Bishop Richard Sklba has just given us a masterful description of the prophetic vocation as it is found in the Scriptures. I would summarize his insights with the following description: The prophet is both a keen observer of the “signs of the time” and acutely attuned with the heart of God. Out of these deep sensitivities, the prophet speaks truth—truth that is often uncomfortable and unwelcome, yet always essential and life-giving. My task is to ponder the significance of this insight for us as priests here and now. Our question is: What does it mean to exercise a prophetic vocation in the Church in a time of transition? What I offer is simply one perspective, one attempt at prophetic listening to the voice of the presbyterate, and one effort at articulating what the Spirit might be saying to and among us today.

The prophet’s role, Walter Breggemann argues, is to propose alternative visions and possibilities than those that are officially endorsed. He states that the biblical prophets have a twofold task: first, in light of God’s word, to express the people’s deepest hopes and lead them to embrace God’s promise of new life. Isaiah’s words have haunted my prayer for the past year, and now echo within me as a summary of this dual vocation: “See, I am doing something NEW”. Thus I believe that the prophetic vocation is first, to help the faith community to embrace a loss it does not want to admit, and then to proclaim to the people a hope that they cannot dare to image.

Part One: “I have heard the groans of my people... (Exodus 3:7)

The prophetic vocation begins with listening to the community’s groans and giving them voice. A “groan” is different from a mere complaint or gripe. By definition, a groan is inarticulate. It is a cry of deep distress or pain that does not always reveal its source or cause. The prophetic consciousness is peculiarly sensitive to “groans” — the inarticulate cries of a people’s distress — because such groans are the initial and indisputable signs which announce: “All is not well!! Something is terribly wrong! This is not how God wants things to be!”

As I listened to the groans of this presbyterate, it dawned on me that our cries have a context and a catalyst, namely, the events of the spring and summer of 2002. That was two years ago, but in some ways it seems like only yesterday. Remember how it was. Recall the incessant headlines and shocking new stories of scandal, abuse, and cover-up; the nightly jokes about priests and the Church by David Letterman and Jay Leno; the heartbreaking allegations and revelations about those who were and are still dear friends and colleagues; the anxiety of seminarians who didn’t know whether to loyally defend the Church or hastily leave the seminary.

I recall these events because we seldom have spoken publicly about what I consider to be this presbyterate’s most difficult yet finest hour. We have lived an “adventure in fidelity.” We have been faithful and we are still faithful. We are still here. The Church is still here.

But there is pain and distress among us. There are groans that indicate “All is not Well.” There are groans among the priests, groans among the bishops, and groans among the laity. First there are the groans of the priests:

We are older, greyer and fewer. We are being stretched ever more thinly, to the point of breaking. We
seriously wonder how much more we can do and how much more can be expected of us. We worry that the priesthood is on the brink of a demographic collapse.

Not only are priests older, greyer and fewer, we also seem to be sicker. I am deeply concerned about the number of priests I know, men that I dearly love and respect, who are on anti-depressants in order to cope with the challenges of this time. Many of us are doing all we can-and more than we should- to manage a priest shortage that we didn’t create (and many believe doesn’t have to be). Many are in therapy and counseling, at times at their own expense, in an attempt to cope with the difficulties of this time in the Church. Commitment and dedication should not result in sickness. Hence, another groan that says, “Something is terribly wrong!”

There is among us a pervasive sense of frustration with the Church’s leadership in general and with its bishops in particular. This frustration has many causes: a feeling of having been “sold out” in Dallas; a fear of unjust accusations and an anxiety about due process; anger because of an official unwillingness to even discuss alternative ways of dealing with the priest shortage; dismay at having to implement changing liturgical practices that conflict with our pastoral expertise and considered reflection; and underneath it all, a groan - a desire - for a more mature understanding that obedience is not passive docility, but respectful collaboration with ecclesiastical authorities that stems from our common love of and concern for the Church.

Deeper still, from some there are groans that convey a sense of betrayal, as the Church increasingly seems to be in retreat from the vision of Vatican II. How often have we priests heard, or said, or felt: “This is not what I gave my life to.” “This is not what I fought for.” “I feel like they’re telling me that everything I learned, everything I did, and even the way I prayed ...was wrong.”

Perhaps this is the deepest, yet most unarticulated groan (and I struggle with how to best express it, and the wisdom of bringing it up): a desire for an honest discussion of the human sexuality of priests. By “honest” I mean a discussion that moves beyond the mere repetition of the phrase, “chaste celibacy,” as if the invocation of that mantra can resolve the serious issues that face us existentially. Please do not misunderstand me. I am not against “chaste celibacy” or “celibate chastity.” But these phrases become pious cliches when their use evades, hides or avoids the complex and sometimes messy realities of human sexuality. Spiritual piety is no substitute for sexual honesty.

I concluded by noting that women religious have much wisdom to offer us men on this issue. They seem to understand better than we do that sexuality encompasses much more than what we do with our genitals, and thus celibacy entails far more than keeping your pants buttoned, zippers zipped, and hands above the waist.

Secondly, there are groans among bishops.

I know that for some it has become a favorite pastime to beat up the bishops. But bishops are also members of the presbyterate. . . .As a humorous example, consider the plight of the poor bishop who now must inform his priests that the precious ceramic chalices given to them by their parents at ordination, and the $2,500 set of crystal wine decanters and goblets purchased by the parish, are now proscribed as “grave liturgical abuses.”

More seriously, I hear groans as I listen to some bishops. Many of these cries are similar to those I have already articulated. For example, many bishops fear that they are becoming a little more than “liturgical police” enforcing laws that they did not write, were not consulted about, and really do not agree with. These groans announce, “All is not well.”

But the bishops’ groans are exacerbated by the fact that they have to juggle and mediate what Chester Gilles calls four “cultures,” i.e., worldviews that are not only different, but divergent, contradictory and to some extent irreconcilable. They are: 1. The clerical culture (which is why some bishops inwardly balk at spending precious capital engaging their priests in liturgical battles they really don’t see as that important; 2. The episcopal culture (one the bishops share with some that they do not know or even trust; 3. The
Vatican culture (a culture for which the bishops profess deep loyalty, yet one that does not always treat them with affirmation and respect; and 4. An American culture that prizes democracy, open debate and rational argumentation in a Church that is monarchical, places a premium on discretion and demands that things be taken on faith. As an example, the tension of mediating these various cultures become evident as one witnesses the bishops wrestling with the dilemmas of being pastorally responsive to both the victims and perpetrators of clerical sexual abuse in the context of an American adversarial legal system. Gracefully juggling the competing and conflicting demands of these cultures requires more skill and wisdom than most human beings can be expected to possess. The bishops, too groan inarticulately that, “Something is not right.”

The Laity also groan:

There are groans: for relevant homilies that speak to the unexpressed yearnings of their spirit; for a real voice within the Church and genuinely collaborative relationships with priests and bishops; for voices that speak courageously about the real “axis of evil” in the world (not Iraq, Iran an North Korea, but the unholy trinity of racism, poverty and war); for an honest account of the relevance of faith in a world of military consumerism (e.g., what does it mean to be a person of faith while living on an island of affluence surrounded by an ocean of misery?) The deep groans of the laity also announce that “All is not well in the Church.”

All of these “groans” the prophet listens to, these inarticulate cries of distress, and arrives at an obvious yet too often avoided conclusion: Things are coming to an end. For the prophet this conclusion soon becomes a judgment: These things must end! The prophet, in fact, dares to proclaim that God is bringing these things to an end, 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 deemed sacred, the prophet declares, is a demise brought about by non other than God.

Things are ending. That statement expresses the stark reality which is often masked by the word “transition.” To put it bluntly, a particular way of being “Church” is dying. The decline of the all-male, mostly celibate priesthood is but the most obvious symptom of this dying. The transition in which we find ourselves is irreversible; our groans point to a larger picture of seismic shifts and epochal changes occurring in the Church and Western society. Richard Schoenherr lists them thus: “1. A shift from dogmatism to pluralism in worldview; 2. The change from a transcendentalist to a personalist construction of human sexuality; 3. A shift from a Eurocentric to a truly global Church; 4. The shift from male superiority to female equality; 5. A decline in clerical control and increase in lay participation; and 6. The decline in sacramentalism and rise in Bible-based worship, even in the Catholic Church.” Each of these shifts taken singly is a major development. But occurring simultaneously and taken together, they become momentous. They are unleashing an unstoppable wave of seismic changes that will take priesthood and the Church (in other words, us) to places unknown — and for that reason, scary and terrifying.

Things are ending. And the prophet dares to proclaim that this demise is aided and abetted by God’s own self.

Part Two: “I am doing something NEW . . .

Recall, however, that the prophets not only announce to the people an end that the community cannot admit; they also proclaim a hope that the people can hardly believe. There are two dangers or temptations that arise in times of transition. The first is nostalgia, which essentially is a state of denial. The strategy of nostalgia denies that the loss has happened or is happening: with increasing desperation it attempts to cling to a way of life and faith that are no more. The second danger or temptation is that of despair, a stance which says that faith is no longer possible in this new situation, that all is lost, that no future possibilities are to be found here. Despair inevitably leads to resignation, apathy and spiritual death. Both the strategy of nostalgia and the stance of despair are present in the priesthood and Church today.

Against desperate denial and fatalistic despair, the prophet announces: “Look! Pay attention! God is
doing something NEW!” Against both denial and despair, the prophet announces hope, that is, the advent of a new future that is neither a simple rearranging of the old furniture nor a continuation of former ways in different configurations. As Jeremiah proclaims, God will make a new covenant, but it will not be like that of old. Hope is the belief that things can and will be radically other than how they are now. Hope is the expectation of a new beginning that is as yet but dimly perceived. As Isaiah declares, “Now it springs forth; do you not perceive it?”

Brueggemann maintains that among the ways that the prophets pierced the veil of the community’s numbing despair and energized it with new hope was by offering symbols and images that nourished an alternative vision. In that spirit, I want to offer an image that speaks to me of hopeful endings and new beginnings: the image of hospice. I want to suggest that prophetic ministry today requires a “hospice” mindset and approach to priestly ministry. I believe that priests today are called to be hospice ministers for the Church.

Hospices prepare people to face endings that are unthinkable yet inevitable . . . and thus also prepare people for new beginnings that are unwanted yet full of life. Hospices do not deny diminishment, death or loss. But they facilitate the choice to live while dying, and focus on preparing for the new by letting go of the old. So when one enters into a hospice, you become committed to the task of living fully while dying. Such a decision is an act of faith in the resurrection, which believes that one’s end is but the gateway to a more glorious beginning.

I know that some will resist the image of a hospice for the Church today. It is said that all theological reflection is to some extent autobiographical; thus I suspect that my resonance with hospice imagery stems from the recent experience of living through my mother’s dying. That experience makes me sympathetic toward those who resist talk of hospice because my mother was a champion resister. She was dying long before she would admit it. She was a master of denial and bargaining, always looking for a second and third and fourth opinion, a better oxygen system. She claimed she listened to her doctors, but she heard only what she wanted. She actively and ingeniously skirted any discussion of entering a hospice.

When I finally pushed the issue and pressed her as to why she would not go into a home hospice program, she confessed, “If I do that, I feel that I’m just giving up, and saying that God can’t work a miracle.” From some deep place within, I spoke words I did not know I had, and answered, “Momma, I still believe that God will work a miracle, though it probably will be one that neither of us expects.”

God will work a miracle, but one that none of us can expect. That is the kind of prophetic hope for the Church and priesthood that I am trying to express through the image of “hospice.” For the hospice workers lovingly stood with my mother and my family. With gentle firmness, they helped us to move beyond the futility of clinging to life as we knew it, encouraged us to accept the inevitability of loss, and enabled us to re-frame the dying process as an experience of living fully in the present while not holding it too tightly. Once my mother entered into hospice, 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 even got her nails and hair done! The hospice nurses, aides, ministers and social workers helped my family to tell my mom goodbye gracefully and lovingly. They enable us to move into a new phase of life, one without my mother. It was indeed a miracle, though not the one we had been praying for.

God will work a miracle, but not the one that we expect. I’m not entirely sure what this means concretely for the Church. I don’t have a “hospice theology” completely or fully developed. I take comfort in the fact that being prophetic is more of a mindset and consciousness than a specific set of practices. But I suspect that as hospice workers, we priests are to stand with the dying — that is, with the Church and ourselves — in hope, solidarity and love in order to help the Church and one another to live fully while dying. For example, I remember how a hospice nurse told us my mother would have some good days during her final weeks, and that we should enjoy them to the full. Similarly, we priests can and should celebrate the “good days” — that is, ordination, professions and up-ticks in vocational recruitment — and do so without denying the inevitable end. With a hospice mindset, we also can accompany the Church in bad days, standing with it in radical, creative and critical fidelity, without succumbing to powerless
despair.

At the least, a hospice approach to priesthood means that we must help facilitate honest conversations of sadness, hurt, anger and even rage, for these are some of the inevitable and essential reactions to any transition or loss. A hospice consciousness requires that we recognize that not everyone in the Church will be on the same page in dealing with the stress of transition. All of the stages of dying and grieving — denial, anger, bargaining, depression (and the spiral back and forth among these states) — are to be expected both in ourselves and our people. A hospice understanding of prophetic priesthood requires the virtues of patience and compassion; an ability to provide boundaries and guidance for grieving communities; and a sense of laughter and humor in the face of the unknown (i.e., what St. Thomas Aquinas might call gnome, that is, the ability to reason well in the unfamiliar situation). Hospice priestly minister demands a new appreciation for the traditional virtue of epikelia, which loosely means, “Don’t let laws and rules get in the way of life.” Ministering to a Church in hospice also requires deep prayer, that is, a contemplative stance of surrender to what we do not fully understand and yet intuitively sense is worthy of trust.

“Hospice” as a mindset or consciousness frees us from the pressure of frantically trying to preserve the status quo at all costs. For hospice accepts the reality of death. And yet a hospice stance is full of hope. The denial of death is the denial of hope. Those who cannot accept the mortality of a particular understanding of Church also cannot embrace the promise of a new beginning.

For I believe that a new Church is coming. It will be browner and poorer, more sensuous and feminine, less clerical and more collegial, less concerned about charity and more conscious of justice and more multilingual and polycentric than the one we know now. That Church will better reflect the diversity of God’s Trinitarian life. It will be a new Church . . .yet it can only come with the passing of this one. I dare to suggest that it is our task to facilitate the present Church’s passing in order to assist in the birthing of the new. Paradoxically, hospice workers are also the midwives of new life.

“See, I am doing something NEW.” This passage gives us a key for discerning the prophetic voice. The prophet stands against both nostalgia and despair. Any voices that say: “All we have to do is go back to . . .”; or, “If only we were more faithful, loyal, prayerful and obedient, then nothing would change;” or, “There isn’t a priest shortage, just a temporary maldistribution”; or, “Let’s just put all the events of the past two years behind us and move on” — These are not prophetic voices, but discourses of nostalgia and denial. But in the same way, those voices that say, “It’s all over. Priesthood is dead. The Church is finished. Get out while you still can.” These also are not prophetic voices, but those of despair. Contrary to both denial and despair, the prophet proclaims in the name of the Lord, “See, I am doing something NEW.” Prophetic voices express that hope which 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 are not, will not and cannot be the same. The image of hospice helps us to live peacefully in the graced promise of the new, even as we grieve 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 to believe. Prophets do this by attending to the present groans of the people and positing an alternative future vision. This, I believe, is the essence of being a spiritual leader in the Church during this time of transition.