Fr. Frans Desmet, AA (Gwangju, Korea)

When, in the spring of 1990, Fr. Claude Maréchal, the superior general at the time, launched the initial appeal for volunteers to participate in the future foundation in Korea, I knew only two things about this country. First, there had been a war there between 1950 and 1953. The oldest of my cousins had fought as part of the Allied Forces. Every night at home my family would sit around the radio listening to the news from the war front. Second, of course, was the smashing success of the 1988 Summer Olympics held in Korea. That was it!

The Celebration



(from right to left: Fr. Desmet, founding father, Fr. Joseph Baik Ho, superior, Fr. Benoit Gschwind, provincial Bishop OK Simon, auxiliary of Gwangju, and Fr. Bernard Holzer, Superior General's delegate for Asia)

Now here it is 25 years since I arrived. We delayed the celebration date by a few months to accommodate as many guests as possible. Unfortunately, the current archbishop, Most Rev. Hygino Kim, president of the episcopal conference, was in Rome and could not attend; however, his auxiliary, Most Rev. OK Simon, participated together with two archbishops emeriti,

Most Revs. Victorino Youn and Andréa Choi, both of whom have been wonderful friends of the community. Also present, of course, were our provincial, Fr. Benoît Gschwind, and Fr. General's delegate for Asia, Fr. Bernard Holzer, accompanied by Br. Rex Navarro from Manila. We were also happy to welcome Fr. Pierre Nguyen Van Hieu of the community in Vinh (Vietnam) visiting Fr. Paul Hai, who works with Vietnamese immigrants in the diocese of Gwangju.

Our Oblate Sisters of the Assumption came out in force. They were the ones who not only invited us to Korea 25 years ago but also welcomed us with open arms. Needless to say, we have maintained close contact with them over the years. Our much appreciated lay friends pitched in as well --- preparing the liturgy, helping to clean the house, working in the kitchen, directing traffic, and welcoming guests.

At the conclusion of the Mass, presided by Bishop OK, it was time for a festive meal and entertainment. Later Br. Christophore Jeong showed a 15 minute montage recalling the highlights of the past 25 years and the superior, Fr. Joseph, read the letter sent by Fr. Benoit Griere, the Superior general. Then it was left to me, the "elder" of the community, to share my impressions of our presence in this land. After my remarks, in charming Korean style, three of the elders (me and the two archbishops) were presented with flowers by the youngest, some of the young handicapped that we care for in "Haraminé" House ».



Some Personal Reflections

Of course when I speak of being in a far off land, it is in relation to my own homeland, Belgium. First of all, it is important to be humble “when you live with others.”

The way to a man’s heart is through the stomach, it has been said. Well, Korea is no exception. Sharing food and drink is of capital importance. Besides, « Have you eaten? » (in Korean) is not a question asking for information, but rather a way of saying, “Hello!” (going back to a time when things were much tougher than they are today). The newly arrived must change his diet radically, get use to smells that can be quite surprising, try unaccustomed seasonings, try new fruits, and forget wine and cheese, not to mention my dear French fries and delicious Belgian Trappist beer!

Guests that we were, it was imperative that we respect the local culture and learn the language. Otherwise how would we ever discover this land where we had come, hopefully, to implant the Assumptionist charism? We had to learn about the political life, the economy, and social questions by reading papers and watching television if we didn’t want to remain isolated. We had to be tactful in our reactions for fear of hurting our hosts or revealing our own ignorance. When you’re a native, you may feel free to criticize, but foreigners must be careful – it’s an experience we have all had. Patience was key --- to listen, to watch, to wait, and often just to ‘waste time’ with natives to understand better the way of doing things, their reactions, and what interests them.

It meant getting involved with the local Church with all its many wonderful qualities but also its down sides. It’s good to ask questions, but not to condemn. I should be clear: even if a foreigner always remains a foreigner, a priest that comes from elsewhere and who is dedicated in his ministry is treated in a way that few others enjoy. I think the fact that foreign priests do not have the same formal, Confucian trappings makes it easier for Koreans to warm up to them. If you make a real effort to understand, to live, to eat, to do what you can in native fashion, Koreans will be quick to say, *« But you’ve really become Korean. It’s like it’s become your second home! »*

I have to admit that, even after 25 years, I can remain surprised and not at all understand things. But life goes on.

Final Words

Let me conclude with some of my remarks to our guests the evening of our formal celebration.

« Your excellencies, Rev. Fr. Provincial, Assumptionist brothers and sisters, priest friends, fellow religious, lay friends and collaborators,

Twenty-seven years ago I answered a call from the Superior general to become a founding member of the Assumptionist first community in this beautiful land of Korea. Yes, I was a volunteer. A little more than 25 years ago our plane landed on December 17, 1991, on the frozen runway of Kimpo airport. During these years we have not been spared our share of trials, problems, and the even the threat of closing the mission. However, the times of grace, courage, and joy have far surpassed these moments. That is why I can say with St. Paul the Apostle: « What have you not received? » (I Cor 4:7). I have received health, first of all. The founding brothers who were with me, Leo and Thierry, have both been affected by illness. I have received a new land and a new language, even if I sweated a lot to reach a decent level of mastery. I have received new brothers and sisters in the Assumption Family. Our community has always received help and encouragement right when it was needed. We have received affection and appreciation from many. The only word left for me to say now is one we often use in Korea: « Kamsahamnida = Thank you! » and I have nothing further to add. »