

The identity and significance of the “Redemptoris Mater” seminaries

by Lorenzo Rossetti

Starting with some brief and meaningful descriptions of the Redemptoris Mater seminaries, and moving towards his personal experience, the author, a professor of theology, draws an “identikit” of the seminaries, to underline their possible significance for the Church of our time.

“The diocesan and missionary “*Redemptoris Mater*” seminaries are erected by the diocesan Bishops, in agreement with the international Responsible Team of the Way and are governed by the current norms for the formation and incardination of diocesan clerics and according to their own statutes, in fulfillment of the *Ratio fundamentalis institutionis sacerdotalis*. In them, the candidates for the priesthood find, in their participation in the Neocatechumenal Way, a specific and basic element of their formative *iter* and, at the same time, are prepared for a ‘genuine presbyteral choice of service to the entire people of God in the fraternal communion of the presbyterate’ (*Statutes of the Neocatechumenal Way*, art. 18, §3).

“The *Redemptoris Mater* seminaries are not the seminaries of the Neocatechumenal Way but, as the statutes and the rule of life specify, are true diocesan seminaries dependent on the Bishop. The students of these institutes receive the same philosophical and theological formation as the other seminarians of the diocese. They could spend a pastoral year in the parishes as deacons and often times two years in the diocese as presbyters, before the Bishop can send them for mission. But if the Bishop has an urgent need in some particularly difficult zone of his own diocese, he can make use of them since they have been ordained without any conditions.

“A characteristic of these Seminaries is their internationality, which makes visible, in a concrete way, the new reality announced by Christianity, in which there is no more white and black, but only a new creature, a heavenly man.

“Experience has shown that the fact of uniting to the priestly formation an itinerary of initiation to the Christian life, such as the Neocatechumenal Way, constitutes a help for the psychological, affective and human maturity of the candidates and above all for the union of the mission with the parish.”

Starting with these descriptions of the *Redemptoris Mater* seminaries, to be found on the official website of the Neocatechumenal Way, I will attempt to describe first the identity and then the significance of the *Redemptoris Mater* seminary.

The identity of the Redemptoris Mater Seminary

“The wind blows where it pleases; you can hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit” (Jn 3:8).

The Redemptoris Mater seminary is diocesan, missionary and international, arisen and animated thanks to the Neocatechumenal Way.

A diocesan and missionary Seminary

Maybe the Spanish priest who all his life tried to reconcile diocesan and missionary spirit, St. John of Avila, could be the “historical patron” of the various *Redemptoris Mater* seminaries scattered around the world. In fact, the first “juridical” peculiarity of this new type of seminary is to link two different traditional elements: incardination into the local Church and a universal apostolic impulse. “Christendom” – that is the era of *societas christiana* – has accustomed us to a clear distinction between diocesan and religious priests. The former represented the diocesan constitution of the Church, while the latter manifested its missionary character.

The *Redemptoris Mater* proposes a new type of presbyterate: incardination into a diocese while being essentially missionary. This corresponds to the Spirit of Vatican Council II which sees the communion between the bishops at the center of ecclesiology and, viewing a single diocese as an actuation of the universal Church, makes it the primary subject of evangelization. Here, let us mention two brief conciliar expressions about the universal character of the Episcopal and priestly mission:

“Bishops should be zealous in promoting the sanctity of their clergy, their religious and their laity according to the vocation of each individual... Let them so sanctify the churches entrusted to them that the mind of the universal Church of Christ may be fully reflected in them. They should, therefore, make every effort to foster vocations to the priesthood and to the religious life, and encourage missionary vocations especially” (*Christus Dominus, 15c*).

“Priests should recall that the solicitude of all the churches ought to be their intimate concern. Where the nature of the apostolate demands this, not only the proper distribution of priests should be made easier but also the carrying out of special pastoral projects in any region or among any race in any part of the world. For this purpose there can with advantages be set up some international seminaries, without prejudice to the rights of the local ordinaries, for the common good of the whole Church (*Presbyterorum Ordinis, 10, cf. Pastores dabo vobis 12b, 16c, 18a, 32; CIC 257 §1*).

The pattern of the quotations of the conciliar decrees on bishops and priests of the encyclical *Fidei donum* by Pius XII (1957), as well as, the norms of the document of the Congregation for the Clergy *Postquam apostoli* (1980), examined the initiation of the concrete collaboration among the local Churches, especially regarding the distribution of clergy, hoping to revive the conscience of the “missionary nature of the Church and the

awareness of the responsibility which individual Christians, and above all the pastors of souls, have towards the universal Church” (*Postquam apostoli, 31*). The *Redemptoris Mater* Seminary responds exactly to this goal; but far from having been planned this answer is born from an astonishing initiative of the Spirit: the Neocatechumenal Way.

For this reason, this kind of college can be born if a bishop, convinced of the evangelizing value of the “Way” and, in agreement with the initiators Kiko Argüello and Carmen Hernandez, because of the care for the other churches who are more in need of clergy, decides to erect a seminary for the formation of vocations coming from the Neocatechumenal Way who once ordained will belong to the diocesan clergy, but be particularly destined for the mission. We could say that the seminary is the “pupil of the bishop”, who would come to have both: one for his own diocese and the other for the universal Church.

The presbyters from *Redemptoris Mater*, even when they are sent for the mission, always remain incardinated in their diocese and linked to their bishop. He can also send them to various diocesan assignments: parishes, chaplaincies, teaching, curial work... Their pastoral work in any field will correspond to the intention of the bishop and to the ordinary directives, even if it will surely be fulfilled with a particular sensibility.

A Neocatechumenal and international seminary

The Neocatechumenal Way, authoritatively defined by Pope John Paul II as “an itinerary of Catholic formation, valid for our society and for our times” is a pastoral instrument “at the service of the Bishops” (cf. *Statutes*, §§ 1 & 2).

Without being a Movement, nor an Association or a Prelature, it is established with the goal to rediscover the riches of baptism and of Christian life on the model of the ancient catechumenate, which envisages a kerygmatic announcement and a moral conversion (*metanoia*) being reached gradually through listening to the Word, the celebration of the sacraments, and community life (cf. *Ac 2:42*).

Being a source of numerous vocations the “Way” is usually counted among the new realities which evoke hope for the Church (cf. PDV, 41g). From among the thousands of Neocatechumenal communities scattered on various continents have in fact come numerous priestly and religious vocations; and this often happened during the World Youth Days. Fully logical with its own awareness of being at the service of the bishops, and not being an association, the Way has obviously considered diocesan incardination as the most natural means to open the doors of the priestly ministry to the young (or less young) who within themselves have felt the call of God.

The condition to enter into this type of seminary is therefore one’s participation in the Neocatechumenal community. In this way it anticipates, stands before and beside the priestly formation, a summary of Christian initiation. Each seminarian comes from a Neocatechumenal community in which he has started to know the Lord and his love, communion with the brothers, discernment upon himself, the life of prayer and liturgy.

All this, far from being suspended during the time of priestly formation, is considered an integral part of it. Because of that, besides the life of prayer, discipline, study and service, proper to each seminary, the members of *Redemptoris Mater* follow the “Way” in the local communities and return to their community of origin for the most important “steps.” With the ordination, they do not enter into a congregation or a particular brotherhood, but are incardinated into the presbyterate of the local Church to serve the evangelizing mission of the Church.

The idea of creating a particular seminary comes from Kiko and Carmen, when, concerned about the words of John Paul II about the new evangelization of Europe (in 1985) they had the intuition to send families in mission to the places dechristianized or never touched by the Gospel. This kind of *implantatio ecclesiae* was inconceivable without the help of many presbyters ready to break the bread of the Word and Eucharist in the context of this mission.

And so, with the encouragement of the Holy Father, there was erected in Rome, in the Marian year 1988, the first Redemptoris Mater Diocesan Missionary Seminary. The Rector, Msgr. Giulio Salimei, and the spiritual Father, Msgr. Maximino Romero de Lema deserve to be remembered. The former, as the auxiliary bishop of the diocese of Rome, had direct knowledge and personal experience of the Way, and the latter, at that time secretary of the Congregation for the Clergy, was co-signatory, together with Cardinal Silvio Oddi, of the above mentioned *Postquam apostoli* (1980) under whose directives the Statutes of the Redemptoris Mater of Rome is referred to.

Since then, there have been born more than one hundred seminaries in many dioceses on five continents: from Madrid to Takamatsu, from Kitwe in Zambia to Berlin, from Perth in Australia to Washington, from Kiev to Toronto, from Seoul to Quebec, from Brazil to Kaohsiung (Taiwan), from Warsaw to Medellin, Yaoundé to Namur, from Callao in Peru to Vienna...etc. The number of seminarians varies from a hundred to a dozen.

The seminarians are of different nationalities. This internationality is in fact a concrete sign of the catholicity of the Church, as well as a strong call to widen our horizons and to consider the uniqueness of the human race in Christ. There is no choice in which seminary to enter: everything depends on the freedom of the Spirit (cf. Jn 3:8; 2Cor 3:17); the candidate is asked if he is ready to go “wherever”, with total disposition and full trust in Providence. In this way, we can find some Spaniards in the seminary of Guam in Micronesia, some Germans in the one of Brazil, some Bolivians in the one of Copenhagen, some Italians in the one of Manila... The language and the culture of the place are slowly assimilated with study and with frequenting the brothers of the local communities.

Another formative particularity connected with universality is the education to the itinerant dimension of apostolic life, dedicating, during the years of the seminary, a significant time (one or two years) to evangelization. In practice, this experience consists

in collaboration either in an itinerant team of the Neocatechumenal Way, or with a pastor in mission, or again with the rector of another seminary.

Discernment over one's readiness for ordination belongs to the bishop, of whom the rector is a direct representative. The latter also takes into consideration the opinion of the Pastoral Council of the seminary, consisting of appointed members of the Diocese and of the team responsible for the Neocatechumenal Way in that given region. In general, concerning the diaconate, the opinions of the responsible of the communities of the seminarians are also heard. All this gives importance and realism to the answer of the rector at the beginning of the ordination, when the bishop questions him about the dignity of the candidates: "From the information gathered from the Christian people and according to the judgment given by those who cared for their formation, I can attest that these are worthy" (*Rite of ordination*).

Theological significance of the Redemptoris Mater Seminaries

I believe that the *Redemptoris Mater* seminary can be considered a small, but significant "sign of the times" for today's Church. In this regard, I would like to draw attention to three points that underline the novelty which emerges from the ecclesiological point of view: the relationship between hierarchy and laity, between institution and charisma, and between universal and local Church.

A new relationship between the hierarchy and the laity

The profound uniqueness of the *Redemptoris Mater* is that of rooting the seminary formation in the basic formation toward the Christian life. By letting the seminarian and then the priest continue to be part of the Neocatechumenal Way, who is in search of the richness of his own baptism together with the members of his community, the necessary condition and guarantee for the ecclesial *koinonia* is assured and a clerical or hierarchical tendency is avoided.

First of all, to be "a Christian *with* the brothers" truly happens before being a "priest *for* them". To constantly attend the community in a parish, on the one hand, helps the seminarian not to "isolate himself" and, on the other, to share joys and hopes, pains and anxieties with other people, within the common perspective of better and better discerning the Lord's will. Holiness has the primacy over function, and baptism reveals itself as that reality which is capable of enlightening every vocation and of making it possible, be it marriage or priesthood. Underlining with such strength the baptismal initiation, on the one hand, and the Christian community on the other, wholly corresponds to the conciliar theology of the People of God, in which the call to holiness precedes every ministerial or vocational differentiation (cf. *LG*, chap. II & V).

The double recovery of the irreplaceable centrality of Christian initiation and of fraternal community is also a huge *atout* with respect to the possible crisis which seminarians and priests can encounter. Aiming not only at ministerial formation and at the role of *leadership*, but also in a fundamental way at Christian formation, can prevent

certain traumas. In fact, no one is ignorant of the fact that, in most cases, defection from the priesthood (but the same thing is also valid with conjugal crisis) is not due to a lack of priestly formation (or of marriage formation) but to a deficiency in the maturity of being a Christian.

The “head” and the “heart”: a new relation between institution and charisma

John Paul II has often used the adjective “co-essential” to indicate the institutional and the charismatic dimensions of the Church. Now, the primary element of the *Redemptoris Mater* seminaries is the marriage between the diocesan and the missionary-international-neocatechumenal character. If the former term indicates the natural hierarchical constitution of the Church, the latter triplet expresses the *charismatic* dimension. In other words, what is here at stake is the relationship between the hierarchical charism and the prophetic charism (cf. *LG*, 4).

In the *Redemptoris Mater* seminaries, the ideal situation is an authentic reciprocity and a mutual inclusion (we would say “pericoreisis”) between the two realities. It is indispensable that the seminary have the bishop as its own *head* (and the rector as his representative), but it is also to be desired that it have the representative of the Neocatechumenal Way, that is the Pastoral Council, as its *heart*. If such “pericoreisis” exists, then one can say that the *Redemptoris Mater* seminary is truly an authentic diocesan seminary, while also being truly missionary-international-neocatechumenal. Only when we reason with the merely human logic of dichotomy and opposition between the hierarchy and charism, between the diocesan and missionary aspects, only then do we find a difficulty in articulating the two dimensions.

With regard to this we could recall a short passage in which St. Paul (or someone in his name) exhorts Timothy in the following way: “You have in you a spiritual gift which was given to you when the prophets spoke and the body of elders laid their hands on you; do not neglect it” (1Tim 4:14). Could perhaps the intervention of the “charismatic part” previously mentioned, about the discernment on the suitability for ordination, but also the suggestions about missionary destinations, not correspond to that *dià prophêteias*?

Mutual interiority between universal Church and local Church

According to *Lumen Gentium*, the particular or local Churches are a concrete realization and “a making visible” of the universal Church (cf. *LG*, 23a). Between them, a relation of reciprocal immanence is in force (cf. *Communione Notio*, 9). It is intrinsic to the universal Church, the *Catholica*, to manifest itself historically in a particular Church, as it is connatural to the latter to open and expand itself in a universal way.

Now, this circle of universality and particularity does not manifest itself only through juridical institutes like the *visit ad limina* (in which the local Church makes itself present, so to speak, to the universal Church), but also and maybe above all through the effective cooperation among bishops: these “ by Christ's institution and command to be

solicitous for the whole Church, and this solicitude, though it is not exercised by an act of jurisdiction, contributes greatly to the advantage of the universal Church.” (LG, 23b). In our time, more than ever, the Church has to escape again from the opposite temptations of centralism and particularism.

Thus, the *Redemptoris Mater* seminaries, being simultaneously rooted in the diocesan particularity and being constitutively universal, because of their internationality and of the charismatic impulse which animates them, offer to individual Pastors the concrete possibility of exercising, first through the formation and then through the gift of missionary presbyters (*Fidei donum*), that apostolic and universal solicitude which is inherent to their Episcopal office.

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