of these dual sensitivities for the signs of the times and to the heart of God, the prophet speaks truth – truth that is often unwelcome and uncomfortable, yet always essential and life giving. I think if you met any prophet in the Old Testament you would see these two characteristics:

- Being acutely attuned both to what's going on in their society and in their faith community;
- Also being deeply rooted in God;

And out of these dual sensitivities, speaking truth that's uncomfortable, unwelcome, but essential and life giving. So if we're going to talk about being prophets in the Church today, we need to ask ourselves the question, "What's going on in the Church?" We'd be attuned to that; judge it in light of God; and then, having the faith and courage to speak uncomfortable, unwelcome, yet life-giving, truths.

So what's going on in the Church and what are the life-giving truths that need to be spoken? To prepare for that reflection, I went back to an old standby, the book that still merits reading: Walter Brueggemann's "The Prophetic Imagination." And I've always been taken with his understanding that prophecy is not so much an action program, as much as it is a mind-set, a consciousness, a way of imagining a scene of the world. Brueggemann argues that the prophet's role is to propose alternative visions and possibilities than those that are officially endorsed. The biblical prophet, he says, has a two-fold task:

- First, in light of God's word, to articulate the people's groans, their grief's, their losses, or as we prayed in today's prayer, their lamentations, their wails, their woes.
- And then in light of God's word, to express the peoples' deepest hopes and lead them to embrace God's promise of new life: "See I am doing something new."

So prophetic vocation is first to help the faith community to embrace a loss that it does not want to admit and then, secondly, to proclaim to the people a hope that they cannot dare to imagine.

So we're going to do two things. We're going to look at the loss that we don't want to admit; and then let's look at the hope that we can't dare to imagine.

### The Loss

"I have heard the groans of my people." God speaks to Moses to talk about why God has decided to definitively intervene in human history. And God intervenes in response to groans – groans, which are not mere grips or complaints, but groans that are deep cries of intense pain that are struggling for speech. Much of what I say is colored now by my experience as a priest; but I hope it's also of the distress of the laity as well. All is not well among us in the Catholic Church. There is deep pain, distress, and groaning going on. Let's give voice to some of those groans.

- The first groan, probably the most obvious, is the demographic collapse of the priesthood, both in terms of numbers, age and health. I used to use the phrase, “*priest shortage*.” I refuse to use that anymore. One: because it’s a euphemism that avoids reality. We are in the demographic collapse of the priesthood. Now let me make plain what I mean. We are in the midst of the third decade, the third decade of a sharp, steep and irreversible decline in the number of ordained priestly ministers. Now I want you to underline the words sharp, steep and irreversible, especially that last word irreversible. And this is going to usher in changes in the Church, whether we like them or not, whether we are ready or not, or whether we want to admit it or not.

Let me underscore what I mean by demographic collapse. In the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, only 21% of the clergy are under the age of 55. We are not at all unusual. When I was introduced, they said I’m a young priest. I chuckle, because in May of this coming year, I’m celebrating 25 years of ordination; and yet I still am one of the young priests, as I’m one of the 21% under the age of 55. Now in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, we can retire with reduced pension at 65, and full pension at 68. That means, in ten years, anywhere between 70 to 75 percent of the priests in Milwaukee will be retired. Milwaukee is not at all unusual. The Jesuits have done a study showing that half of the Jesuits are over the age of 70, and that’s not going to change for the next fifteen years that they project. Fifteen years from now, there’ll be half the number of Jesuits serving the Church in the United States that exists now, and half of those will be over the age of 70.

This decline is not a shortage anymore, because it’s irreversible – irreversible in the Milwaukee Archdiocese. Even if we ordain ten priests a year for the next ten years, and we’re not going to do that, by any means; but even if we ordain ten priests a year for the next ten years, ten years from now, we would still have fewer priests than we do now. In the diocese of Madison, Wisconsin, there are 120 parishes and only 87 priests now to serve them. Five years to seven years from now many dioceses will have only one-half to one-third of the current number of priests to serve the faithful. To put it bluntly: priests are older, grayer and fewer than they have been in any time in the living memory of the United States Church.

Now this shortage has already had major affects upon our life. It has deeply realigned parish life throughout the country through parish closures. We don’t close parishes anymore; we merge them, especially in our urban centers – more about that in a moment – shared pastorates, reduced number of masses, and compromised access to sacramental services.

A priest shortage is also causing deep transformations in structures of lay ecclesiastical leadership. A lack of ordained ministers has lead to an explosion in the development of lay ecclesiastical ministry. Yet, we need to question the ecclesial commitment of the Church to these lay ministers – that got a rise out of some of you. Among the questions that need to be raised are the nature of their connection and affiliation with the Church and its leadership, and the willingness of the Church to respect and utilize their competence – after all, anecdotes abound throughout the Church about how the collar still trumps, you know; academic intellectual competence and academic preparation – and the willingness of lay ministers to use their gifts in the service of the Church as a vocation, and not simply as a career, whose priorities are dictated by the reality of the marketplace. All of these are pressing questions that need to be raised; but they will never be faced by a Church that still acts as if lay ecclesial ministry is an emergency stop-gap measure to meet a temporary mal-distribution of the clergy. (Applause) You’re applause shows that this is a groan in the faithful that says that all is not well.

Related to the demographic collapse of the priesthood, not only are we priests older, grayer and fewer, we are also sick – sicker, as in Michael Moore’s movie, “Sicko”. (Laughter) I’m a member of the priest council in my archdiocese – I’m kind of grandfathered in; I’ve been there since 1995. I keep opening my mouth, thinking the bishop will be tired of me; but he actually respects my opinion, so! At one of the recent priest council meetings the Vicar for Clergy gave this report and he said, “Brothers, I need to tell you: the wheels are coming off the bus. I spend most of my time

dealing with the health concerns of those under the age of 50.” I was waiting to see what the reaction of the brothers would be, and we kind of went on. The next priest, who gave a report, began the report by saying that, he’s a younger priest – three years younger than I am – and how he was taking a sabbatical leave in order to try to center himself, and salvage what was left of his priesthood. That was followed by another of the vicars, who gave his report beginning by apologizing for the fact he wasn’t at our last meeting, because he was clinically depressed, and couldn’t get himself out of bed to attend the meeting.

At which point, I threw up my head in the air and said, “Brothers, when are we going to pay attention? The vicar just said the wheels are coming off the bus, and we are debating whether the seats on the bus should be cloth or leather.” (Laughter) I am deeply concerned – and this is not just Milwaukee. You can go around the country, and you can hear stories of priests, priests I dearly love and respect, who are on anti-depressants, who are going through counseling and therapy, often on their own dime, in an attempt to cope with the difficulties of this time in the Church. As one priest in my diocese said, “Commitment and dedication should not result in sickness.”

This is a groan. All is not well. This is not the way God intended things to be.

- Another groan. There is among priests, and I sense among the people of God as well, a pervasive sense of frustration and a smoldering lack of trust in the Church’s leadership, in general, and with its bishops, in particular. (Lots of applause) I sense that, at best, we might like our bishop as a person, but we don’t trust him as a bishop. As one priest candidly confessed to his new bishop, “We need to know if you are in the boat rowing with us, or in another boat trying to sink ours.” I know; I was that priest. (Much laughter)
- Now when I listen to this groan, underneath it is a deeper groan – groans that convey a sense of betrayal, as the Church increasingly seems to be in retreat from the vision of Vatican II. How often I speak of priests I’ve known say this: “This is not what I gave my life to.” “This is not what I fought for.” Or, I hear this among the people of God: “I feel like they’re telling me that everything I learned, everything I did, and even the way I pray, is wrong.” As a sign of this: I was amazed this summer, attending a priest gathering, at which there were a number of highly respected priests in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, men who taught me in the seminary, men who are mentors, men who, if you ask the priests of the archdiocese to say, “Who are the twenty best priests of the diocese?” all of us would have their names on it. And how many of them said they can’t wait for retirement; and they’re simply marking the time until they can go. And if this is going on in the greenwood, what’s going among the dry?
- You also hear it among lay ministers who say: “You know, I can’t stand my pastor; but I can’t leave, because I don’t have another job to go to.” But you listen underneath the words, and you hear the sense of betrayal. Now let me tell you what I mean by betrayal – there’s a word that we use, but let’s get clear about what that reality is. Dictionaries define betrayal in terms of “violated trust.” One dictionary says that to betray is “to violate by fraud or unfaithfulness”. Perhaps the most comprehensive description comes from psychologists who study betrayal and treat its effects. These healers speak of what they call “betrayal trauma,” which they state, occurs when the people or institutions we depend upon for survival violate us in some way.

Betrayal is a kind of abusive behavior. What is common to all acts of betrayal is that a trusted party violates our trust to deliver what we see as necessary for our physical, emotional, financial or religious well being. Now, regardless of where this betrayal happens, what settings it occurs in, or the age of betrayal, betrayal unleashes primal intense emotions. Among these are: hurt, bitterness, resentment, helplessness, anger, fear. Because it compromises what we need for our survival, betrayal – whenever we’re betrayed it sends shock waves through our very core – the psychic pain is profound; the emotional wounds are deep. Now, those who study betrayal say that the intense emotions it engenders, as difficult as they are, serve a useful purpose. But bluntly, they motivate us to get the hell out of Dodge.

Or to put it another way, more formally: they are a motivator for changing social alliances. In other words, the pain of betrayal moves us to leave the abusive situation. We flee our betrayer; we sever our ties with the abusive institution; we discontinue our association with the offending parties; we find safer people, places and settings from which to meet our needs. Right? Right?

But what happens in a situation where we are not free to flee or to leave? More complex reactions happen. Therapists in these situations speak of a coping strategy of disassociation. People stay in the abusive situation; we maintain a relationship with the betrayer, but in ways that are more or less disengaged. People in that situation pull back from institutional involvement. They attempt to create a buffer or zone of safety that limits their contact with the betraying or abusive party. We narrow our focus. We look for our own little piece of the kingdom. We tend our own little garden. We focus on OUR parish, or OUR ministry, and we avoid the diocese as much as possible. (Laughter and talking) Their affiliation with the betrayer, though necessary for various reasons, becomes loose or distant. The damage, done at their core, makes them appear dispirited.

Sometimes people in this situation strike us as lifeless. Such individuals or groups sometimes are characterized as suffering from low morale. In an extreme case, the one betrayed disassociates by denying that the betrayal ever occurred. And from that, event is depressed, the psychic pain is buried, the deep wound is covered thickly, but remains unhealed.

Why am I going into such detail? Because one of the major signs of the times in our Church is that the Catholic community, both as individuals and as a corporate body, we bear the deep scars of betrayal trauma. Many congregations continue to struggle feeling betrayed by the Church's leadership, through its complicity in the scandal of childhood sexual abuse. Many in our congregations wrestle, feeling betrayed by our government's resource to waging an unjust pre-emptive war, and by its use of terror in response to the reality of terrorism. Some in our congregations are trying to cope with chronic feelings of betrayal, caused by an institution they trusted to meet their religious needs. They feel betrayed by what they perceive as the Church's insensitivity, or even hostility, to their aspirations and their needs. Here, I am speaking of the divorced and remarried; racial and ethnic minorities – that doesn't matter whether you're black or Latino.

I was once talking to a group of African American Catholics, and I said, "You know, we Africans Americans need to stop beating up on the Latinos, because the Church doesn't take them any more seriously than it take us. (Laughter) Gay men and women, and women as a group, come readily to mind. I'll talk more about the experience of gay clergy later, because they have a particular form of betrayal trauma to deal with. Many in our Church feel betrayed by the current directions of the Church that signal a retreat from Vatican II. For some, maybe some in this room, our own rights of communal worship seem abusive, as recent liturgical changes thrust the uniqueness of the priest presider, and his prerogatives, to the detriment of the laity. Many other examples could be given, but betrayal names a deep wound and a deep groan. It's real and it says: "This is not right. This is not the will of God."

- Perhaps the deepest groan, and the most unarticulated groan, especially among clergy – and I struggle with the wisdom of bringing it up, even though it's already written; so I'll go for it – the groan that expresses a desire for more honest discussions of human sexuality. (Applause) By honest, I mean a discussion that moves beyond the mere repetitions of stock phrases, such as celibate chastity, and chaste celibacy, and faithful marriage between man and woman, as if these mantras can resolve the serious issues that face us.

Now since this is a tape, please do not misunderstand me: I am not against the fundamental values of our tradition. The fundamental values of our tradition are solid, values such as honesty, fidelity, responsibility, care, and deep affection. And I firmly don't endorse everything that's going on in our culture and our society in the name of sexual freedom, which, too often, means that as

long as it feels good, and no one gets caught, and no one gets hurt, it's okay. But, too often, our teaching as a Church becomes reduced to pious clichés that simply evade, hide or avoid the complex, and sometimes messy, reality of human sexual relationships. I mean human sexual relationships are complex, and their messy – at least, that's what I hear in confession. (Laughter) But spiritual piety is no substitute for sexual honesty and maturity.

- This relates to another point that wasn't in the original talk; but I am becoming more and more convinced of it, and that's this – one of the moments we need to name in our Church is this: the growing irrelevance of the Church, when it comes to matters of human sexuality. (Applause) Now this is a neuralgic point, that means, it's going to make people's hair stand on end, but no honest account of the contemporary ecclesial context could have met what is an obvious "elephant in the room." It is no secret that there is a widening chasm between official Church teachings on human sexuality and the actual behavior of the vast majority of the Catholic population. (Applause) But, and this is where it gets really interesting and more challenging for the institution is this: this gap is not due to the sinfulness of the Church's members. Let me give you an example. Ninety-nine point nine percent of the Catholic population lies – and the point one percent that don't admit to it are lying to their selves. (Laughter) All of us lie, but none of us want the commandment against lying to be repealed. We lie; we admit that we're not doing right; but we admit that we are sinners.

The difference with human sexuality is that we don't follow the Church's teaching, because we don't believe, deep down, that the Church's teaching is correct. We don't believe that we're sinning in every case when we're not living up to that teaching. It's an expression of a non-acceptance of the teaching itself. It's also no secret that the Magisterium has heavily invested its authority in maintaining these traditional teachings – evidence not in the least of the disciplining of theologians and pastoral agents who propose modest modifications or revisions of such teachings – the names, such as John Kern, John McNeal, Jeanine Grammick, Robert Nugent and others.

This controversy is not new to us, and we need not go into detail here. But what occurred to me, the new insight is this: whereas before, I believed that issues of sexual morality polarized and politicized the Church; and while that's true, to some extent, I now believe that polarization is less significant to the life and future of the Church than I had believed. The deeper reality that marks our ecclesiastical life is this: not in opposition to the Church's teachings, but a sense of irrelevance. The Church is increasingly not polarized over these issues. Rather, large segments of the community have come to the conclusion that the Church is simply irrelevant in terms of having anything credible or useful to offer when it comes to human sexuality.

Now let me illustrate this by making reference to what is, admittedly, an antidotal experience from my own teaching at Marquette University. As I was teaching class, and after discussing the Church's teaching on human sexuality, I had the students keep journals. And one student after that discussion wrote the following in her reflection journal; she said, "When it comes to the Church's teachings on gender and sexuality, I look at the Church much like I do my senile grandmother." (Laughter) She continues, "I respect her as a dear old lady, but I don't base my decisions on anything she has to say."

Or again, this past November, there was a constitutional amendment in our state's constitution trying to ban or outlaw same-sex marriage. Now outlaw: it is already illegal, but now they want it unconstitutional. In the midst of that discussion, a self styled conservative and faithful Catholic student came up to me, because he was torn between his professed loyalty to the Church's authority and his love and respect for his homosexual friends; coming up to me wearing his JP II / *Love you* T-shirt, he said, "You know, most of my straight friends engage in sexual behaviors I don't approve of, but I would never dream of limiting their legal rights because of that." And I thought, "The institution's in trouble. This is precisely the kind of person that the institution is staking its hopes on; a person, who went to World Youth Day, had a life changing experience – a

person, you know, “JPII, We Love You” – but on this issue, he said, “Wait a minute! Disagreeing with behavior doesn’t mean compromising legal rights.”

My point is that there is a new blown moment occurring among the faithful. Whereas a previous generation of Catholics struggled with and engaged the Church’s leadership over these matters, a younger generation has simply decided to simply move on. And a number of older Catholics, their parents and their grandparents, have made their peace with their sons or daughters living with each other before marriage, not liking it, not especially happy about it, but we’re not going to split the family up over it. And the number of gay clergy in our midst, calling for an honest discussion of human sexuality, because many now are discerning whether they should leave the Church. Why should I minister to a Church, which not only won’t validate my experience, but actively invalidates my person? I speak because, even as I speak, there are three of my very dear friends in the priesthood, whom I honestly don’t believe are going to priests a year from now. Something is terribly wrong. A groan.

- And finally there are groans related to the continuing impact of the clerical sexual abuse scandal. I wouldn’t mention this except, there’s a tendency in some parts of the Church to insist: “We’ve turned the corner; we’ve put all that behind us now.” And yet, the repercussions of these events still hang over us. In many ways Catholic identity for us at this moment is marked by the sobering realization: we belong to an institution that failed to protect its youngest and most vulnerable members. Now this has so many ramifications. There’s been an erosion of moral authority in the Church in general, and especially its bishops. Our moral witness is compromised and our voices are muted on significant justice issues. We are seen as lacking in our credibility to speak. To cite a few examples:
  - On the greatest social questions that confront us – the Iraq war, genocide, the poor, racial justice and terrorism in the presence of nooses, the mendacity of public officials – the voice of the institutional Church and its leadership is,, at best, MIA: Missing in Action.
  - There has been a severe financial cause, as well, estimated at over a billion dollars. The number of dioceses that declare bankruptcy is ever growing; and this significantly impacts our public witness and presence, as economic pressures compel dioceses to downsize and to reduce their staff for all but essential services. And among the first offices to be cut around the country are offices for peace and justice, social ministries, and outreach for racial and ethnic communities; (Applause) those are deemed non-essential. A final ramification of this scandal is that the Church has decided to turn inward.
  - There’s been a noticeable lack of presence in a social sphere. The bishops in our episcopal conference are less active and present in our nation’s public policy debates, with the exception in issues concerning abortion, euthanasia, stem-cell research and same-sex marriage. (Laughter and Applause) Commenting on this situation J. Bryan Hare, noted Catholic scholar and author, attributes this to three realities: the bishops’ loss of confidence in their moral authority, the pressures of finances and vocations, and cuts to their own national conference staffing due to these financial constraints. Quoting him, he says, “It’s hard to have a national voice if you’re not sufficiently staffed; and you don’t have a sense if this is where you ought to be. All of these groans.

The prophet listens to these groans and comes to an obvious conclusion: things are coming to an end! For the prophet, this conclusion becomes a judgment. These things must end. In fact, the prophet dares to proclaim that God is bringing an end to things; for our collective groans are indisputable evidence that the current state of the Church is not the will of God. The collapse of what was seen sacred, the prophet declares, is a demise brought about by none other than God’s own self. God himself, God herself, is bringing an end to the Church; or to put it bluntly: a particular way of being Church is dying, that is, the stark reality that we use the term “*transition to gloss-over*.”

There’s an unstoppable wave of seismic changes at work in the Church that will take the priesthood, the Church and us to places unknown, and for that reason, scary and terrifying.

Things are getting... The church is dying; and the prophet proclaims that this demise is aided and abetted by God's own self. That's the uncomfortable, unpopular, yet life-giving and essential proof the prophet must proclaim today.

### The Hope: See I Am Doing Something New

But the prophet also has to do a second thing; otherwise, you're not just a prophet, you're a groaner. The prophet not only announces to the people an end that the community cannot admit, they must also proclaim to the people a hope that they can hardly believe; because, you see, at any time of transition, there are two dangers that need to be avoided.

- The first danger, or strategy, is that of nostalgia, which essentially is a strategy of denial is. The strategy of nostalgia denies that the loss has happened, or is happening, and with increasing desperation, nostalgic people attempt to cling to a faith and way of life that are no more, such as the Trindintine Liturgy.
- The second temptation or danger is that of despair; and this is the danger especially for a group like this one. It's a stance which says that: faith is no longer possible in this new situation; all is lost; there are no future possibilities to be found here; get out while you still can; take the next job offer you get.

Both nostalgia and despair are present in the priesthood and in the Church. But it gets both desperate denial and fatalistic despair; a prophetic voice speaks in a different key. The prophet says, "Look! Pay attention! God is doing something new."

Against both nostalgia and despair, the prophet proclaims hope – the advent of a new future, which is not a simple re-arranging of the old furniture, nor a continuation of the former ways in different configurations. As Jeremiah says, "God will make a new covenant, but it will be a covenant very different from the old." Hope is the belief that things can and will be radically different than they are now. As Isaiah declares, "Now, it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" Now Walter Brueggemann, who I had mentioned earlier, maintains that among the ways a prophet pierces the veil of numbing despair and energizes the new hope is by offering symbols and images that nourish an alternative vision. As I indicated before, the Church is dying; a new Church is being born; and that means, if we are to be prophets, we need to be hospice ministers for a dying Church.

### Hospice

The alternative image I want to put forward for us is the image of hospice. Hospices prepare people to face endings that are unthinkable and yet inevitable. And thus, they help people to face new beginnings that are unwanted, yet full of life. Hospices do not deny diminishment, death or loss, but they facilitate the choice to live fully while dying, and focus on preparing for the new by letting go of the old. So, when you enter into a hospice, whether in a hospital or at home, you become committed to the task of living fully, even while you're dying. Entering into hospice is an act of faith in the Resurrection, which declares that one's death is but the gateway to a more glorious beginning.

Now, I said before, that all theology is autobiographical, and I suspect, that the reason I resonant with hospice so much is because of my own experience living through my mother's dying. That experience makes me sympathetic for those who resist talk of death and hospice, because my mother was a champion resister. (Laughter) My mother was dying long before she would admit it. She was a master of denying and bargaining, always looking for a second, and a third, and a fourth opinion, a new drug regiment, a better oxygen system. She claims she listened to her doctors; but she heard only what she wanted.

She had a pulmonary lung disease, and came home once, and said, "You know, the doctor said there's been no change since the last checkup." I said, "Mom, there's nothing there to change." (Laughter) My mother actively and ingeniously skirted any discussion of entering a hospice. When I finally pressed the issue, because we as a family had gotten to our last wit's end, we needed help, and I said, "Mom, why in the hell" – it's one of the few times I ever swore to my mother and she called me on it too: "I'm still your Mother" – "I know you are, but why in the hell won't you go into hospice?" She broke down, and she cried, and she said, "If I do that, I feel like I'm just giving up, and I'm saying that God can't work a miracle." And I was...what do you say to your mom? And you know, sometimes you speak words, and you don't

know where they've come from, when they come out of you. This was one of those moments where I said something I didn't know was there, from some deep place within, I spoke words, and I said, "Momma, I still believe that God can work a miracle, though it probably will be one that neither one of us expects."

God will work a miracle, but not the one that we expect. That's the kind of prophetic hope for Church and priesthood that I'm trying to convey with the image of hospice; for my mom to decide to go into hospice; and hospice workers lovingly stood with my mother and with my family. With gentle firmness, they helped us move beyond the futility of clinging to life as we knew it. They encouraged us to accept the inevitability of loss; and they helped us to reframe the dying process as an experience of living fully in the present, while not holding to it too tightly. When mom entered into hospice, she became a new person. She began to live more calmly and freely. She spent her remaining energies engaging family and friends, rather than denying and fighting her death. She entered into hospice. The next time I visited, she got her hair done, and her nails done, and she was a new person. The hospice aids and the social workers helped my family to tell my mom goodbye, gracefully and lovingly. They helped us to move into a new phase of life, one without my mother. It WAS a miracle, but not the one that we'd been praying for, not the one we expected.

I confess that I don't have a hospice theology of ministry and priesthood all worked out; but I suspect that it means that, as hospice workers, we need to stand with the Church and with each other in helping the Church to live fully while it's dying. At the very least, a hospice approach to ministry and priesthood means that we must help facilitate honest conversations of sadness, hurt, anger and even rage; for these are the inevitable reactions to death and dying, or any loss. A hospice consciousness requires that we recognize that not everyone in the Church will be on the same page, or at the same point of transition, in dealing with the loss. All the stages of dying, denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and the spiral back and forth among them, will be present and should be expected in ourselves, and in our Church, and in our leaders.

A hospice understanding of a prophetic vocation requires the virtues of patience and compassion, the ability to provide boundaries and guidance for grieving communities, and a sense of laughter and humor in the face of the unknown. Being a hospice minister will also demand of us deep prayer – contemplative prayer – surrender to that which is beyond us, which we sense intuitively is worthy of trust.

As I think about this, this also occurs to me, being a hospice minister of the Church also requires that we own our own sense of agency, leadership and power. No institution is going to empower you to speak unwelcome truths to it. If you're waiting for permission to speak unwelcome truths, you're going to be waiting in vain. (Laughter) A hospice minister also does not act in collusion, aiding and abetting a family's denial. Families are in denial, but a hospice minister, at times, has to speak the hard and unwelcome truth to a family that refuses to face the impending reality of loss. What that means for us as priests and lay ministers is this: we need to get beyond waiting for bishops to get their acts together. (Laughter and Applause) We need to own the fact that maybe it is up to us to help them, lovingly and firmly, to face realities they fear to own. Another way of saying this is, that bishops are not the only leaders in the Church. We need to stop waiting for the bishops to do what we could and should be doing for ourselves.

People, when they hear me say, "You beat up on the priests and bishops a lot," I said, "No! If anything, I am beating up on the whole Church for us not accepting the fullness of our stature as disciples." Vatican II says the bishop is a co-worker with the order of bishops. Now, as I read co-worker, there is nothing in Vatican II that's an excuse for mindless docility or sheep-like humility. Being a hospice minister requires the courage that we speak the truth that sets us free, even if it, sometimes, makes some people miserable.

I want to conclude, as I see it, people are telling me to wrap it up. People say, "Well, this is a hopeful vision of hospice, this new Church is coming into being; but where is the hope? How can you stay hopeful to the question, because hope is inherently a fragile reality?" Hope requires an ambiguous situation. If success is guaranteed, you don't have to hope. So, if I drop this microphone, I don't have to

hope that it falls to the ground; on the other hand, if failure is guaranteed, there's no need for hope either. Hope requires the willingness to work for a non-guaranteed future, even in the face of formidable obstacles. That's hope!

So it nourishes my hope. I hope for a new Church. I hope for a new Church first, because of my faith. I believe that God has not abandoned God's people. God is still with us. My hope for the future is founded in the second thing: the non-necessity of the present. The Church of today doesn't have to be the same as the Church is always. This is not the way we were in the twelfth century; it's not the way we were in the twentieth century; and with God's grace, we can change.

My hope for the future is also brought in with the unsustainability of the current Church. If nothing else, the irreversible decline of the priesthood means that the Church will change, whether it wants to admit it or not. My hope is grounded in a witness of past and current struggles, and engagement. We talk about St. Francis of Assisi being a prophet, who answered the call to rebuild the church. We also speak of St. Teresa of Avila, St. Catherine of Sienna, women who were bold witnesses, who spoke truth to power to bishops, and even the pope, criticizing institutional wrongs of the Church of their day.

And finally, my hope is grounded in the witness of other groups, who are discovering their leadership. For example, I was involved with a failed project with the bishops, getting them to draft the pastoral letter on racism, which for a number of reasons now is tabled. But other groups in the Church have stepped forward. Catholic Charities USA is publishing a major statement on racism to be released in January 2008. The Catholic Health Association made racial disparities and health care a major focus of its energy and its concern. There are many other leadership groups in the Church who speak, who are speaking. That gives me hope for the future Church.

I am doing something new. The prophet stands against both nostalgia and despair – voices that say, "All we have to do is go back to, or if only we were more faithful, more loyal or prayerful and obedient, then nothing would have to change." These are not prophetic voices, but discourses of denial. But the same way those voices say, "It's all over; priesthood is dead; the Church is finished; get out while you can." These are not prophetic voices. Those are the voices of despair. Contrary to both denial and despair, the prophet proclaims the name of the Lord, "See, I am doing something new."

Prophetic voices proclaim the hope that we articulate in our funeral liturgy, "Lord, for your faithful people, life is changed, not ended." Priestly ministry, ministerial service, the Church's life, these are not over' but they cannot, will not, and must not, be the same. The image of hospice can help us to live peacefully in the graced promise of the new, even as we breathe the demise of the old. The prophetic vocation is to help the community to accept a loss they cannot admit, and to embrace a hope they cannot dare believe. Prophets do this by listening to the groans of the people, and positing an alternative future vision. This is the essence of being a spiritual leader in the Church in the time at a time of transition. This is the essence of a prophetic ministry in the Church today.

Thank you. (Applause)

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1/ For a transcript of the Milwaukee talk, see [www.elephantsinthelivingroom.com/See\\_I\\_Am\\_Doing\\_Something\\_New.doc](http://www.elephantsinthelivingroom.com/See_I_Am_Doing_Something_New.doc).