

FIFTH ANNIVERSARY OF ASSUMPTIONIST PRESENCE IN THE PHILIPPINES: AN INTERVIEW WITH THE DELEGATION'S SUPERIOR, REV. BERNARD HOLZER, A.A.

Question 1: Fr. Bernard, you recently celebrated the fifth anniversary of the Assumptionists' presence in the Philippines. Could you tell us a little about the celebration?

It was a really quite a simple celebration. We invited the entire Assumption Family present in Manila and Antipolo: the Religious of the Assumption who welcomed us here 5 years ago and whose help in getting us settled has been inestimable, sending us our first vocations, young men teaching in their schools…

- the Little Sisters of the Assumption, who have served as an example for us by their commitment to the poor;

- the Oblates of the Assumption who arrived in February 2010 and all the laypeople who have helped us and who collaborate with us, especially in our Assumption Language Center.

- the only ones missing were the Orants of the Assumption who arrived in the Philippines in January 2010, but who settled on an island in the central zone of the archipelago, in San Jose. They prayed and continue to pray for us.

It was a time of thanksgiving, of gratitude for all the graces and blessings we have received, for our benefactors, and of ardent prayer for vocations and for the future of our mission in the Philippines and Asia in general.



Question 2: From the beginning you have been the superior of the Assumptionists in this new mission. Could you give us a little bit of the history of the development of the mission?

We arrived in Manila on January 25, 2006, on the feast of the Conversion of St. Paul. And we had our work cut out for us! There were five of us: a Frenchman, a Canadian, a Congolese, and two Filipino brothers who had begun their formation in the United States.

During our first local chapter, with the help of our Superior general, Fr. Richard Lamoureux, we elaborated the major priorities of our mission: to build an international and inter-Asian community centered on Jesus Christ and to address the great needs of the local and continental Church.

The archbishop of Manila, Gaudencio Cardinal Rosales, in welcoming us, proposed three priorities to us: formation at all levels ---priests, religious, laypeople--- that they might move from a popular religiosity to a faith committed to the social realities of the country, commitment to the poor, and assistance to the Church of China.

During these first five years, we have begun to implement these priorities.

Very concretely, formation is the first of our priorities, especially vocation ministry. We have 17 young men in formation (and as many candidates) as well several priests for the Church in Asia. We participate, with other congregations, in various formation programs. Together with our international publishing house, we have begun to make magazines for young people and adults available.

We have tried to take seriously the needs of the nation's poor. Such was the case at the time of the terrible typhoons of 2009: we helped families put a roof over their heads and we continue to offer scholarships to young people in hard-hit areas so that they can pursue their studies, the only doorway to stable employment and exit from misery. For a few months we have had a foothold in one of the slums of our neighborhood: we offer young people a place to do their homework and children an opportunity to experience the joy of reading and group activities. This summer we have organized camps for them to discover nature and to learn lessons of responsibility.

Finally, we have established a Language Center (Assumption Language Center) in order to teach English to seminarians, religious and priests of Asia, especially China. This center is a space where one can discover different cultures and different ways of living one's faith, thus building peace on a wounded continent.

We also have a residence where we welcome Asians who wish to experience community life and discern a vocation to religious life.

We accomplish this work with the help of lay volunteers, who bring to us their competence and enthusiasm.

Question 3: You have had a longstanding interest in the Far East. Could you explain to us the origin of this interest?

As a youngster, I was always taken up with the Far East, by the accounts of adventurers and

missionaries who gave their life there, by its cultures and thousand-year-old religions, by its being so exotic and mysterious, but also by its exuberance and the beauty of nature in this part of the world.

While I was in minor seminary, I lived with the Assumptionists, who were expelled from China by the Communists: they had learned the language, discovered Chinese culture, and told us fascinating stories.

Later, as Secretary general of the Catholic Committee against Hunger and for Development, an organism of the French episcopal conference (Comité Catholique contre la Faim et le Développement), I had quite a few opportunities to visit countries there: Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, the Philippines, China… It was like a lightning bolt. I came to see that something extremely important was taking place in this part of the world and that it would dramatically change the shape of the world and the Church.

As assistant general of the Assumptionists from 1993 to 2005, I was given responsibility for Asia and therefore for our foundation in the Philippines. It was entirely normal for me, then, at the end of my twelve years of service to the congregation in Rome to volunteer for the new foundation in the Philippines.

Question 4: From the very beginning, the Assumptionist presence has been international. As a matter of fact, every one of the communities in the Philippines is international. How has this international character affected the life and growth of the Assumption in the Philippines?

In the context of globalization, the international character of a congregation attracts young people. It’s an opportunity --- not to say a challenge –to learn how to live with brothers from other cultures and to discover new ways of living, of believing and of seeing the world. It’s a requirement for us Assumptionists who wish to be “men of faith and men of our time.” It means learning new languages and new attitudes. It presupposes a listening spirit, the desire to learn, and self-esteem.


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