

Experiencing Mission in the Philippines

Paolo Benetton

I am Father Paolo Benetton, 45 years old from Treviso, Italy. I was ordained priest for the Diocese of Rome in 1999 by Saint John Paul II. For seven years I was an assistant parish priest in Rome. Then in July 2006, I was sent to the Philippines as a missionary. I became the rector of *Redemptoris Mater* Archdiocesan Missionary Seminary of Manila.

Before anything else, I would like to say that what I am going to present in this article regarding my mission here in Manila is the work of the Lord; I am but His poor instrument. I would like to add that I consider it an honor to be here in the Philippines as a missionary.

When I arrived, I was not prepared for the stark realities that confronted me, and for some time, I was shocked by the state of the country. Utter poverty stared at me. Simultaneously, I was wrestling with the question why the Lord sent me to help in the formation of seminarians and future missionary priests. I told myself that since it was the Lord who sent me here, He would grant me the grace that I need to fulfill this mission according to His will. The Lord has been really faithful, because every day he infused me with the strength to carry out this mission to help the seminarians to discern the will of God for them. The seminarians of *Redemptoris Mater* have been receiving their Christian formation in the Neocatechumenal Way, which is a post-baptismal catechumenate, an itinerary of Christian initiation to rediscover the riches of their Baptism and to be rooted in Christ. The Neocatechumenal Way and the specific formation that they receive in the seminary help them to mature, to do the will of God, and to be disposed to go anywhere as priests for the New Evangelization of Asia, announcing the Good

News of the Love of Christ that is humanity's true salvation!

At present we have 23 seminarians from five different countries and one deacon who will soon be ordained as priest. Twenty-one priests had been ordained so far. In my work as formator, I was very much helped by the pastoral team responsible for the Neocatechumenal Way in the Philippines: Luigi and Bertilla and the rest of their team. As Saint John Paul II once said, vocation is both a gift and a mystery. I am repeatedly amazed at how the Lord keeps on calling young men to give their lives to Christ.

Working with me in the seminary are Father Faustino Mora, Vice-rector, and Father Adonis Saclolo, Prefect of Studies. Bishop Benjamin Almoneda, *emeritus* bishop of Daet, is the Spiritual Director. He accepted the job to help us in the formation of the seminarians and has been with us for ten years. Their presence and their faith have helped me tremendously.

Formation Program. One of the most important components in the formation of seminarians is the Word of God which has the power to transform each one of us. We do the

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scrutatio with the seminarians every week. In the *scrutatio* a passage of Scripture is looked into deeply, its parallel readings scrutinized and meditated on, while praying to God to reveal His will. What issues is God addressing in one's vocation? What struggles, trials, doubts is He shedding light on with His Word? How does one deal with challenges in relationships with others? During the *scrutatio* there is a time set for the seminarians to share their experiences with each other and the formators. To me, it is really a grace to see how the Word speaks to the heart of the young men, encouraging them, correcting them, granting them deep intimacy with the Lord. In addition, we pray Lauds, Midday Prayer and Vespers, and celebrate the Eucharist together, expressing our gratitude to the Lord for everything.

Part of the formation is going to the community where they belong to continue the formation that began when they entered the Neocatechumenal Way. They go twice a week and attend the celebration of the Word and the celebration of the Eucharist with the brothers and sisters in the community. They always go two-by-two. Once a month, they attend the *convivencia* (one day retreat) where they pray Lauds together and share experiences in their lives in the light of the Word of God.

In the seminary there is a time devoted to physical activities like sports and other forms of healthy recreation, to allow variety and to have balance in life. All the different aspects of seminary life are designed to help the seminarians learn how to have a personal dialogue with the Lord in prayer, where each one can truly find rest. Apart from these activities, the seminarians undergo intellectual

formation through the study of philosophy and theology.

Assisting Personnel. Besides the formators and seminarians, there are three sisters (widows) who are giving their lives by rendering service in different areas: in the kitchen (Magdalene), in the laundry and keeping the premises clean (Pilar), and at the reception (Zenaida). They are sisters of the Neocatechumenal Way who, at a certain point in their lives, felt the call to serve the Lord in this way; they have been with us for many years. Aside from them, many other sisters and brothers come to the seminary to take turns helping with the different chores like keeping the place clean and orderly: Ulysses and Cynthia, Freia, Suzanne, Romancita, Ramon and Rhodora, Ofelia, Zosima, Caloy and Melania, Renato, Melinda. More brothers and sisters address other needs: Beeday and Joseph are the doctors of the seminary; Jojo and Marcelle give remedial English lessons to those who need help; Cesar and Inday do the marketing; Susan and Elenita take care of the task of accounting; Gilbert and Donna, Rolly and Bobby are in the Administrative Council, and many others help by keeping links with benefactors (Susan, Issa, Nanette, Dominic and Jackie, and Rene). I am impressed by the generosity of the people who are ready to help. Really, I have seen their love for the seminary.

Saint Mary Magdalene, the *apostola apostolorum* (the apostle of the apostles) whose feast day is on July 22, is the patroness of our seminary; she has been helping us a lot through all these years.

Personal Experiences. I have a strong experience of the hand of the Lord, about His



design and Providence. I am referring to the time when we seriously committed to construct a new seminary. In the past, the seminary had moved several times from one rented residence to another. When I arrived in 2006, it became clear that it was God's will for the seminary to have a permanent location. I had many questions: Where are we going to build it? Where can we find a property that fits this purpose? Where will the funds come from? I had doubts about my capability to spear-head this project, since I have no experience in construction; I did not consider myself an efficient fundraiser. All I knew was that it was necessary to find a place to build the seminary.

So, we started to pray and experienced the power of prayer. The Lord gave us many signs confirming that the place where to build the seminary was a lot located along Jerusalem Street within Multinational Village in Parañaque. The

area of the property was 11,700 square meters and it would have been really fantastic for the seminary, but the price was forty million pesos. I could not imagine where to get this amount to buy this property. Gilbert, a brother in my community at Mary the Queen Parish, thought that it would be a good idea to ask people to each donate money enough to pay for one square meter (Php. 3,500). It was surprising to see how the people responded positively to this scheme of raising the amount. Through them the Lord provided the amount needed to buy the lot—a miracle!

I was personally moved when one day, in the seminary, I received a plastic bottle full of coins amounting to Php. 3,500, good for one square meter. Everybody enthusiastically wanted to contribute. To me, it signified that what was going to build the seminary was not money, but the love and faith of many people who see the importance of forming

presbyters for the New Evangelization. We were able to purchase the lot and began to take care of the place. In fact, the youth from the communities in Manila, together with many other brothers, came to the property twice to remove the garbage and to cut the grass. The Lord gave us much!

It was time to start to draw the plans, get the necessary permits, and also go around asking for help. The Lord gave us the strength to go through all these challenges, trusting in his Providence. On July 22, 2009, Feast of Saint Mary Magdalene, we laid the time capsule. December 3, 2011 was the laying of the cornerstone; it took place in a celebration presided by Cardinal Rosales who has always been supportive of us and who encouraged us a lot in this project. On that occasion Cardinal Rosales spoke strongly about the urgency to be missionary.

Slowly the construction commenced, despite many difficulties; on February 14, 2014 we were able to move into the new building. Many people helped us with their skills in construction: Remigio and Lourdes, Sergio, William, Rolly,

Gilbert, Mel, Emmanuele, Eduardo, Chris and many others; we are very grateful to all of them.

The seminary is a beautiful building, because we believe that the beauty of the place plays an important part in the formation of the seminarians. This is a concept that we received from the initiator of the Neocatechumenal Way, Kiko Arguello, who is a painter. He introduced us to the importance of the esthetic of the spaces in which we live and celebrate. Something beautiful does not have to be extravagant or luxurious, but it helps to give importance to the dignity of the person, a place, or an event. In this sense the beauty of the seminary is part of the formation: a seminarian can touch the love of God through the dignity of the seminary where he lives. This affects his frame of mind when he goes to bring the beauty of the Love of Christ to the people he will meet in his mission, wherever the Lord will call him.

Additional Reflections. Every time I enter the gate and see the seminary I recall all the marvels that the Lord has done and the people He sent us to acquire this place. I give thanks to Him because it is really true that “If Yahweh does not build the house,





in vain do its builders toil. If Yahweh does not guard a city, in vain does its guard keep watch. In vain is your getting up earlier and putting off going to bed, sweating to make a living, since it is he who provides for his beloved as they sleep” (Ps 127:1-2).

Aside from my work in the seminary I am part of the team of catechists in my community at Mary the Queen Parish in Greenhills, San Juan. We evangelize in the Diocese of Imus. There are several communities of the Neocatechumenal Way and it is always a joy for me to visit them and see how the Lord is faithful in the life of these brothers and how He helps them.

Definitely my mission is to bear witness on how the Lord intervenes in the seminary and in evangelization. I am deeply impressed by the generosity of the benefactors. I have approached a lot of people and spoken to them about the reality of the seminary and the need to form priests. I proclaim to benefactors the love of God, because I firmly believe that He is the one who touches the hearts of

the people and not my poor words. I am deeply grateful to all of them because they are part of this mission entrusted to us.

The Gospel speaks about the encounter of Jesus with Martha and Mary. I myself during these years was agitated by so many worries and I did not realize that the “good part was really to stay at the feet of Jesus and to listen to Him.” That is why the Lord put me in a community, the first Neocatechumenal Community of Mary the Queen Parish. There I have embarked on a journey of faith; there I can listen to Him, so I may realize that I need to be converted every day. He has put oil on my wounds, forgiven my sins; he has invited me to go forward and announce with joy his love to many people in the Philippines who are waiting for it.

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