



What is Prophecy?

Question: Some say the last prophet was St. John the Baptist. But how can this be? Are we without prophets today?

Answer: As always with questions like these, it is going to depend on whether the word “prophet” is being used in a strict sense or a wider sense.

In the strictest sense, the word “prophet” refers only to a group of 17 men in ancient Israel whose writings and prophecies are contained in books bearing their names and to others attested as prophets in the Old Testament, such as Samuel, Elijah and others. Tradition varies about whether John the Baptist is added to this number because he does not have a book bearing his name, though he is referred to in all four Gospels. The Catechism of the Catholic Church says: “John the Baptist is ‘more than a prophet’ (Lk 7:26). In him, the Holy Spirit concludes his speaking through the prophets. John completes the cycle of prophets begun by Elijah” (No. 719).

So in the strict sense, this period of the prophets is now closed, and no new prophets can join this group. Scripture confirms the close of the age of the prophets. For example, Jesus says, “The Law and the Prophets lasted until John” (Lk 16:16). The Book of Hebrews says, “In times past, God spoke in partial and various ways to our ancestors through the prophets; in these last days, he spoke to us through a son” (Heb 1:1-2). As even these texts indicate, this does not mean that all prophecy itself is at an end. Indeed, our baptismal theology indicates that every baptized Christian shares in the prophetic office of Christ. As Christ is priest, prophet and king, so do we, as members of his body, share in his prophetic office in a subordinate sense.

In this wider sense of the word “prophet,” the world is teeming with them. But note this difference. We prophets of the New Testament have our office subordinated to Christ. Our prophecies do not independently carry an infallible and canonical status as do the words of the biblical prophets. We do not produce new revelation. Rather, we announce the Gospel that is given, and we can never add to or subtract from that which is given by the Lord Jesus.

The New Testament does refer to prophets in this wider sense of the word. Acts 13:1 mentions certain prophets at Antioch; Acts 15:32 speaks of two prophets named Judas and Silas; and Acts 11:28 and 21:10 mention a prophet named Agabus. Ephesians 3:5 says that the mystery of the Church has been revealed by the Holy Spirit to the apostles and prophets. Finally, Ephesians 4:11 says that prophets, along with others holding various offices, have been given to the Church for the equipping of the saints. Hopefully these distinctions help answer your question.

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