

## Religious Life and the Journey of the Prophet Elijah

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How can the religious life of today live its prophetic vocation while embracing the limits and the fragility with which it is confronted? A rereading of the cycle of Elijah the prophet can help us become bearers of the Good News.

### A Powerful Prophet

Elijah arises without warning in chapter 17 of the first Book of Kings: “Elijah the Tishbite, of Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab...” (1 Kings 17:1) His ministry begins in a troubled time. King Ahab, to whom Elijah speaks, “did what is displeasing to Yahweh, and was worse than all his predecessors.” (16:30)

This is very similar to the founding of many of our religious communities, which came into being during or after a time of crisis. In this case, Elijah begins his ministry with power: “By the life of Yahweh, God of Israel, whom I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain these coming years unless I give the word.” (17:1) Although he is called “prophet,” there is nothing to indicate that the Lord spoke to him and ordered him to declare a drought. Yet the Lord obeys him. The drought occurs.

### A Prophet Protected by the Lord

Twice, the Lord acts to save the life of Elijah. First, he sends him to the torrent of Cherith where the “ravens brought him bread in the morning and meat in the evening, and he quenched his thirst in the stream.” (17:6) Once the stream had dried up, the Lord sends Elijah to Zarephath: “Up and go to Zarephath in Sidonia, and stay there. I have ordered a widow there to give you food.” (17:9)

The blessings of the Lord also extend to those who help the prophet. The widow and her son can eat with Elijah. Yet “the son of the mistress of the house fell sick; his illness was so severe that in the end he expired.” (17:17) The prophet then took the child and prayed over him. “Yahweh heard Elijah’s prayer and the child’s soul came back into his body and he revived. Elijah took the child, brought him down from the upper room into the house, and gave him to his mother. ‘Look,’ Elijah said, ‘your son is alive.’” (17:22-23) The blessings of the Lord are not limited to the prophet.

### A Prophet Who Manifests the Power of God

A new mission awaits the prophet: “The word of Yahweh came to Elijah in the third year, ‘Go, present yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain on the country’.” (18:1) This time, it is God who has the initiative and Elijah obeys.

Like us, Elijah faces the disbelief and indifference of his people. When confronting “the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal and the four hundred prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel’s table” (18:19)<sup>1</sup> on Mount Carmel, he says, “How long do you mean to hobble first on one leg then on the other? If Yahweh is God, follow him; if Baal, follow him.” (18:21) And to convince them, he manifests the power of God. He brings down fire from the sky. “When all the people saw this they fell on their faces. ‘Yahweh is God,’ they cried, ‘Yahweh is God!’” Elijah said, ‘Seize the prophets

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<sup>1</sup> *Translator’s note:* Passage translated from the French. In *The New Jerusalem Bible*, the same verse says simply “the four hundred prophets of Baal who eat at Jezebel’s table” with no mention of Asherah; other English-language versions of the Bible do speak of Asherah while still others speak of “prophets of the grove.”

of Baal: do not let one of them escape.’ They seized them, and Elijah took them down to the wadi Kishon, and he slaughtered them there.” (18:39-40) This is an act of power—of murderous power!

### **A Prophet Whose Life Is Threatened**

Elijah pays dearly for this show of strength. His life is threatened and he makes a pilgrimage to the sources. On his way to Horeb, he asks for death (19:4). Arriving at the place of the Covenant, twice he said to the Lord, “The Israelites have abandoned your covenant, torn down your altars and put your prophets to the sword. I am the only one left, and now they want to kill me.” (19:10, 14)

Like us, he experiences his limits and his weaknesses. At the heart of this experience, the Lord reveals His true face. God is not in a hurricane, earthquake or fire. He manifests himself as “a light murmuring sound.” (19:12) He invites Elijah to leave his solitude: “You must anoint Elisha ... as a prophet.” (19:16)

### **Finding the Path of Hope**

What is the connection between Elijah's experience and our own? Like him, our communities have often arisen in times of crisis. Like him, we believed in the power of God and our service has made us bearers of a power that our contemporaries constantly begrudge us. Like Elijah, since the Council, we too are returning to our origins, to our founding charism. This return however, has not always yielded the expected fruits. So that, like Elijah, we are confronted with our solitude.

The prophet's spiritual journey invites us to not shut ourselves away or turn inwards on ourselves. By rediscovering the murmuring sound or light breeze of God's presence, the source of our vocation, we will be able to pick ourselves back up and bring the Good News to others; inviting them to listen to God who softly calls.

### **Questions:**

How does our life testify to the power of God? Is it through fire or a light breeze?

Like Elijah, our communities have gone from an era of power to an era of weakness bordering on death. What path does Elijah's experience map out for us?

Like Elijah, we sometimes have the impression of being alone. Yet God sends him to anoint another prophet. He is not alone and neither are we! What concrete collaborations are possible between and among our communities?