

Introduction

1. What are the reasons which are pressing our Congregation to found in Asia today when so many of our traditional works are in need of renewed commitment? One reason emerges as fundamental: the mission is urgent.

When it spoke of a foundation in Korea, the General Chapter of 1993 cited four reasons that made such a decision desirable:

a) The Church has recognized something original in the Assumptionist charism. It is a gift that God makes to the local Church to which we belong.

b) Asia, where millions of men and women live, has a right to the Word of God. Messengers and witnesses of the Gospel are indispensable. Our mission in Manchuria was an initial response to this need.

c) Assumption can never become fully herself without taking root in many cultures different than those in which she was born and in which she now exists. This transplantation is indispensable for her to deepen her identity.

d) Young people are waiting for us. The Oblates of the Assumption have already gone before us. Bishops are inviting us.

I. Where others have gone

2. In fact, Asia is not completely virgin territory for us. The first Assumptionist experience in the Far East goes back to 1935 in China where we got involved in formation work. Assumption was entrusted with responsibility for the major seminary of Hsinking in Manchuria, which we oversaw from 1940 to 1946. When the Communists took power, our religious were forced to leave the country definitively ten years later. Other appeals from Asia at the beginning of the last century, which never materialized, also came our way. Let us cite one from a missionary priest in Korea, Fr. Charles Bouillon, who asked the superior general of the time to take responsibility for schools “at every level: primary, secondary, and college.”

3. The women’s branches of the Assumption Family have taken root throughout Asia. Already at the time of their foundress, Mother Marie-Eugénie de Jésus, the Religious of the Assumption founded a mission in the Philippines. Not only have the religious there become an autonomous province, they have founded elsewhere: in Japan, Thailand, Vietnam and the United States. Known particularly for their involvement in the world of education, the RAs gradually established schools in wealthy and then poorer areas. Their educational philosophy has had an impact on the entire Filipino public school system.

The Oblates of the Assumption founded in Korea in 1985 after a Korean, Paulina Shim, decided to become a religious while she was studying in Europe. In 1987 the Oblate community in Korea included two Frenchwomen, one Italian, three professed Koreans, four postulants and three candidates. Today Korea has become a vice-province. As is the case in the Philippines today, it was our sisters in Korea who directed young men toward Assumptionist religious life.

The Little Sisters of the Assumption arrived in the Philippines in 2001 where they are involved in social work in a poor neighborhood of Manila.

4. We decided to found in Korea during the Congregation Council in 1990 in Santiago (Chile). Four provinces answered the call and a first assumptionist community is decided in 1991. It was officially missioned on December 8, 1991. Although the site of this initial foundation in Asia may have been determined because young men were knocking on the door, it was, in the end, an answer to the intuition of several chapters.

The first community counted three members: Frs. Frans Desmet (South Belgium), Leo Brassard (North America), and Thierry Cocquerez (France). It depended directly on the Superior General as a vicariate. After a period of time dedicated to learning the language in Seoul, these three religious settled in the diocese of Kwangju, where they continued their language studies and engaged in the spiritual direction of our Oblate Sisters. After an initial stay in New Zealand, the first two candidates, Kim John and Han Thomas, began their formation in the United States in September 1990. Other candidates followed. When the Assumptionists made it known that they, too, in conformity with the norms in force for the Church of Korea, would require taking the qualifying exam for entrance into major seminary studies, the news took the wind out the sails of these young men who had hoped to find a much less demanding path to the priesthood. The disappointment was total; they all left. We had to await the arrival of Joseph Baik Ho for the slightest hope to take rebirth. In December, 1998, after much hard work, he passed the qualifying exam. Unfortunately, at the same time, Fr. Thierry Cocquerez, asked to return home. In spite of diverse trials and the reversal of early dreams, the community re-expressed its desire to move ahead. Their knowledge of the language allowed them to take charge of a rural parish while vocation ministry remained a priority. The Oblate Sisters provided ongoing support to assert our presence.

Several decisions allowed the community to get restarted. During the Congregation Council in 2000, the vicariate was suppressed and a consortium of three provinces, South Belgium, Spain and France was created. France took primary responsibility to animate the community. In the meantime, Joseph Baik Ho made his novitiate in France in 2001. After maintaining this responsibility for three years, the Province of France accepted complete responsibility for the community of Korea, which became an official part of the province. In 2003, after having left the rural parish of Haktari, it was decided to found a more permanent community in the city of Kwangju. It was likewise decided to build a house large enough to welcome young people with an interest in religious life and to permit a spiritual life. This plan was concretized at the end of 2004. Also, the same year, a young postulant, Francisco Ha Il Ho, entered the community.

II. An Assumptionist renewed adventure

5. In 1995, a young Vietnamese, François-Xavier Nguyen Tien Dung, was sent to France by the bishop of Vinh, a diocese in the northern part of Vietnam, to undertake theological studies. François-Xavier had discerned his vocation while he lived in a student center in Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon), directed by a Franciscan priest, Fr. Jean-Bosco Nguyen Van Dinh. Having arrived in France by means of the Association of Children of the Mekong, he was placed in a new community organized by Fr. Daniel Ange. When this experience failed, François-Xavier found refuge in our community ('maison d'accueil') at Cachan in 1997. While he was there, he began to consider AA religious life and soon thereafter to encourage other young Vietnamese to join. After an initial contact with Church authorities in Vietnam, the Province of France accepted to welcome ten young men for vocational discernment and university studies in theology. During the Council of the Congregation of 2000, the congregation decided to welcome Vietnamese candidates as one of its six prophetic gestures. Today, 25 young Vietnamese are in formation in France and in England, of whom 10 are religious. A second

source of these vocations has been our parish in Moscow, from which four young men have come.

In 2001 the Province of France purchased a house in Ho Chi Minh City, which became one of the four student vocational centers overseen by Fr. Jean-Bosco. The province is also about to buy another property that would house the first foundation foreseen in 2006. The community would be composed primarily of Vietnamese, since foreigners have a very hard time obtaining visas for lengthy stays. The plans for this foundation include several possibilities:

- vocation and formation, especially taking gradual responsibility for the work Fr. Jean-Bosco has been doing and initiating post-novitiate formation in theological formation centers on site;
- social work, in response to an appeal from the cardinal of Ho Chi Minh City to address “social ills” (abandoned children, drugs, illiteracy, prostitution, etc.);
- understanding of the faith, in response to an appeal by the Church of Vietnam to form lay leaders; there is also an expressed desire for the translation of works of theology and spirituality into Vietnamese; if possible, we may be present in superior education and the media.
- missionary work in conformity with the demands of our Assumptionist charism, with a special priority to be given to the overall plan of Assumption in Asia.

Our welcome of young Vietnamese men has also awakened a missionary interest in the Oblates and the Little Sisters. The former have already accepted two Vietnamese aspirants and the latter will do so this year.

6. With regard to the Philippines, the Province of North America has responded to an interest in AA religious life on the part of young men, the first group of whom came to know the congregation through the RAs. Most of those young people are associated to the educational plan of the Religious indifferent schools. In 2005, there are ten such men, of whom one is Vietnamese who are welcomed for a formation in the USA. Four of them have taken vows.

The plan to found a community in Manila in 2006 depends on the availability of four religious from various provinces. The first stage of the project foresees a brief orientation period in the United States for these four ‘founders,’ as well as an initial community experience. The second stage would consist in a period of inculturation in the Philippines, learning about the local Church, and study of Filipino. It would also include accompanying candidates interested in religious life and examining various fields of possible apostolic involvement. The third stage would be marked by the arrival of young Filipinos currently in formation in the United States for further formation and pastoral experience. After an initial period of formation in the Philippines, it is foreseen that most candidates would eventually spend some time in the United States to improve their English skills and general academic formation and to enjoy an international experience.

Local Church needs in the Philippines, center on formation and education. One concrete possibility would be responsibility for campus ministry in an enormous university belt in Manila. Some involvement in social work is also taken into account in the initial plan.

III. Towards new prospects

7. Other venues in Asia may also be opening. First of all in China, which was already the object of AA missionary ventures. The Province of France has just welcomed five young Chinese, three of whom are priests, for theological formation and for an experience of apostolic religious life. They came via the community in Moscow, because the capital of Russia remains a vital center for Asia. Two Chinese seminarians are currently in residence there before they come to France in September 2005. Thus, the Province is responding to an appeal by Chinese bishops to

prepare clergy for the rapid evolution which economic development may have a considerable impact on social life, and so on pastoral ministry adapted to such change.

Elsewhere, in October 2004, Frs. John Franck, provincial of North America, and Tom O'Brien, a religious of the English region, spent time with the RAs in India, to get a picture of the situation of the country. There, also, the local Church is ready to welcome us. It goes without saying, with regard to these last two countries. That is too soon to speak of any kind of a foundation, but we can still speak of a gradual awakening. Who knows what the Spirit has in store for us in the years ahead?

IV. A Response to the Call of the Spirit and of the Church

- 8.** Asia is the largest continent on the face of the earth. It encompasses two-thirds of the world's population, China and India alone accounting for nearly half of the entire population of the globe. Moreover, Asia forms a complex mosaic of cultures, languages, beliefs and very ancient traditions which constitute a substantial part of the history and heritage of the human family. The peoples of Asia recognize themselves principally in religious and cultural values, such as the love of silence and contemplation, simplicity, harmony, detachment, non-violence, hard work, discipline, a frugal life, the thirst for knowledge and for philosophical research. They show great respect for the values of respect for life, compassion towards all people, respect for nature, filial duty towards one's parents, one's ancestors, and one's elders, and they have a highly developed sense of community.

But it is also the continent that the Gospel message has penetrated the least. The Church, however, is convinced that deep within the people, the cultures and the religions of Asia there is felt a desire for "living water" (Jn 4:10-15).

Also, speaking to the young Vietnamese in formation in the Province of France who had gathered at Valpré in February, 2004, Fr. Richard Lamoureux, Superior General, summarized Assumption's ambition in Asia by underlining the role of mission as a response to Christ's call, "Go and make disciples of all nations." (Mt 28:16).

- 9.** The Spirit has given us a spiritual heritage that we must share. Our love of the truth and of unity, the witness of our fraternal life in community, are so many answers to the urgent needs of our world. By our fraternal life in community we strive to live in Christ with "one mind and one heart" (Acts 4:32). Inserted into societies which have been recently shaped by globalization, but also often deeply affected by violence, our international communities, where brothers of many ages, languages, and cultures live together, bear witness to unity in Christ and stand as signs of an ever-possible dialogue and of a communion capable of harmonizing all differences.

With a humility consistent with our religious condition, we must dare to ask the following questions, "What would Asia be without Assumption? And what would Assumption be without Asia?"

- 10.** The Assumptionist charism to work for the unity of all Christians leads Assumption naturally to be open to interreligious dialogue. Asia is the cradle of the world's great religions: Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Hinduism. It is also the cradle of many other spiritual traditions such as Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Zoroastrianism, Jainism, Sikhism, and Shintoism. Besides, there are millions of others who adhere to traditional or tribal religions.
- 11.** In Asia there are also millions of individuals who have been oppressed and left on the margins of society for centuries economically, culturally and politically. The status of women leaves them in a worrisome state of inferiority. Moreover, there are millions of native peoples across Asia who live in social, cultural and political isolation in relation to the larger society. The apostolic opportunities open to Assumption are immense.

Conclusion

12. The gene of catholicity---- more than the vicissitudes of History---- has pushed the Augustinians of the Assumption towards universality. In certain provinces our communities and our works are becoming more and more international. With our modest means and in spite of repeated failures, the masculine branch of Assumption reveals today the different stages of mission: maturity, even aging, in Europe and in North America; youth in Latin America; adolescence in Africa; and birth in Asia.

It remains for us to entrust the Assumptionist mission in Asia to Mary, Our Lady of the Assumption. May her response in faith to the Spirit become our own: "May everything which happens to and for us in Asia be done according to your Word."