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Wishing to follow Jesus, I entered the diocesan seminary of Viterbo, but the more I continued with theological studies, the more I perceived that there was another way for me: to announce the love of the Lord to the poor in countries where He was unknown. When I discovered the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate and their charism, "Announcing the Gospel to the poor," I decided to join this congregation and dedicate my whole life to the poor.

So, in 1990 I arrived in Korea. I arrived in this country with Fr. Mauro Concardi, and in search of a possible way of manifesting our charism, we went to the local bishop to put ourselves at his disposal for the evangelization of those most in need. After the bishop cordially welcomed us and exposed all the magnificence of the Korean church to us, he candidly said: "But there are no poor here. Our nation is rich and wealthy and the Church is overflowing with local clergy." Upon hearing those words, to say the least we were stunned and dismayed. So, what to do? Return to Italy? Or seek new horizons? With tenacity and discernment, we put ourselves back on track and listened to those who could help us. We went to visit old missionaries who had spent their entire lives in Korea: Mariknolls, Columbans, Guadalupes, MEP, Marianist...and they all indicated that there were many pockets of poverty. With the help of a Korean priest, Don Pedro Bae, I discovered that there was a city with great problems of marginalization. So, in 1992 I arrived in Seong Nam City, a metropolis of one million inhabitants right on the outskirts of Seoul, the capital. I started to visit poor families in the slums of the city with the help of a Korean nun, Sister Mariengel. I remember that in one of these visits, I entered a basement where an elderly man lived alone, paralyzed. The stench of that small, semi-lit room was sickening. This poor handicapped man told me his story: As a young man, an accident at work left him without his lower limbs. Having no one and very-limited economic possibilities, his suffering began. At first, the people from the neighborhood did their best to help him, but as the years went by the neighbors began to forget about him. He only ate when someone remembered to bring him something. He spent every day alone and all his physiological needs were left in that whirlwind. In that semi-lit, dirty, smelly room full of useless junk, I listened to him for two hours. I tried to put some things in order and prepared some food. Before leaving, I approached to embrace him and in that moment, a strong and pungent smell of urine and dirt caused a strong impulse to vomit. In that deep and interminable instant, I heard a voice say to me: "Do not be afraid, it is I." From that moment, rooted in that huge inspiration, my adventure began alongside the poor and with the lowest of society.

In 1993, with the help of a nearby parish, we began a soup kitchen for the poor and lonely elderly called the 'House of Peace.' At the beginning we only offered about 200 hot meals, but after talking and listening to these poor old people we realized that there were many who could not read nor write. (The official statistics said that there were no illiterates in Korea)! So, we also started a series of lectures and a course in therapeutic dance.

In the afternoon I continued to visit slum families and I realized that many young people from that neighborhood, even though they wanted to study for economic reasons, they did not have the opportunity to do so. So, in 1994 with the help of about 40 university volunteer students, we started an after-school program called 'Sharing' for all those poor kids who lived in that neighborhood, not only to study, but also to play sports, listen

to music, to join film clubs and much more. It was practically a small youth center to help these young people in their human and academic growth. There were about 70 young people involved in this project. In 1998 a very serious economic crisis hit the Far East. In Korea, from one day to the next, thousands and thousands of people found themselves on the street without a job and without a salary to support their family.

Given this new and most urgent plea that challenged our spirits, we started 'Anna's House' with the help of some lay people who were so generous and good. We began as an evening soup kitchen in a small, old, abandoned and poorly stocked warehouse that the nearby parish had kindly made available to us. We only offered 80 meals, three times a week. Upon hearing their needs, we extended to four, then five, and finally six evening meals a week. In the meantime, a doctor with his team made himself available to run a free clinic, then a lawyer came to help and so on. Now, Anna's House offers 550 meals a day, and in addition, offers shower services, haircuts and distributes clothes, responding to the basic needs of those who live on the street. On the second floor, we have the lawyer's office offering legal advice, the outpatient clinic, alcohol addiction coaching, work orientation and a school of formation. On the third floor, there is a dormitory that houses 30 homeless people and on the fourth floor, we have a small factory that employs about 10 people from the street. Our project is not only to solve the immediate problems of those who live on the street, eating, sleeping, hygiene, etc., but also to help them with different services to start a new life and to accompany them in the first steps of this new beginning. By accompanying these friends on their journey of human development, we set up a course of art therapy, sports therapy, agricultural therapy and music therapy. Here a homeless choir was formed and even performs at public events. Collaborating with the nearby parish, I was also in charge of the Sunday morning mass at 6 a.m. At that time, I got up at 2:30 a.m. and left with my backpack full of sandwiches and bags of milk and went to visit my friends on the street, offering them something to eat and a small chat. On one of these night trips, I came across three teenage boys. I was shocked. For the first time I realized that in Korea there was also the phenomenon of street children. I invited those young teenagers to the soup kitchen and, little by little, a great friendship was born. It was then that I realized that it was not enough to only offer them food but it was necessary to offer them a safe place to rest, get help and, through accompanying them, guide them back to their families or into society. So, in 1998 we opened our first shelter for street children. Due to an increase in the number of children, we opened a second, then a third and a fourth. Now our program for street children is divided into 3 stages: First, the 'Purumi shelter' is the welcome center for children coming off the street. Here, with a series of therapeutic programs, we want to help the child to

reconnect with a familiar home environment. If this is not possible and they wish to continue their studies, we have two different houses for those studying: one house for adults and one for children. All of them go to school or to a vocational program to learn a trade. Finally, for those who cannot return to their family or do not want to study but would like to enter the workforce, we have a fourth house where these young friends live. Our program for young people is organized as a network: return to the family, go to school or enter the workplace.

In recent years, we have become aware that in the city there are still many, too many, young people who live on the street and are not reached by institutions. Knowing this, we started the 'AJIT' movement. It is a bus that leaves four times a week at night from 6 p.m. to midnight to meet the children who live on the street and who refuse to be institutionalized.

Seeing all this vivacity and creativity with regard to the plight of the poor, in 2014 they awarded me the 'Ho Am Sang' Prize (also known as the Korean Nobel Prize) for my service in the community, which was established by the conglomerate, Samsung. The thing that surprised me the most was the fact that Samsung, which is a very powerful and rich secular Korean multinational, had awarded this prestigious award to a foreigner, a Catholic priest who cared for the poor, which is the exact opposite of what Samsung itself represents: Koreanism, secularism and wealth. This made me reflect a lot. The evangelical values that I had tried to live and communicate to this society for all these years had been recognized, appreciated and rewarded. In other words, they told me: "the love, hospitality, solidarity, attention to the needy, free service, sharing... which you practice in your own life, we recognize as our own, and, rewarding, make our own with the hope that others will live these universal values". Evangelical I say.

In 1993, I wore the apron for the first time and, at 28-years-old, I still wear it every day from 1:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m. during my daily service at the soup kitchen as an assistant cook, not even a cook. I realize that as a priest, I ministered few sacraments, few baptisms and weddings, but I washed many dishes, cleaned many toilets and served many poor people. In 2015, when a special presidential decree presented me with a Korean passport (Koreans cannot have a double passport), the Minister of International Affairs told me: "Kim Ha Jong ('Ha Jong' means: servant of God)"—this is the Korean name I had chosen from the start—"you, honoring your name, have taught us to serve the poor and showed us a beautiful face of God." In saying this, he handed over my new Korean passport. That occasion was also a moment of joy and satisfaction; the great teachings of Jesus had struck and generated admiration in this secular and non-Christian society.

In 2018, after a twenty-year contract, the lease of the building we were using was unavoidably due to expire. Even reluctantly and with much pain in our souls, this magnificent twenty-year experience of service to the poor and needy was closing. We didn't have a place to go, they didn't have the money to build another one (4 million euro) and, at that time, my personal health wasn't well. After so many conflicts, wounds, and fears, I knelt before the Blessed Sacrament on the evening of September 9th, 2016 and prayed: "Lord, you know me, you know that I wish to continue to live alongside the poor, to serve them, and to love them, because in

them I see the wounds of the Risen Lord. Those brothers and sisters whom I meet every day at the table are not disowned but are the 'glorious wounds' of the Risen Jesus. I desire, as I have done for all these years, to continue to welcome, bind, love and kiss these bloody and glorious wounds of Your Son in our midst. Help me. You know I don't have money, I'm not well and I don't even have enough experience for such an undertaking. I only trust you. In these long years you have always accompanied me, defended me and helped me, continue to do so, even now. Amen."

From that moment on, a series of miracles happened. Wasn't there any land? Suddenly the restrictions on the big field in front of us were removed, and for that space, the city offered us 500mp towards the construction of the new headquarters (a total cost of 4 million euro). Didn't we have the money? A national broadcaster made a program about us and in a month, we raised 1.5 million euro. The bishop of the diocese wanted to contribute to this work and donated 1 million euro to us. A chain reaction of charity began and in less than two years, we managed to build the new headquarters (five floors for a total of 1,300mp). I have many good memories from that time. Among the various expressions of solidarity, I want to mention in particular one of an elderly lady. This woman came to visit me and said: "I'm alone. I didn't get married. I spent my whole life working as a maid or as an attendant in restaurants. This allowed me to get by in life with dignity but I could not put aside any savings. I too wanted to contribute to the construction of this center, but I had no savings set aside. So, I opened the drawer of my bedside table, I took all the earrings, necklaces and gold bracelets that I had and I sold them. Now I am old and I do not need this jewelry anymore and I got this amount. Take it and use it for the poor." With tears in my eyes I embraced her and accepted the envelope.

In this long journey with the poor, I learned a lot from them. They taught me that life is always a gift, even in misery and in contradiction. I have seen many suicides among the rich but I have never seen a suicide among the poor. 'Life is a precious gift' they have always told me. They also taught me that suffering is not a punishment from God but an opportunity for human and spiritual growth. Once you experience pain, you are no longer the same; either you become better, purified by it or you get angry and beat yourself up more. Finally, the poor have helped me to discover a different face of God, a new and more authentic Presence. Yes, in this long life, 28 years are not many, alongside the poor and with the poor, I met God. God is Love and I bear witness to this.

p. Kim Ha Jong Vincenzo