

Survival of Prophecy

Review of

*Great American Prophets: Pope Francis's Models of Christian Life:
Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King Jr., Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton*

By Daniel Cosacchi

Foreword by Kerry Alys Robinson

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Reviewed by **Kathleen Noone Deignan, CND**

If only a valid book review could read: “Buy this book. Read this book. Do this book” – I would be done. But, alas, more words will have to lure you to it, so let me try. Undoubtedly, most of us remember the quite unforgettable presentation on September 24, 2015 made by Pope Francis before a joint session of Congress while on apostolic pilgrimage to the United States. During that dramatic visitation and in that unique theater of power, he called to the spirit of the nation by holding up four “great American prophets” as models of Christian life for our own citizenry and for the world. It was nothing less than a blessing day when to be Catholic and American seemed to rhyme in the sounding of the Pope’s stunning performance of papal charisma, “Franciscan” authenticity, and Bergolian impact.

Francis’s relatively brief and well-considered words were in fact a seminal treatise on the mission of contemporary prophets, written in the icons of four “great Americans” who were and are profiles in what Francis has come to call the highest form of caritas – “political love.” He portrayed each one as an exemplar of the moral task of creating a “more perfect union,” winning for each the accolade “pontifex,” or bridge-builder, to name the common nature and arduous work of all the noted American greats. Like the Pope himself, each is presented as a bridge-builder to those estranged, alienated and exiled from “the beloved community” of Christian vision and purpose. Likewise each is presented as an inspiration and invitation to practice our own prophetic calling.

If Francis’s stirring words and presence have slipped from our personal consciousness – or more to the point of this book, from our collective conscience – Daniel Cosacchi offers us a rehearsal of Francis’s insightful and incisive civic homily and much more. He offers the Church of this moment a boundaryless exegesis and lucid analysis of Francis’s startling summons, transmuting its authoritative inspiration into a bold catechesis, a new syllabus for the transmission of centuries-

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old Catholic social teaching, and proposals for the practice of contemporary political spiritual exercises. The achievement of this 163-page book is nothing short of amazing.

Dr. Daniel Cosacchi is a Catholic ethicist and Vice President for mission and ministry at the University of Scranton, a theologian, a professor of religious studies, evidently a superb teacher and clearly a remarkable writer. A systematic thinker, he has put his stellar intellect and scholarship at the service particularly of the religiously and politically homeless of our country, those dispirited and worn weary by the toxic climate of political duplicity and acrimony, and the ongoing refusal to confront and dismantle the systemic racism and pervasive violence that are the cancerous foundations of our nation-state. On that autumn day, before all our elected leaders of state, in the hearing of the world, Francis called Americans to renounce political cynicism and embrace a renewed practice of political holiness. The significance of this book is the way Cosacchi serves to augment and explicate with remarkable richness and integrity the Pope's summons to take up the work of "forming a more perfect union," and to do so in the audacious spirit of prophecy that marked these "Great Americans."

Cosacchi establishes the dynamic framework for his exposition in his introduction: "A Prophetic Papacy." This large and yet evolving forum allows him to generate creative tension as he scripts generative and critical dialogues between the Pope and each of the nominated Americans. More to the two-edged nature of this work, it allows him to invite us into this conversation meant to generate conversion and the agreement to be ourselves prophetic bridge-builders. What then is Cosacchi's profile of a contemporary prophet? One who speaks an inspired "politics" to the polis. She is not a partisan; he is not a culture warrior. Their words do not make more ruptures and alienated camps; they do not put down but lift up. Such political missionaries are deep and creative thinkers who discern the source of the pathologies within their society and so become its healers. They are not bomb-throwers but bridge-builders, seeking not personal power or tribal victory but social conversion and communal healing. The prophet's wisdom comprehends the unifying power of a carefully constructed linguistics of inspiration, motivation, invitation and dialogue as a tool for raising up from the ruins of a failed community the necessary hope for moving forward together. They have learned to speak the language of prophecy with the tongue of the pastor and vice versa.

In the succeeding chapters Cosacchi renders an in-depth examination of the significance and imitability of the four great Americans named by Francis in his Congressional address and the particular yet multivalent foci of each one's prophetic mission. More complex than mere biography, Cosacchi's portraits in prophecy link the unique concerns of each one of the four to aspects of Francis's own prophetic pontificate – his own work of conversion toward being "bridge-builder." In so doing the author constructs a remarkable architecture and in-depth design in which to place each of these prophets, however differentiated they may be one from the other. To both Pope Francis and Dr. Cosacchi they all appear to be wearing the one vintage mantle of the Christian prophet inscribed with the radical values the Gospel and the marks of a still-evolving Church in service to a nation and a world: non-violence, anti-racism, confronting sexism, care of Earth, inclusivity, bridge-building.

The first great American named by the Pope is, unsurprisingly, Abraham Lincoln, with the halo of "Freedom" illuminating his still urgent and unfulfilled prophecy. What is startling about Lincoln as an American prophet are not his features as a "guardian of liberty" or "emancipator," but Cosacchi's nomination of him as the precursor of modern Catholic Social Teaching, and of

contemporary liberation theologies. Though Lincoln is neither Catholic nor professedly Christian, Cosacchi makes the case that in him, the only professional and elected politician among the four, we see a nascent prophet of liberation, albeit compromised and racist. We see in this president presiding over an as yet unhealed civil war and still unacknowledged Indian pogroms, the anguish of prophetic emergence as a leader is forced to see with greater clarity the moral consequences of facing into the evils of systemic and personal racism and state violence. In Lincoln we are asked to consider what a political vocation really means and how the work of Catholics today who are called to participate in the public life of the world is to be undertaken, especially the care of those most violated and made poor. Flawed and unfinished, or might we say a novice on the path of authentic political love, Lincoln is honored as a proto-liberationist whose Emancipation Proclamation is prototype for the revolutionary and evolutionary transformations now underway.

The next great American honored by Pope Francis on that memorable day is Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., himself a liberator and nominated by the author as anticipator of the Black Lives Matter Movement. The political mission of Dr. King did not arise from an election but from the inception and reception of charismatic power by way of ordination through the Christian church. King was a theologian, a minister, a pastor, an orator, an intellectual, a social analyst and a member of an historically enslaved people who became in an exceptional way, their liberator. He was America's Gandhi, embodying the nonviolence of Jesus as both the way and the means of transformative political love. Indeed, King's mass movement for integral racial justice prefigures and forecasts the Black Lives Movement of our moment and he remains the still sounding prophet for an anti-racist Church in all denominations and across all faith traditions. He remains the animator of a vibrant mode of Black Christianity that places agapeic love – divine love – at the center of political life and community on the way to the Beloved Community.

Many of us were contemporaries of Dr. King and greatly transformed by the prophecy of this preaching teacher who called a nation to conversion not only from the violence of racism but likewise from the economic exploitation of workers, environmental degradation, militarism and racist wars. His dream of the Beloved Community must live on in the dreaming of new prophets if we dare to reckon with the nightmare being experienced by more and more creatures of this Earth. Wondering how King's legacy as an activator of peace and justice activists might remain a living transmission, Cosacchi promotes a multifaceted curriculum that ought to be taught and amended as we continue to engage in the struggle of human liberation through the practice of non-violent antiracism.

Who will take up the work of preaching and teaching the ways to rekindle and sustain Dr. King's Dream? More pointedly, where are Catholics to learn anti-racist behavior, to hear the challenge to become an anti-racist church, and be fostered in an anti-racist spirituality? These are the questions that provoke Cosacchi's most incisive – prophetic? – critique of the American Catholic hierarchy entrusted with the formation of such dreamers. If we are baptized into the work of prophecy, why are we not faithfully fostered to take it up by all the grace-bearing resources of the Church? Where are our models and mentors among the episcopacy – those prelates consecrated to lead prophetically yet perceived to be more engaged in cultural warfare than true prophetic leadership? In particular, Cosacchi asks again and again, what is the reason for the reluctance of the Catholic Church in the United States to clearly embrace the Black Lives Matter movement?

The author ends the chapter with his own creative and implementable proposals for programmatic education in the Church regarding white privilege and antiracism.

The rich treatment of King's legacy resolves in the simplicity of his most singular understanding that all life is interrelated. Thus, we perceive the greater field toward which King himself was moving: not simply to serve peace or fraternity or justice with one another in the human community but to commit to deepening communion with all our relations in the natural world. In this, King's challenge to realize the Beloved Community becomes a Franciscan call to care for our common home in which the Beloved Community will have to thrive.

It is to such a prophet of our Common Home that the Pope then made tribute. Dorothy Day, securely canonized by the loving acclamation of the Catholic people, is the only woman to be nominated by Francis as another great American model of Christian life not just to be emulated but to be imitated. In Cosacchi's rendering she comes toward us like a boomerang zooming into our twenty-first-century conscience from her twentieth-century theater of prophecy. As with each of these heroes she is presented in new light with blessings and challenges that become all the more compelling as she is set in dialogue with the prophetic papacy of Pope Francis.

No American Catholic has impacted what Cosacchi calls the landscape of the Catholic faith tradition on these shores more than she, and none has anticipated the radical magisterium of Francis in the core facets of the Pope's dream for the Church more than she. Once again Cosacchi invites us to a fresh and new encounter with an apparently familiar American hero by tracing the development of her radically unique variety of American Catholicism, her Christian anarchism, her uncompromising non-violence, her revolutionary spirit, her fierce commitment to workers and the impoverished, the largely invisible and ignored human persons consigned to the wastelands of the urban industrial world.

Like Dr. King, Day was a movement founder, and the ethos of the Catholic Worker movement, so securely embedded in the fabric of American Catholicism, continues to disturb us in the most personal ways toward a willingness to practice its integral constituents: creative nonviolence, manifest protest, on-going conversion, Gospel living, personal presence to the poor. But in the Pope's salute to Day, we encounter another facet of this hero: the woman raised up as patron of the environment, the prophet of a radically integral "Care for Our Common Home" whose life-practice was an anticipation of *Laudato si'*. Pope Francis enhances his sincere accolade to hail Dorothy Day as patron saint of peacemaking, of workers, of ecology and of the United States itself.

Arising from Day's partnership with her mentor and collaborator Peter Maurin, she took on a commitment to what Maurin termed the "Green Revolution" to be set at the heart not only of the Catholic Worker movement and community but of Catholic Christianity itself. Once again, we see a play of apparent contradictions in the orientations of our heroes that create generative tension and fruitfulness in their prophetic legacies. The Catholic Worker movement itself, so committed to cities and the most challenging and desolate urban areas, still invites us to return to the land as a way to mitigate the technological pathologies and unemployment so embedded in an industrial economy. But Day is not simply the pragmatic prophet of a green revolution playing out in the countless farms and green spaces of the sprawling Catholic Worker network; she is the on-going animator of the deeply intellectual and spiritual work of her movement: the generation of a cultural revolution rooted in Maurin's proposal for immersion in "cult, culture, and cultivation," of clarification of

thought, of vigorous intellectual development. Cosacchi completes his portrait of Day by giving broad strokes to her way of embodying the personalism so characteristic of the Catholic Worker phenomenon in America and he spins her prophecy yet again into an invitation to consider what environmental personalism could mean for each of us and the Catholic Church, not just in theory but in practice. The chapter ends with a provocative challenge to Catholic intellectuals and scholars to bridge her radical curriculum to the Academy, thus inviting professors to their own ways of becoming prophetic pontifexes for countless young dreamers yet to be introduced and inspired by this remarkable American prophet.

The last of the big four of Francis's American heroes is none other than Thomas Merton, who continues to provide a compelling model of three seemingly disjunctive terms: "modern, American and Catholic." Merton the monk-prophet/prophetic monk captured the imagination not simply of countless Americans and seekers globally, but clearly the pope's as well. Casting his own insightful eye on the biography of Merton, Cosacchi explores the question of Pope Francis: how is Merton a pontifex, an indefatigable bridge builder in myriad directions? Francis salutes Merton as a man of dialogue amid his own great search. As with the other American prophets, Merton reveals the incremental psychic development and inner anguish of bearing prophecy in times of crisis. Read in the voice of Merton's own literary eloquence he enables us to comprehend the great challenge of being a true prophet.

Explicitly, Francis hails Merton as a prophet of prayer and of the spiritual life itself and underscores the urgent meaning of such ministry in the contemporary world. Though not a movement founder as such, Merton might be considered a monastic founder of a uniquely disbursed and anonymous spiritual community of emergent contemplative prophets, faithfully and unassumingly bridge-building in all the directions indicated by Merton's own efforts. As master teacher of the spiritual life Merton has become not just an inspiring modern American monk, but a prophet inspiring consideration of embodied modes of monastic Americanism. The hallmark of Merton's challenge is to be intentionally immersed in the crises of one's time and speak clearly to them, minister to them, build saving bridges to and away from them. Again, in Merton's prophecy we see the features of his understanding of gospel nonviolence, radical lifestyle, cultivated spirituality, intellectual depth and passion for justice toward the construction of peace. We see in him a prophet of anti-racism and anti-militarism. We see in him a master of dialogue in a variety of tongues as he built bridges to the world's religions, intellectuals and activists. Merton remains the father of the Catholic just peace movement, and he did so from the obscurity of a Kentucky hermitage through the power of his pen. In his tireless work of dialogue abides his heroism.

It is fascinating to remember that three of these American prophets were contemporaries who knew each other, who befriended each other in ways that elicited or evoked each other's prophetic identities as reconciling revolutionaries. Cosacchi turns his clarity on each one's moral struggle to be honest prophets in their distinct but overlapping worlds and in that light we see how each dared to propose a better Dream for America. Theirs were not utopian dreams but realistic, sober, lucid wakeful dreams of a new "American Dream" that would also inspire and elicit an explicit renewal of Catholic soul force.

Cosacchi's two final chapters turn us toward a host of other prophets of our moment – all women, all Catholic, all risking personal security, complacency and comfortable piety to model

modes of prophecy in an array of theaters. This chapter serves as Cosacchi's critique of Pope Francis's gender blindness even as he labors to liberate himself from his own cultural and ecclesial formation in patriarchy. Therefore, Cosacchi identifies three groups of American women who offer prophetic ways, unique to each, of being pontifexes – bridge-builders. Cosacchi first salutes women religious of the United States who have lived prophetically their intention to abide in a space of tension with the institutional Church through which they have consecrated themselves to life-long ministerial service to the world. Such fidelity to remain public members and ministers of a very compromised church is a remarkable witness of keeping the bridges passable to male clerical leadership that has in so many ways silenced, ignored and disenfranchised them. Cosacchi singles out two representatives who stand as exemplars of the myriad ways Catholic women religious prophesy in America. First, Sister Helen Prejean, a pontifex to American death chambers, and then Sister Norma Pimentel, whose bridge-building invites passage into community and solidarity with migrants. Alongside these American prophets Cosacchi holds up Notre Dame de Namur Sister Patricia Chappell, a Black Catholic woman who has led Pax Christi USA and the National Black Sisters Conference for decades, reminding us of the seamless garment which is the prophetic mantle that weaves anti-racism into nonviolence practice and vice versa.

But Cosacchi hastens to identify remarkable mostly Christian lay women in their various movements and prophetic initiatives. It is refreshing to see Ava DuVernay topping the list as an artist and social revolutionary who practices her prophecy through cinema. A cradle Catholic who migrated to a more progressive church as she matured, DuVernay is the first black woman to be nominated for an Academy Award for her documentary *13th* and for her stunning presentation of *Selma*. Artists like DuVernay are bridgebuilders who bring us into a wider national and cultural dialogue concerning questions of race and violence that must be confronted and transformed. Among these prophetic women is another movement founder, Tarana Burke, a Catholic convert and then renunciate after learning of the Church's racist history. Burke launched the “#MeToo” movement years before it went viral, and its impact has changed the way American culture views sexual assault. She herself has been prophet to the Church she formerly loved in its own confrontation of sexual violence. Other Christian prophets identified in this chapter are also women of color: the enslaved African American mystic Sojourner Truth and Chief Wilma Mankiller, who was the first female Cherokee Chieftain. Both of these female prophets serve to bring forward the complex dimensionality of racism in America and the sacrificial work undertaken to be exemplars of the prophetic vocation of pontifex – bridge-builders in a fragmented world.

Most kindly and finally, Cosacchi turns to the prophets of the Academy in our time, those women of faith who do the challenging and mostly unobserved work of theological inquiry and clarification of religious distortions that perpetuate the violence of white privilege, violence and economic disparity. Here he calls forward Sister Elizabeth Johnson, whose scholarship restores to us an expression of Catholic theology that has undergone a process of conversion. Her prophetic voice articulates a feminist critique of a Gospel mired in patriarchy and androcentrism. Her prophecy is read in her liberative texts that labor to free symbol itself to once again be authentically transformative and unifying modes of discourse. She is a pontifex within classrooms and wherever a new type of God-language resounds in an ecological and feminist key. With her stands Kwok Pui Lan, another hero who has taken on a legendary status in the Academy. Dr. Kwok is a diaspora

Chinese Christian practicing her prophetic mode of theology in the American context who embodies some of the challenges and constructive strategies for women in neo-colonialist, global culture. She is pontifex to a myriad of pluralisms and identities that have accumulated in the debris of the post-colonial world. Kwok's work builds bridges of understanding within a web of relations that open up new possibilities for understanding faithfulness to the Christian tradition in a complex world.

Cosacchi reserves the sixth and last chapter of this almost magisterial book for a challenging consideration of the ways all of us may ourselves become great Americans in his signature habit of presenting an ordered list of provocative possibilities for entering into the prophetic stream. His proposals for bridge-building service and mission list ten steps to becoming great Americans, a kind of catechesis toward prophetic development for each and every person. If you are a Christian teacher, this is your next semester's text; if you are sensing a desire to be among the prophets of our moment, this is your manual for development and commitment. If you can, buy this book, read this book, do this book. It holds its own kind of activating grace to bestow on you.