

Portrait of an Italian missionary in Korea

Interview: Fr Maurizio has worked for 25 years with the poor and marginalized in the divided peninsula



Fr Maurizio – he prefers not to use his full name – has spent 21 years as a missionary in South Korea. He studied physics at the University of Messina in Sicily before moving to Marino near Rome to work in a youth center at the Missionari Oblati di Maria Immacolata.

In 1985 he took his vows and then spent the next five years studying theology and philosophy at the Lateran University before making his first mission trip to Paraguay in 1989.

Cristian Martini Grimaldi interviewed Fr Maurizio for ucanews.com in August just prior to the visit by Pope Francis. He spoke about his past, his work as a missionary and the future of the Church in South Korea.

Ours is a missionary congregation. There is always an internship abroad before leaving for a long mission. I spent a year among the Guaraní of Paraguay,” he says of his first mission trip.

Yes, but in the movie it’s all more spectacular. They were living in a forest on the border with Brazil near the Iguazu waterfalls. Today, the Guaraní live on a practically deserted land, a large dried-up lake, not very welcoming. This mission marked me a lot. Field experience is important. It is there that my vocation was strengthened.

You were ordained in 1991 and then moved to Korea – a big jump from Latin America.

When I finished school, John Paul II wrote *Redemptoris missio*, where he appealed to all the missionaries to go to Asia. It was very moving. It was then that I wrote a letter to my father-general, saying that if there was a need I was willing to go to the East. Luckily the mission to Korea had just been created. I arrived in the middle of winter, freezing cold. It was 1993.

How did you settle in?

I immediately studied the language, for a couple of years. Then I began to follow the footsteps of Father Giovanni, another Italian missionary who has worked here for many years and is now working in China. He's operated mostly with immigrants since 1995, meaning all those workers in small factories that do business for the big companies like Samsung and Hyundai.

The majority are Filipinos, but also some from Bangladesh and China. The bulk reached South Korea after the financial crisis of 1997, and that's when the problems exploded. Father Giovanni went to the bus terminal, where all those immigrants gathered in the evening. He talked to them, he showed interested in their problems. Often they did not receive a just wage, or the contracts were not fulfilled.

Especially in the small factories, the exploitation ran very high. On top of that almost all of these foreigners had communication problems. They did not know the language. I now continue the work that Father Giovanni had started. The situation today has changed slightly. In some ways it has even improved. The workers certainly have more rights today than twenty years ago. But there are other problems.

For example?

I work in another field, that of mixed marriages. Filipina women, Vietnamese, Cambodians that marry Korean men. There are agencies that 'scout' for wives. But in fact, it is an actual purchase.

How does this work?

There are many Korean middle-aged men who fail to find a Korean wife, and for various reasons. It may be a matter of social status, which in Korea is still very important; or maybe this person has mental or physical problems, or he comes from a previous marriage that ended up in failure – a factor that still weighs on the image of a man in Korea.

And a Korean woman is more demanding than a Filipina. At that point, the best solution is offered by these agencies. They look for women in developing countries who often may come from remote villages, may be almost illiterate, and so to speak, don't have much expectations.

What incentive do these women have in marrying a man with whom they share neither the language nor the culture?

First of all, there is a lot of money at stake. These are mostly women who come from very poor families, and marrying a Korean for them means to get out of a troubled economic and social situation.

The marriage represents an economic benefit for the whole family of the woman. And this is also the reason why these types of marriages, which are not based on solid foundations, don't last long.

What are the most common complications?

There is a culture and language difference between the couple. But often the reason is behind the motive that led to the formation of that union. A man that goes to these agencies to look for a wife, he often does it for reasons of loneliness, because maybe he needs someone to keep the house clean, or just to cook for him. And then there is the money. Finding a wife with this system can cost from 10 to 20 million won, or US\$20,000.

Imagine what happens if the wife tries to rebel against the husband if she is treated badly. The typical reaction of the man is: with all that you cost me you even dare to contradict me? Of course there are happy couples too, but these are the most common problems.

In that way your work can help these foreign women?

When a girl comes to me, it means that she has already run away from the husband. And this can be a big problem. If the union did not last at least for two years, the husband can go to the immigration office and report her. At this time the girl, though still officially his wife, becomes illegal, an illegal in all respects, and when traced and caught these women are sent to detention centers, which are just like prisons.

I was personally following a case of a Peruvian girl whose husband beat her constantly. I was involved in doing the translation for the cause of divorce. The husband did not want to concede it. The couple had already two teenagers. I said to myself, I am a priest who blesses the couples till death do they part, and here I find myself having to participate in a divorce case? But unfortunately this is the reality. We cannot close our eyes, we must face the real problems of the people. Pope Francis reminds us often, life has to be taken as it comes, not as we would like it to be.

About the pope. You will also be the interpreter for the initial greetings of the Korean bishops to the pope this August 14.

I would be happy if the visit of Pope Francis helped the Korean church to become more real and profound. Success cannot be reduced to a mere matter of religious numbers, and the numbers are always what we hear talked about more often, unfortunately. The Korean Church needs to go through a deeper inculturation of the faith.

It seems to me that in some respects the Christian life in Korea is just like a picture frame. Most Koreans remain Confucian inside and even Buddhist. Many of the baptized did not have an appropriate catechesis. Here we talk too much about the external structure of the Christian precepts that have to be followed. The ritual is the main concern."

The pope wants a church for the poor ... (here Maurizio interrupts)

And unfortunately, the Korean Church gives the impression of being a rich church for the rich. I'll give

you an example. If there are believers who fail to pay their tithe (which corresponds to a portion of their salary) every month to the parish, then they prefer to leave the church rather than continue to attend Mass and experiencing the 'shame' of being non-compliant.

Because the context is what matters here, that is, a context of an upper-middle class people. If you go to church in Korea you realize that people are all dressed up, with expensive clothes. This causes a strong social pressure ... and the person who cannot afford nice clothes just won't go to church.

Their presence in the church is reduced to a minimum now. There are parishes that have only 10 percent attendance. The pope is saying that he wants a poor Church for the poor, meaning he emphasizes that we need to be re-evangelized by the poor, by their suffering and by their difficulties.

The interview ends when Fr Maurizio says he must leave to accompany a Philippine woman who is undergoing chemotherapy for breast cancer.

They have already removed most of the tumor, but doctors think that it has already spread to other organs. If it were not for the Catholic hospital that recruits many volunteers now she could no longer be among us. The Korean Church can be rich, but it is also very generous. The problem now is to find a hospital with chemotherapies that are not too expensive. If she went back to the Philippines she would have no chance of survival. But even here it will be tough.

See for me, what matters is to be close to these people. It is not so much about solving the problem for the foreign workers, but it is essential that these people feel the presence of someone who is on their side. If I look at the results I can honestly say that I do not have many, but I am satisfied if I know that they feel that they have been loved. These people need two things most of all: love and companionship.

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