

# The Scuola Epi @ 40: The challenge to be a home and a school of communion

## Interview with Fr Andrew Recepcion

*Come January 2023, Scuola Epi, the Center of Spirituality for Priests and Seminarians of the Focolare Movement in Tagaytay (Philippines), marks its 40th anniversary. Fr. Andrew Recepcion of the Archdiocese of Cáceres<sup>1</sup> walks us through its 40-year history of taking the challenge to be a home where ministers of the Church learn and experience a life of unity and love.*

### ***How did Scuola Epi, the Focolare's Center of Spirituality for priests and seminarians, start in Tagaytay?***

If we go back in history, we can trace the particular continuity of formation in *Scuola Epito* the Movement's first school for priests and seminarians in Grottaferratta in Rome (Italy) in the late 1960s. The young men in formation to become priests, who made the Focolare's spirituality of unity their own, came to be called "*Gens*" (New Priestly Generation) or "*Gen seminarians*." Focolare founder Chiara Lubich wanted this school to become a place where diocesan priests and seminarians can experience profoundly the spirituality of the Focolare. Fr. Anton "Toni" Weber, a Swiss priest, was the first director of the priests' school at Grottaferatta. Many of the first priest focolarinos now, who were *Gens* at that time, were formed in that particular period at the first priests' school. It is interesting to know that some bishops and cardinals of the Church today who are serving at the Vatican are "products" of this school. Among them are Cardinal João Braz de Aviz of Brazil, the Prefect of the Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, and Cardinal Lazarus You Heung-sik of South Korea, the Prefect of the Dicastery for the Clergy. From Asia, there is also Cardinal Francis Xavier Kriengsak Kovitvanit, the Archbishop of Bangkok (Thailand). I would like to highlight the figure of Fr. Toni Weber who guaranteed the continuity of formation in the spirituality of unity when, decades later, he opened the Focolare's school for priests and seminarians in the Philippines.

The 1960s, the period of Vatican II, until the 1970s were years of transition with the onset of mass media technology, gender crisis, and mass transportation. It was the height of the Cold War between the US and the former Soviet Union, as well as the Vietnam War. Priests and seminarians had a great longing for an experience of communion as many of them were discouraged and demoralized by the exodus of priests from the ministry, and those in formation to become priests leaving the seminary in the 1960s and 1970s. There was a crisis

of identity among priests and religious. I think the Focolare's spirituality of unity has offered a renewal program that gave a space, in a sense, to find new meaning on how it is to follow Jesus, to go back to the Gospel, and to be able to highlight how it is to live in fraternity. We can show the example of Enrique Cambón, an Argentinian priest, who was the first *Gens*. His narrating his experience to the Focolare community helped him to go back to the seminary, and become a priest. It was in 1968 that the *Gens Movement* started. This movement emphasized that, before ordination to the priesthood, God should be put first in a seminarian's life. Putting God first would mean serving God in my brothers, in my neighbor. This shows the power of the evangelical revolution proposed by the spirituality of unity to priests and seminarians in that period of transition during Vatican II and after.

The late 1970s saw the establishment of the Focolare's Mariapolis Center in Tagaytay (Philippines). Now it was providential that Chiara Lubich, the founder of the Focolare Movement, visited the Philippines in 1982. During Chiara's visit, she was approached by 47 Filipino bishops, who desired that there be a center in the Philippines, particularly in Tagaytay, for priests and seminarians to experience a spirituality of communion. Chiara, being a daughter of the Church, felt it was an inspiration of the Holy Spirit. She shared this desire of the bishops with members and friends of the Movement in Manila. While she was speaking, somebody stood up in the audience, saying that he owns a piece of land in Tagaytay that he wanted to give for the use of the Movement. When Chiara received this providence of land in Tagaytay, she thought that it was the sign to start this "school" as desired by our Filipino bishops. However, to start the School in Tagaytay, the right person was needed to take on this new responsibility.

It was Fr. Toni Weber who accepted this daunting task. But before he arrived in 1982, some priests of the Movement were already in the Philippines. Since 1979, Fr. Victor Agius and Fr. Colin Apap, two Maltese priests, had been doing pastoral work in Mary Immaculate Parish in Moonwalk Village in Las Piñas. Both of them attended the priests' school in Grottaferrata (Italy). At that time, the parish was still part of the Archdiocese of Manila, and Cardinal Jaime Sin, the Archbishop of Manila, also wanted a special place where the Focolare can share its spirituality in the context of the parish community. Here we can see how God was already preparing some people for the concretization of the priests' school in Tagaytay. So when Fr. Toni came, he lived first in the Mariapolis Center. Later on, Fr. Victor, who was a more practical guy, joined Fr. Toni, assisting him in the construction of the School. Another priest who flanked Fr. Toni was Fr. Jean-Baptiste Phạm Văn Vương, another priest focolarino from Vietnam who was working for Radio Veritas Asia in Novaliches, Quezon City. They were the first collaborators of Fr. Toni Weber in setting up the priests' school in Tagaytay.

Upon arrival, they started construction immediately. In the meantime, they lived as a "focolare household"<sup>2</sup> in the Mariapolis Center. Fr. Victor was basically in charge of the construction of the first structure which was later on called *Scuola Epi* (School of the Epiphany). There was no road yet to go to the site. The existing road extended only up to the Maryridge Retreat and Renewal Center of the Good Shepherd Sisters. From that point, there was only a pathway going up to the site of the School. If we try to set the official start of the School, it was when the first priests came after the whole structure was built. Fr. Victor

was saying that, at that time, they didn't have a water system yet because the local water district supplied only until Maryridge, so water supply was hard to come by. They had to gather rainwater for washing.

On Christmas 1983, Fr. Toni, Fr. Victor and Fr. Jean-Baptiste celebrated Mass together. It was a beautiful experience to start the School with the three of them. Before they could finish the Mass, suddenly, the first group of priests from Cebu came to visit them: Fr. John Du, who is now the Archbishop of Palo, and two other priests. Fr. Toni recounted, "And now the shepherds came..." These priests stayed with them for a few weeks.

While construction was going on, Fr. Toni Weber was going around the Philippines, visiting bishops and priests, talking about this center for priests and seminarians, and offering his services. Fr. Toni was quite known for his work in the priests' school in Grottaferrata (Italy). He was also a man of great culture and learning because he studied at the Gregorian University in Rome and served as a professor in a regional seminary in Brazil.

This new task was not easy for Fr. Toni. As a European, he had to face the Asian world, a world completely unfamiliar to him. Though he was accustomed to a certain lifestyle, he had to adjust to the tropical climate and the local food. All this he did with evangelical simplicity, which was typical of his person. Fr. Toni lost no time in contacting bishops, priests and seminarians, visiting them all over the Philippines. Many priests and seminarians got to know about the School, and the bishops started to send seminarians there. In the first few years of *Scuola Epi*, there were very few programs. Basically, it offers this option: a possibility to live and experience a spirituality of communion. The program was later on called "One Year for Jesus."

### **What are the goals of Scuola Epi?**

The goals of *Scuola Epi* are quite clear. Its mandate is from Chiara Lubich herself: to offer a spirituality of communion to priests and seminarians who attend the School. Yet it should be a "school of life," a laboratory of the Gospel, animated by the spirituality of the Focolare, by its charism of unity. When I say it is a school of life, I mean it is a school of evangelical life.

Communion is not just a slogan but a way of life for priests and seminarians. I have experienced that personally in my 7 years in *Scuola Epi*. From my first day in the School, I was already struck by the communitarian spirit there. As a priest, I respond to God's call individually or personally. But in the School, I experienced that the journey I make, I make with others. The emphasis is that we go to God together as brothers, and that is the journey of collective holiness. I am a saint, if you are a saint, and if we are saints together. I think that's the power of this school for priests and seminarians in Tagaytay. It is not so much about programs and activities, but about being saints together. Every neighbor becomes my way to God.

## Can you share with us your experiences and realizations during your stay in Scuola Epi?

In my 7 years as a *Gens* in Tagaytay, *Scuola Epi* became a school of life because, first of all, the Teacher is Jesus, who is present among us when we have a reciprocal relationship of love. He is spiritually present as the Master teaching his disciples. Moreover, it is a school because we learn from the book where we find *God's Word*, the Bible, especially the *Gospel*. We strive to put the Word of God into practice in daily circumstances until it becomes spontaneous. For example, I had an experience of having a conflict with somebody over a word, and I couldn't let go of my idea. I was so disturbed that I went to the chapel and prayed before Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. The Word of Life<sup>3</sup> that month was "*Nothing... is hidden from God's sight*" (Heb 4:13), and in the reading during Night Prayers, it says, "*Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger*" (Eph 4:26). Opening myself to Jesus, I felt he was asking me to make a step. Honestly, I have never lived like this before. In the seminary, when I had something against another, I really didn't care. However, at that moment, I decided to approach the person and talk to him. We were able to recompose our unity, and afterwards, I felt so much peace, joy, and freedom. It was the power of living the Word of God, but also putting into practice God's will in every moment in very concrete terms. In my experience, we can see that another "book" in the School is the *brother* that I live with 24/7. Since Jesus is also present in my brother, he is another Jesus I should learn to love.

So in the School, we have *the Teacher*, different "books" ... and how about the classroom? The classroom is every living space there is. It was a kind of dynamic existence because, in the kitchen, we worked together. It was not so much about cooking but trying to see things together, what is the best food to prepare for others. Any place can become a classroom: the kitchen, the laundry, etc. It may be a menial job, but I am doing it because I am committed to serving my brother in this way. True enough, nothing is small or insignificant when you really love the person, or your brothers in the community.

Our "classroom" can even be outside the premises of the School. For our apostolate, we visited the different *barangays* (villages) near the priests' school. Every encounter with people was an opportunity to share our life with them. Sometimes, we just had to be with them and not be preoccupied with programs like teaching catechism immediately. The time spent with them, taking the coffee or coconut juice they offered us, were often moments that created family among us. I think this has transformed our relationship with our neighbors around the School. Fr. Toni Weber, through his friends, was able to offer scholarships to poor but deserving boys and girls around the area. This social project was the forerunner of the Pag-asa Social Center which started in the late 1990s and now caters to the needs of hundreds of families.

Just like physical exercise, we try to apply what we have learned every day. We do not go to bed without assuring each other, *maintaining, before anything else, mutual and constant*

*charity, keeping always the presence of Christ in our midst* which is the norm of every norm in the Focolare. I think this is the power of our communitarian experience in Tagaytay. Chiara would always emphasize to the *Gens*: “We do not do away with structures; instead we put a soul in the structures... And that soul is *unity*, lived in reciprocal charity. With this, the School has borne much fruit in the past 40 years.

### **What is the impact of this school of formation on the lives of those who have attended it?**

I can only speak from my own experience. For me, it's the realization that God matters first before the priesthood. My personal relationship with Jesus is crucial in my priesthood; to put God first above priestly ordination, and above my own plans. The School also proposes priesthood as a way of life. It is not just a ministry I have to do. A phrase in the *Gen's* magazine sums it up perfectly – *being Christians before being priests*. The emphasis is not so much on becoming a priest but on becoming a better Christian first. And from these, one appreciates his vocation to priesthood. I think this is the overall impact of the School. I cannot be a good priest if I am not a good Christian. Being a good Christian would mean really living the Gospel so that it becomes my way of life. I have to think the way Jesus thinks. I also acknowledge my fragile humanity but, at the same time, I know that I am fully, unconditionally and infinitely loved by God. Furthermore, God's love in my life is also connected to my brothers in the community. Maybe the influence of this school of formation on those who attended it can be seen in the leap in quality of their relationships with God and others.

### **How has your formation in Scuola Epi helped you in your priestly ministry?**

When I got ordained, I was assigned to a parish in a very remote place. My mother reacted, “What have you done? Why are you being sent to that place?” As a priest, I do not choose my assignment. I don't make plans for myself alone. I know that only the plan of God liberates, that only His will is important. So it doesn't matter whether I go to a remote place or stay in the city. I do the will of God, and there I find my fulfillment and happiness as a priest. For me, that was essential.

After a few years, my bishop asked me to go to Rome to study. At first, I was reluctant because I enjoyed being in the parish. I said to myself that this is another expression of God's will through my bishop. I tried to do my studies well for the good of the Church and for love of Jesus in my bishop. Upon returning from Rome, my bishop asked me to stay with him for almost 10 years.

Talking about the hierarchy of the Church, Chiara would usually quote what Jesus said in the Gospel: “*Whoever listens to you, listens to me*” (Lk 10:16). At times, this obedience and love for my superiors can be difficult, but it is an important part of my experience as a priest. Whether I'm assigned in Rome or in a parish, I live that service not so much as a kind of formula but as a way to be like Mary, “knowing how to lose” even what is good and beautiful, just to be love for others. For instance, I set aside my being the parish priest, not

dictating on everyone; instead, to have an attitude of openness, taking into consideration the contribution of others, the charism<sup>4</sup> of others for building up the community. This was fundamental in my experience in the priests' school in Tagaytay and it continued when I was a parish priest. Some years ago, I was asked again to go to Rome, this time to be spiritual director at the *Pontificio Collegio Filippino*, the home in Rome of diocesan priests from the Philippines studying at the pontifical universities. Taking this assignment was another way for me to respond to God's call.

My stay in *Scuola Epi* was truly unique and life-changing. Though I still struggle with my human frailties, my experience in this school for priests and seminarians has been like a compass that guides me in saying yes to God's will.

### **Is there anything else you would like to share as a message to our readers?**

Let's pray for priests and seminarians. There is truly a need for places of renewal for ministers of the Church. I think it's an opportune time, in the spirit of the synodal journey of the Church, that we acknowledge the many opportunities for priests and seminarians to go on this journey with others as God's people. And this school for priests and seminarians in Tagaytay is an opportune place because you live and journey with other people: priests, young people, professionals, and so on. This school offers a concrete synodal experience.

### ***Interview by Jose Aranas***

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<sup>1</sup> A Roman Catholic archdiocese that comprises the Bicol Region, while directly overseeing the third, fourth, and fifth congressional districts of Camarines Sur, Naga City, Iriga City and the Municipality of Gainza

<sup>2</sup> Refers to a small group of consecrated men or women of the Movement who live together in community.

<sup>3</sup> A passage from Scripture proposed to all members of the Focolare to reflect on and put into practice

<sup>4</sup> A gift of God to a person for the good of the Church and the world