



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.



Question 5: Given your experience over the past five years, what do you see as the major challenges facing you at this moment?

Our number one challenge is the lack of formators and especially formators with experience in international communities, trained in how to transmit the charism in a culture different than their own. It takes time, patience and humility to learn, to get inculturated into, to understand and appreciate another culture. It takes time to re-orient one's life, taking into account the riches and weaknesses of new cultures one encounters. It takes time to understand the behavior of young people in formation, young people of their time, of their culture, and the culture imposed by the media and globalization.

One of the greatest forms of asceticism for me takes place in the arena of interpersonal relations, in cultures where authority and seniority are overvalued and where it is difficult to become brothers and disciples of Jesus Christ.

Another challenge is that of finances. While vocations in the west are becoming rare, here in the East they are still numerous. But we can't accommodate all the requests because we don't have enough money to take care of the room and board, the accompaniment and education of young people coming from poor families who can't support them. And the formation of a religious and a priest is long.



Question 6: The Assumptionists continue to attract vocations in the Philippines. What is it that continues to draw young men to the congregation?

What attracts young people is community life, prayer, a commitment to extending the Kingdom of God, solidarity with the poor. It's also a life where we pay a lot of attention to people, to their development, to a personalized formation which responds at one and the same time to the needs of the individual and those of the Congregation. That is why it's important to have examples of religious involved in mission-driven apostolates who can serve to concretize the Congregation's vision in the areas of formation work, outreach to the poor, and openness to the Asian continent. Finally, there is the fraternal life lived in a family style, at the service of the Church and society, with a strong sense of spirituality and identity which allow one to live peacefully in a world which is being built every day.



Question 7: Finally, in May the Assumptionists will hold a general chapter to discuss the future direction of the Assumptionists throughout the world. With regard to Assumption in Asia, what are some of your hopes for this meeting?

Our expectations are great. In fact, we would like the Congregation to continue giving priority status to Asia in its apostolic directives and to vote to reinforce our presence here in order that we might welcome even more young people and train them. We collaborate with our sisters in the Assumption Family who are firmly installed as well in this continent. At present we are in South Korea, Vietnam, and the Philippines. In our communities we have begun to welcome the first brothers from China and India. Young people from other Asian countries are also knocking on our doors. How are we to welcome them boldly, inventing new models of organization, with lay-people who are convinced that the future of the world and of the Church is at play, in large part, on this continent which is experiencing unparalleled and rapid transformation? Asia is a priority of the Holy Father, especially China for which he prays every day. How shall we succeed in moving from the lands of our traditional apostolic commitments to these new mission lands full of such promise? Here is a crucial challenge facing the upcoming general chapter. May the Spirit of the Lord inspire us and guide, the Spirit of wisdom and of fire!