Columns
Religious Life



On the evening of the Full Moon festival, candidates at the community house spent the evening singing and dancing with joy. (Sophia Park)



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Since the era of early Christianity, we can see that the essence of our faith has been a mission spirit, which has been moving freely and creating new communities everywhere. The beauty of these communities lies in their intercultural and hybrid identity, one which is based on Gospel values.

In the Acts of the Apostles, we read about many border crossings in terms of cultural and religious practices, finding new ways through dialogue and discernment in prayer. For example, at the Jerusalem Council, the early church decided not to require gentile Christians to be circumcised or to adhere to Jewish dietary laws (Acts 15).

I found an example of such a hybrid and intercultural community, composed of Korean and Vietnamese sisters in Vietnam. While teaching my course, "Human Sexuality and Spirituality," at the St. Joseph Jesuit Scholasticate in Saigon in 2023, among the very few women students in my classroom, I met Sr. Nguyen Gian. Seeing a sister in her habit, sitting with a bunch of religious men was itself a great joy. But even more so, to my surprise, she greeted me in Korean, "Hello, sister. □□□□ , □□ .” It was beyond anything I could have expected!

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Sr. Nguyen was a member of the Handmaids of the Sacred Heart of Jesus at Pohang, which is a prosperous community in Korea. Pohang sits in the Gyeongsang province, in the southeast of South Korea. This community, named after the Korean city, suggests that it was founded to specifically serve that geographical area. Still, by the nature of the Gospel and mission, they founded various local communities in many other countries such as Thailand, the Philippines, Bolivia, Nepal and Taiwan, as well as Vietnam. The community's founder, Fr. Louis Deslandes, was a member of the Missions Étrangères de Paris (Paris Foreign Missions) who was sent to Korea in the 1930s, during the period of Japanese occupation.

In 1935, Deslandes founded a community called the House of Three Virtues, which was the first convent of the Handmaids of the Sacred Heart of Jesus at Pohang. There, they took care of orphans and the poor. However, the founder's spirit of mission, which had originally brought him to Korea from France, never stopped.

In 2011, the congregation founded a community in Vietnam to serve the poor and the sick. Now, those sisters work as social workers and continue to care for the poor. The sisters stress that one needs to maintain a simple life in order to serve the poor, and as long as they keep their charism to serve the poor and find joy in a simple life, they are united as sisters in the charism. I feel that the spirit of the mission, which began in Paris, still moves toward the global church and the poor.

The beauty of this community in Ho Chi Minh City manifests a deep sense of joy in living in two cultures that are fused, thereby creating a third culture that pursues intercultural sisterhood.



Novices wash dishes together after lunch. (Sophia Park)

When I first went to the novitiate, which is located at the fringes of Ho Chi Minh City, it was around noon. On arriving, I immediately felt a vigor and joy among the sisters. At the lunch table, I found sisters praying in both Korean and Vietnamese. The combination of the two languages flowed seamlessly, almost sounding like a new language, or like singing a new song to the Lord. Thirteen novices and a few temporary-vowed sisters lived together, farming and raising chickens.

Some hybrid communities were also created by recruiting Vietnamese women to Korea. Yet, it is rare to have the capacity to form a genuine hybrid community where two cultures actually forge a new identity, without one having dominion over the other and while maintaining each culture's characteristics. The novice director in Vietnam, Sr. Eunsuk Park from Korea, seemed dedicated to implanting mutual respect between two different cultures in quite a gentle manner. This community has become a great example of intercultural living and, as such, their vocations are increasing. The community has 23 perpetually vowed sisters, 29 temporary-vowed sisters and 30 candidates.

During the formation process, some sisters spend years in Korea during their novitiate. They each struggled in navigating cultural differences and creating a sense of unity in charism. Sr. Nguyen, who spent five years in Korea, said, "It was difficult to understand cultural differences at first when I lived in Pohang, and I had conflicts with the Korean novices. However, my novice director told us we should argue, and even fight, until we reached a common agreement." When she shared many of the struggles of living in Korea, she smiled and said, “Even in the almost daily struggle, I felt great love for the Korean sisters."



Sr. Nguyen Giang, the director of candidates, left, and Sr. Eun Suk Park, novice director, right. (Sophia Park)

In religious life, we do not often encourage arguments or disputes; rather, we receive the message to be quiet and to take problems inward, into one's heart. Now, Sr. Nguyen serves as the director of candidates while she studies theology. She said, "It is not easy to live religious life interculturally, but I feel it made me stronger in my faith and helped me to understand our charism profoundly."

My stay in Ho Chi Min city coincided with the Full Moon Festival, which is a common feast celebrated throughout Asia, marking the full moon of August in the lunar calendar. In Vietnam, the festival is highly joyful, especially for children. Dancing and singing can be seen and heard all over the place, with children holding candles.

On the evening of the Full Moon festival, at the candidates' community house, they spent the evening singing and dancing as well. While I listened and watched, I imagined their joyful spirit moving into a place in this global church.