Voices of Sisters
Spirituality



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Welcome to Theologians' Corner, where each week a different woman theologian from around the world offers a fresh reflection on the Sunday readings.



Twenty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

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Often, people unburden their deepest struggles to me during a very first encounter. Perhaps that makes me a natural counselor, healer, confessor or spiritual companion. But there's a risk they may expect the relationship to be exclusive, if not contained.

Once, when attending to a sick person and suffering from an excruciating earache myself, I couldn't answer a call from another consecrated woman. In haste, I sent a brief text message instead.

Moments later, I received a message saying that my response felt cold and hurtful, and she was done with digital connections. I was blocked permanently, and my message explaining my situation remained unread.

I remember asking God in prayer: What was my fault? Had I, in my pain, failed her? I'm not an AI companion without feelings. Why didn't she try contacting me again? The answer never came clearly.

In this era of immediate communication, it's easy to have instant friends and instant enemies, and for the former to become the latter, instantly. One-sided friends and one-sided enemies are common realities.

Strangely, people may never have met in person or even spoken one-to-one on a video call, yet they carry deep expectations and assumptions about one another. Sometimes, even Christians seem to journey together on the synodal path like parallel railway tracks that never meet.

This contemporary dilemma brings me directly to the biblical readings, where the tension between truth-telling and relational distance is starkly apparent. In the first reading, God asks Ezekiel to warn the wicked. If he refuses to prophesy, and the wicked die, Ezekiel will be held responsible. However, if the wicked ignore the warning, Ezekiel will not be accountable.

Prophets, then, are necessary. But will today's prophets dialogue?

Face-to-face encounters are becoming rare in urban families. A mother who could shout from her room, "Son, switch on the geyser for five minutes," can instruct AI-operated "Alexa," instead. When there's a conflict, people in the same house are more at ease texting each other than looking in the eye and speaking the truth with love. Blocking becomes the final blow to a spouse, sibling or parent who tries to care-front persistently.

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Outside the home, especially when faced with conflict in digital spaces, many are tempted to assume prophetic roles. We denounce, correct, expose and pronounce instant judgments from behind screens, without genuine encounter. Social media, shaped by algorithms, can create an illusion of expertise, with little openness to

nuance. Eliciting reactions to a group post can be mistaken for a communal discernment process and become decisive.

But not everyone who speaks loudly or is an online influencer is a prophet, for the biblical prophet is strictly accountable to God and often unloved by the majority.

The Gospel according to Matthew (18:15-17) offers Jesus' teaching on conflict resolution. First, dialogue privately with the person who has offended you. If that fails, involve one or two others. Only then bring the matter before the wider community. Further, if the person refuses to listen to the church, then treat them as a "tax collector" — a derogatory term denoting someone who is morally compromised and deserves to be ostracized.

Ironically, Matthew, the apostle, is a former tax collector, and no other synoptic Gospel mentions the detail. While Mark omits the teaching, Luke speaks about forgiveness (17:3-4). Matthew's reference can serve as a subtle reminder how Jesus has dined with him and changed his life instead of "canceling" him out for his sins (9:9-10).

Moreover, he is probably responding to a conflict in his local church. Either his community is discontented with him about something and chattering behind his back, or he is offering a model of a non-hierarchical church in which leaders can be held accountable. He points to a participatory ecclesia where Christ remains the highest authority in the midst of believers gathered in his name.

This should encourage bishops, the successors of the apostles, to engage in direct dialogue with the people.

We cannot simply impose modern political language onto the ancient church. Yet Matthew seems to suggest that true leadership is not about top-down control but mutual accountability. No one stands above correction, listening or conversion. Even apostles may need to be re-evangelized by the community.

This remains a challenge for the institutional church, as it continues to wrestle with these questions. The synodal vision encouraged by Pope Francis, and now by Pope Leo XIV, points precisely in this direction.

Just as Paul, in the second reading, reminds us that love of neighbor is the fulfilment of the law, perhaps the most prophetic action any of us can take this week is also the simplest: to reach out, face-to-face, to the one we have been avoiding. After all,

it takes two to dialogue!

This story appears in the **Theologians' Corner** feature series. View the full series.