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Fr. Nepo, SMM defends his Doctoral Thesis

LEUVEN, Belgium - It was a cloudy day in Leuven, Belgium but Father Nepo's bright smile made everything glitter. Indeed, it was also the feast day of St. Lucy, the saint of light. In the august presence of a host of distinguished professors at the Catholic University of Leuven, and in the presence of the local bishop, under whose shepherding he renders his pastoral service, Dr. Fr. Nepo successfully defended his doctoral thesis on December 13, 2023.

Father Jos VAN DEN BERGH, SMM, the delegation superior of Belgium was present long before everyone else, and his presence was encouraging, providing both moral and physical support to Fr. Nepo. Fr. Nepo acknowledged his indispensable contribution to completing this work and thanked him in a very special way. Accompanying him were other priests from the Belgium Delegation who came to support Nepo. Fr. Alex, SMM, representing the Montfort General House, Rome, was also present. The confreres from the Delegation of Germany were also present to witness and celebrate this significant event.

The doctoral thesis was titled “The Place of Mary in Contemporary Theological Research: An Investigation of the Contribution of Virgilio Elizondo and Elizabeth A. Johnson”. It is written and presented in English.

It was a historic day as an unprecedented event unfolded. The hall was filled to capacity with dignitaries and invited guests, marking a momentous occasion. In the university’s history spanning several decades, it had never witnessed such a massive turnout for any doctoral defense. The hall accommodated over one hundred people, leaving no space to sit or stand, and a substantial number of individuals found themselves standing outside the hall.

This exceptional attendance took the administration by surprise, prompting them to bring in additional chairs in an attempt to accommodate the overflowing crowd. However, these efforts proved insufficient to alleviate the congestion, and many attendees remained on their feet throughout the entire two-hour-long presentation, discussion, and deliberation. Despite the university’s attempts to manage the situation, it was unable to accommodate everyone for this unprecedented event.

If the crowd was high on spirit and hysteria, the mood in the hall was even more elevated. The candidate, Fr. Nepo, found himself immersed in a shower of praise from the distinguished professors. His thesis was acclaimed for its high Christology and high Mariology. Another professor credited Fr. Nepo as a unique theologian, describing him as the theologian of his own kind, who has crafted his theology from his intense pastoral experience.

Yet another theologian observed that Father Nepo possesses the art of remaining an orthodox and traditional theologian while simultaneously proposing a new contemporary theology. One of the professors openly admitted that he was pleased that Fr. Nepo’s theology challenged him and prompted him to think differently. Fr. Nepo’s thesis had a profound impact on one associate professor, who belongs to one of the evangelical churches. She remarked that his thesis is particularly well-suited to foster ecumenical dialogue on Mary.

Father Nepo highlights the salient features of *Teologia Latina* by Virgilio Elizondo and affirms Mary’s *mestizo* identity, illustrating how she identifies with the people of *Latinas* through her manifestation as the Madonna of Guadalupe. Additionally, he underscores the feminine theology of Elizabeth A. Johnson, emphasizing Mary’s qualities of courage, independence, and assertiveness.

After a thorough critical evaluation of the Marian theology proposed by these two contemporary theologians, Father Nepo introduces a “Christocentric Mariology”. In this dissertation, he presents a new “Mariological method” to study the significance of Mary. He contends that to truly understand Mary, one must have a profound understanding of Jesus. Those who know Christ cannot overlook Mary, as she is inseparable from Jesus. As a result, he puts forth a novel Mariological method: “Through Jesus to Mary” (*Per Jesum ad Mariam*), representing his unique contribution to theology and Mariology.

He too touches upon the “Pneumo-Christocentric Mariology” where the forgotten figure of the Holy Spirit is dealt with concerning Mary. As suggested by one of the readers, it can be his further research and be his post-doctoral research.

The joy of witnessing this momentous event was palpable, and every participant openly acknowledged the caliber and significant contribution of Fr. Nepo. In a remarkable gesture of appreciation and recognition, one of the juries removed his own cap and crowned Fr. Nepo. This unprecedented act was a

first in the history of the Catholic University of Leuven, where a professor honored a student in such a unique fashion. Fr. Nepo not only broke records with the overflowing attendance in the hall but also received an exceptional honor from his own professors.

The event was marked by the performance of several Marian hymns composed by Fr. Nepo in the Flemish language. Regrettably, due to time constraints, he was unable to showcase his musical prowess by singing his compositions in his mother tongue, Tamil, which are not only simple but also soothing. In this manner, he not only emulated Montfort in his theological contributions but also in the art of composing and singing hymns accessible to the general public. Fr. Nepo, who routinely sings these hymns every Sunday to his parishioners, demonstrated himself to be a true Montfortian.

Fr. Nepo expressed heartfelt gratitude to everyone, leaving an emotional impact on the audience with his poignant words and gestures. His heartfelt appreciation moved people to tears. The event concluded on a joyful note, and all participants were invited to partake in a fellowship sharing of refreshments. The conclusion was marked by a sense of joy that left an indelible mark on the minds of all who attended this memorable event.

Fr. Alex SWAMY N., SMM