

IN SEARCH OF OUR IDENTITY AS REGNUM MARIAE SISTERS

This essay is divided into two parts. In the first part, I will deal first with the Biblical category of ‘memory’ and with some of its most essential elements, providing also some passages for your personal study; then I will briefly outline the history of Regnum Mariae, providing dates and facts about the Institute.

In the second part, I will deal with the main features of Regnum Mariae’s vocation, in the context of its development from the 1962 Statutes to the Rule of Life of 1983.

As an appendix to the essay, please find a set of questions that may be used both individually and at the community level.

I. MEMORY OF THE PAST AND COMMITMENT TO THE PRESENT

In order for our identity to be re-discovered, we need to look back on the earlier days of RM, and find out which were the original reasons for starting it. By looking back, by recalling the past in the light of the Holy Spirit, we will be able to infuse the freshness of the origins into our present life and circumstances and look to the future with confidence.

1. Memory in the Scriptures

The Jewish term ‘memory’ (‘z k r’) and the term ‘male’ (ie, the man / animal who makes a woman / female animal pregnant) have a common root: even from a linguistic point of view, the Biblical memory is defined as a generative power, as a kind of life fertilizing personal as well as the people’s history.

According to the Scriptures, to ‘remember’ means to infuse our present life with the certainty of God’s love for us. In the past, God has revealed in many ways His desire to be close to mankind, to save them, to make them free. Difficult times or tragic events might have occurred. But God never disavowed his faithfulness to man. When the people of Israel gathers and recalls to mind the events and the protagonists of its history, is in fact celebrating its faith in God as the Saviour and Redeemer of today. The history of salvation is not over: it continues in the days we live in, too.

Memory is followed by an announcement and a proclamation:

“On You I have relied since my birth,
since my mother’s womb You have been my portion,
the constant theme of my praise.” (Ps 71:6)

And it becomes a commitment to serve, worship and follow God, and God only, as well as to recognize Him as the Creator and Lord.

“The whole wide world will remember and return to the Lord,
all the families of nations bow down before Him.” (Ps 22:27)

To remember clearly means to return to the Lord, to turn to Him in faith, to convert to Him.

In the New Testament, the most important passages where the rich Old-Testament meaning of ‘memory’ occurs are the Lord’s Supper’s narratives. Jesus’ command “to do again, in

remembrance of Him,” what He Himself has just done (cf 1 Co 11:24-25; Lk 22:19) can be paraphrased so: “Do this, in order to confess your faith in me, your Lord, present among you: eat the bread and drink the cup, sharing my life (body) and my death (blood), proclaiming my Passover to the whole world by preaching and thanksgiving.”

Some passages from both the Old and the New Testament show how either the whole people of Israel or single individuals did remember the past in order to find the strength to face the present.

- Psalm 78: “I will unfold the mysteries of the past.” (2) The lessons of Israelite history must be interpreted in the light of faith, otherwise they will remain a mystery. Cf the parallel psalms: 105, 106, 114, 144, 136.

- Deuteronomy: the book of memory. Cf the following passages:

Dt 4:9-20: the memory of the revelation at Horeb; its demands;

Dt 4:32-40: the memory of the great gift of having been chosen by God;

Dt 8:1-20: the memory of the ordeal in the desert, a trial for faith;

Dt 9:7-21: the memory of sins and errors of the past turning into praise to God and His mercy;

- 1 Maccabees 2:49-70: the memory of divine protection in the past as a beacon of hope for the present and an incitement to fight;

- Luke 1: 46-55: the Virgin’s hymn as a memory of, and a meditation on God’s works in history to the benefit of the humble and the poor; (cf also Lk 2:19, 51: Mary stored up everything in her heart);

- Acts 22:1-21; 26:4-18: Paul’s memory of his personal history as a proclamation of faith.

2. Regnum Mariae’s history

I will limit myself to giving an outline of RM’s history, including the most important dates and events.

· 1959, February 2. Regnum Mariae is born on this day, within the Third Order of the Servants of Mary of the Sacred Heart’s Parish Church in Ancona.

· 1961, May 31. The first three RM sisters take the three vows.

· 1962, November 21. The new Statutes of RM clarifies that RM’s special aim is “to offer one’s consecration to God, through the hands of Mary, to the benefit of priests, especially those belonging to the Order of the Servants of Mary, so that their holiness may increase...”

· 1967, September 2. RM is now a large group, subdivided into four local groups and one ‘headquarters’. Ancona’s Archbishop entrusts Villa Getsemani (Montesicuro) to RM, thus giving rise to the first RM community with its own activity.

· 1969, July 27-August 4. In the year of its tenth anniversary, RM holds its first special ‘chapter’ at Montesicuro. A new awareness of its own identity emerges, together with the need for a Rule of Life in conformity with its own secular vocation.

· 1970, December 8. The ‘Rule of Life’ is ready. This is a major turning point in our quest for our own identity.

· 1971, September 2. A new fraternity is established at Candia, our own place, but open to our friends.

· 1976, November 10. RM affiliates to the Order of the Servants of Mary.

· 1977, October 25. Ancona’s Archbishop establishes RM as a ‘Pious Union’.

- 1983, February 28. After getting the ‘nihil obstat’ from the Congregation for Religious and for Secular Institutes, Ancona’s Archbishop signs the decree by which RM is established as a ‘Diocesan Secular Institute’.
- 1983, August. At Cassano Murge (Bari), RM holds its first Assembly as a Secular Institute. The sisters renew their profession of the evangelical vows and receive the new text of the Rule of Life.
- 1984, February 2. In the year of its 25th anniversary, RM goes on a thanksgiving pilgrimage to the Holy Land.
- 1984, August 26-September 1. For the first time RM takes part in the World Congress of Secular Institutes (the third one) and in the General Assembly of Moderators.

II. OUR OWN VOCATION WITHIN REGNUM MARIAE

Now I will deal with the main ideas and themes by which our sense of identity has been shaped.

1. The meaning of the name of the Institute

According to the first page of the 1962 Statutes, ‘Regnum Mariae’ is closely linked with ‘Regnum Christi’. Given that Jesus is the King, Mary is the Queen. Christ’s lordship revealed itself in the paradox of the Incarnation. The Son of God became a servant, emptying Himself of His divine dignity and becoming one of us. Thanks to His radical sharing of man’s lot, He vanquished death and by His resurrection He gave us life.

Exactly as Jesus-Servant, the Lord’s “Maid-Servant” obediently adhered to the divine plan. At the foot of the Cross she shared her Son’s kenosis (abasement). As part of the community of believers she received the Holy Spirit, “whom God has given to those who obey Him” (Ac 5:32). The Church believes that she deserved to share Christ’s supreme victory, the victory over death: after her Assumption, Mary ‘reigns’ with Christ.

The name Regnum Mariae implies all that. The resulting commitments are:

- to incarnate our Marian vocation in the world, with no separation or escapes from reality;
- to welcome one’s cross, as well as other people’s, as a means of communion with Christ, intercession for everybody’s salvation, fulfilment of what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ;
- to transfigure our own sad and sinful realities, as well as those around us, so that the kingdom of Christ might come as the kingdom of justice and peace;
- to proclaim and bear witness to the fact that the kingdom of Christ does not fit into human or worldly categories: it is based on God and the gospel of service. Christ is the servant of truth, justice, evangelisation of the poor.

The name ‘Regnum Mariae’ is therefore a proclamation of Easter in the world of today. All those who take it upon themselves mean:

- to keep burning the flame of hope in life, in spite of all the sins inside and outside ourselves, in spite of the culture of death and violence which is still present in our society, together with so many seeds of good;
- to be at the service of life in all its forms, looking after the old and the sick, and the poor of any kind;
- to reveal Christ’s lordship and majesty when we have our crosses to bear or we are defeated; to reveal the Lord’s power when we are weak, Jesus’ life at the moment of death.

2. Priestly vocation

From its earliest days, the RM group felt called to carry out their ‘priestly vocation’. The 1962 Statutes entirely devote to this subject the articles from n° 14 to 17. I will quote some articles, so that we may better understand the ethos informing them.

“RM’s special aim is to offer one’s consecration to God, through the hands of Mary, to the benefit of priests, especially those belonging to the Order of the Servants of Mary, so that their holiness may increase.” (1962 S, n° 4)

“...RM’s members shall contribute towards the salvation and sanctification of souls, through the priests for whom they have offered their whole lives.” (1962 S, n° 5)

“They shall be content with their vocation, given that in Heaven they will reap the same reward as priests, as St Paul puts it: ‘Whoever helps an apostle, he will reap the same reward as the apostle.’ RM members should not just give away something they own for the apostle, but everything and their whole life: this will be the source of their joy; and from this their reward will come.” (1962 S, n° 6)

“In order to increasingly recognize the value of their own vocation and to fulfil it more and more, they shall try to learn as much as they can about the priestly status, by reading and studying everything they can find on that subject.” (1962 S, n° 7)

“They shall do their best to fulfil this vocation of theirs, and shall make sure to draw other people to this ideal, by asking them to pray for all priests until they have absorbed the Servitan spirit.” (1962 S, n° 11)

According to these articles, RM’s priestly vocation is carried out by sharing the ministerial priesthood through the offer of one’s life, prayer, theological study, or providing help of any kinds.

The Vatican II Council’s renewal widened the scope of the common priesthood of the baptized. Our Rule of Life shows this marked shift in the Church’s awareness.

“Each of us has been called to become more and more aware of her participation in Christ’s one, prophetic and royal priesthood, while being constantly attentive to the mission of those who have been called to exercise the ministerial priesthood in the Church. We shall co-operate in their mission by our prayer as well as by any other means the Church might show us – provided that these are in agreement with our vocation to consecrated secularity.” (RoL, n° 6)

RM is still genuinely concerned for the ministerial priesthood, but in the light of a wider theological understanding (“her participation in Christ’s one, prophetic and royal priesthood...”) and open to new means the Church might suggest.

It is this priestly vocation that turns life, work and each and every of our activities into a genuine liturgy.

“You shall carry out everything in the name of the Lord Jesus. It is by sharing in His priesthood, that your life may become prayer and praise to the Father.” (RoL, n° 29)

“You shall turn your work into a liturgy, in the awareness that even the humblest of services has a redemptive value for your brothers and sisters, and also that it is worship and praise of God.” (RoL, n° 48)

3. Consecrated secularity

There has been an evolution of our specific way of living up to consecrated secularity, too. The 1962 Statutes present the main features of the secular vocation, even though it is mainly concerned with “works of the apostolate” or with RM’s specific apostolate.

“We are religious women who live within the world; therefore, our field of apostolate is very wide. First of all, our apostolate should be done within one’s own family, at least by prayer and setting a good example for them.” (1962 S, n° 55)

“Our field of apostolate may be widened and include work in other associations. Everybody is urged to try getting important jobs or positions with power, through which Christians can influence society (organization, teaching, etc.), and to hold them as long as RM’s leaders might deem it appropriate.” (1962 S, n° 57)

Consecrated secularity and active apostolate are a bit blurred. In this respect, the Rule of Life represents a turning point.

“Each of us will fulfil her consecration in her own environment, doing an ordinary job, as ordinary people do. In conformity with our apostolic witness, we shall live all of life’s situations in Christ, and carry out our social mandate in a spirit of service, with responsibility and competence.” (RoL, n° 4)

Consecrated secularity is “a hidden life in the world, with a deep appreciation of its authentic human values and the ability to live a solitary witness.” (RoL, n° 68b)

To do some specific works of apostolate is not the point; the point is to be like the yeast mixed in with the flour, until the dough is leavened all through...

“Being aware that thanks to baptism we are new creatures, let us live according to our consecrated secularity, soiling our hands with the temporal realities we are part of, so that they may be ordered to God through Christ.” (RoL, n° 46)

RM’s sisters work in the world:

“You shall draw your inspiration from the service that Mary rendered and still renders to the world; you shall work in all peace, with no anxiety, which is typical of those who do confide in their own efforts.” (RoL, n° 47)

Our first apostolate is the thorough fulfilment of all the duties deriving from our professional activity (cf RoL, n° 48).

Living in the world with no distinctive signs, in order to bring to the world the dynamism of true liberation, will prompt us to hold dearer the poor (cf n° 52), to appreciate friendship (n° 53), to try building a universal fraternity “which is a bond between you and every creature, due to our common origin in God the Father and to communion brought about by Christ’s reconciliation” (n° 54).

The awareness of our consecrated secularity may be deepened through constant study and formation:

“You shall feel responsible for becoming an expert in your branch of work, and you shall keep up-to-date in the fields of theology and social studies, depending on your personal aptitudes, abilities and possibilities. You shall do that in order to have an ever more thorough and prompt share in God’s redemptive plan, fulfilling itself in the ever changing human history.” (RoL, n° 50)

4. Fraternity and prayer

The beginnings of RM were marked by a constant heartfelt prayer and fraternal communion. The first spiritual exercises were held at Pietralba from July 31 to August 2, 1962, and were preached by Fr Gabriel M. Roschini. Eleven RM sisters took part in them. They were a major landmark in our experience of fraternal communion.

Fraternity

The 1962 Statutes shows but little traces of those experiences of communion: n° 21 is the only article dealing with fraternal love among sisters.

“Following the example of the Seven First Fathers, they shall greatly love one another: this love shall consist of mutual help and understanding. It shall be a heartfelt love for the RM Family, extending to all the members of the Servitan Family, that is, to all those belonging to the first, the second and the third Order.”

On the contrary, the Rule of Life deals with fraternity at length: a sign that our link with the Servitan Order’s spirituality is now clearer.

Fraternity is dealt with in numbers 3, 17, and 36-45 (the whole Chapter 6 on ‘fraternal life’).

Prayer

The first RM group used to pray hard, but with no self-consciousness. We had to fill the so-called ‘report’ – by ticking the boxes on it. This was not a legalistic duty, rather the sign of our practical, humble and faithful commitment.

The 1962 Statutes deals with prayer in numbers 62-68, where the daily, weekly, monthly and yearly practices are prescribed. The Divine Office is mentioned in n° 66c, while n° 66e briefly mentions meditation and spiritual reading. That same article also prescribes that all of our “Thursdays should be devoted to especially remembering priests in our prayers – given that on that very day Jesus ordained the very first priests...”

The Rule of Life tries to clarify the meaning of our prayer, as well its right spirit and contents: it should be characterized by and express our secular choice. In numbers 28-35, prayer is regarded as a hunger to be nourished, by constantly and “untiringly [– ie, in all situations of life –] searching the face of God” (n° 28). It should be the living expression of our vocation to share Christ’s priesthood (cf n° 29). We should take part in the prayer and liturgy of the whole Church (cf n° 31), as well as “be faithful to our daily, long, personal meeting with the Lord,” during which “meditation will help us see into the meaning of the Scriptures” (n° 32). Last but not least, in our prayer we should intercede for all the world in which we live (cf n° 33).

5. Marian-Servitan inspiration

“RM was started within the Order of the Servants of Mary: its wish is, and always will be, to live in fraternal communion with the Order.” (RoL, Prologue)

In addition to the sanctification of priests, RM’s specific task, the 1962 Statutes points out another task: “to promote the growth of the Third Order of the Servants of Mary, being the Third Order one of the best means to fulfil RM’s specific task” (1962 S, n° 18). In fact, “all those who mean to join RM, have to become members of the Third Order of the Servants of Mary first, so that they may be instructed according to the Servitan Family’s spirituality” (1962 S, n° 19).

We have already quoted n° 21 of the 1962 Statutes, where the Seven Fathers are presented as a perfect example of communion to the RM sisters. Again, the Seven Fathers are presented as the source of inspiration in n° 39, which is part of the section of the Statutes dealing with the ‘virtue’ of poverty.

“Each member of the family shall do her best to get rid of all attachments to temporal realities. She shall be content with the necessary or, better, at least by her interior affection and humility, with what is even less than the necessary, thus imitating the First Seven Fathers who were a shining example of each and every virtue, and of that one in particular, by getting rid of all their material possessions and being content with asking for alms and living in the bare caves of Mt Senario.” (1962 S, n° 39)

The Rule of Life, consistently with its ideal of consecrated secularity, gets rid of all the elements which were too typical of a religious / monastic spirituality. The Servitan Order is mentioned only in the Prologue. The Seven Fathers are mentioned only in the Promise. In fact, the whole Rule is pervaded by the Order’s spirituality. In this respect, we have already mentioned the theme of fraternity.

Another important feature is the Marian inspiration, which can be found in all, or nearly all the articles of the Rule. This inspiration could be found, of course, in the 1962 Statutes as well. But from that date onwards, it has been clarified and purified thanks to the heightened awareness of both the Church and the Servants of Mary.

From the 1962 Statutes we will quote numbers 20 and 54.

“RM’s character is mainly Marian; it may be fulfilled by learning to know Our Lady in depth, and by imitating her virtues, especially purity, poverty and obedience.” (1962 S, n° 20)

“Besides Jesus, the perfect example... we shall always keep in mind Mary, who was the first to walk on this path [chastity] and who was the most perfect teacher and leader: as far as work is concerned, apostolate, prayer, behaviour, style of dressing, leisure time, and so on... She shall be an example urging us to imitate her. RM’s members shall be wholeheartedly Hers, so that she may be known, loved and followed on this path, which is so rewarding but not appreciated and loved. And when they have to face some difficulties, overcome temptations or bear with sufferings for her sake, they shall be proud for being deemed to be worthy to suffer something for the coming of her Kingdom of purity and love, and they shall give thanks to Heaven for this very great gift.” (1962 S, 54)

The Rule of Life focuses our attention on Mary as the perfect example of evangelical-apostolic life. RM's aim is "to make present in the history of salvation the active and silent presence of the Mother of Jesus who, 'while leading on earth an ordinary life, full of familiar cares and chores, always managed to be intimately in communion with Her Son and quite outstandingly co-operated in our Saviour's work.' (AA, 4)" (RoL, Prologue)

N° 7 of the Rule of Life is an important summary of RM's Marian spirituality:

"...each of us will learn from Her "Fiat" to welcome the Word of God; from Her life with Jesus at Nazareth, each of us will learn the meaning of her participation in society; from Her participation in the redemptive mission of Her Son, each of us will be led to understand, alleviate and make the most of human sufferings. Each of us will strive for the Virgin Mary – an example of trust in the Lord – to be a sign of hope and unity to the divided and insecure men and women of our times.

Each of us will draw her inspiration from Her, the embodiment of the highest feminine values, in order to fulfil herself as a woman, as well as to commit herself to love and to serve, even if this might mean giving up something of great value. She will always turn to Her with devotion and filial trust." (RoL, n° 7)