

U.S. priest sees hopeful signs for reunification of Korea

MARYKNOLL, N.Y. – Subtle changes in attitude are more important than signed documents when it comes to measuring progress in relationships with the North Koreans, according to a U.S. priest who has visited North Korea more than two dozen times since 1995.

Maryknoll Father Gerard Hammond, a missionary in South Korea since 1960, has served in many capacities, including as personal envoy of Cardinal Nicholas Cheong Jinsuk, who is the archbishop of Seoul, South Korea, and apostolic administrator of the Pyongyang Diocese in North Korea.

The priest also is the director of the Seoul archdiocesan National Reconciliation Center, chairman of the North Korean branch of Caritas International, a Catholic aid agency, and a trustee of the Eugene Bell Foundation, a Protestant charity that works in North Korea.

Father Hammond first visited North Korea to bring aid after devastating floods there. In the 12 years since then, he said, there has been an improvement in “dialogue, attitude and trust on both sides. I speak Korean and I’m accepted. If I wasn’t, I couldn’t go there.”

Father Hammond, 74, said his age is an advantage and “they would consider me, in many ways, a Korean.”

The subtle shift in attitude means Father Hammond has more access to the projects that are funded by the groups he represents. Most of the assistance is related to treating tuberculosis patients at 41 hospitals throughout the country, he said in an interview at Maryknoll headquarters.

Father Hammond said that he is one of few foreigners who have traveled extensively within the country. He also has been allowed to travel with a group that included both foreigners and South Koreans.

The communist government of North Korea assigns “minders” to travel with visitors and it forbids citizens to speak to foreigners unless there is another North Korean present.

Father Hammond said the Catholic Church in Korea was founded in 1784 by lay scholars who sought baptism in China. A Chinese priest was assigned to Korea in 1801 and the first Korean priest was ordained in 1831.

Maryknoll missionaries arrived in Korea in 1922. There were three brutal persecutions of Catholics in the last century, Father Hammond said. Maryknoll Bishop Patrick Byrne and Sister Agneta Chang were among 10,000 Catholics who were victims of the last wave of persecution. There have been no permanent resident priests or religious in North Korea since the Korean War started in 1950.

In 1988, the government created the North Korea Catholic Association and built a Catholic church the following year. Nonetheless, Father Hammond said, “there is no visible sign of the Catholic Church or Catholics. There is no resident priest and the association includes Catholics, non-Catholics and nonbaptized.” This makes the celebration of Mass there problematic for priests who visit, he said.

Father Hammond said he has celebrated Mass at the church, but because of the government prohibition on North Koreans being alone with a foreigner, he has not been able to hear confessions.

“We’re trying to bring (the government) around,” he said. “We’re showing the compassion of the church for the people who have been left behind.”

The division of Korea along the 38th parallel at the end of World War II separated many families.

Father Hammond said the doctors and nurses in North Korea who receive medicines and supplies donated by the groups he represents are grateful, especially because their hospitals are inadequately supplied.

He recalled a scene he attributed to “one of those mysteries of the Orient,” that of a medical doctor who was also a Communist Party official asking him for prayers. On another occasion, a government driver taking him to a hospital for a site visit remarked that his grandmother had had a rosary like the one Father Hammond was

using in the car.

In contrast, religious practice and the Catholic Church flourish in South Korea, Father Hammond said. "It is a success story. It went from ashes during the wars to a very vital church with two cardinals."

He said that there are 4.7 million Catholics, who comprise 10 percent of the South Korean population. Each of the country's 16 dioceses is led by a Korean bishop, and there are 9,000 religious sisters and 1,500 seminarians. The Korean Foreign Mission Society sends priests to six other countries in Asia.

Today, there are 19 Maryknoll missionaries in South Korea.

In 1984, on the 200th anniversary of the church's founding, the Catholic bishops of South Korea established the National Reconciliation Center, headed by Father Hammond. "There is a great urge for reconciliation and ... reunification" of the two Koreas, he said.

The center sponsors an annual day of prayer for "the reconciliation and unity of the Korean people."

Father Hammond said the day of prayer is held on the Sunday closest to the June 25 anniversary of the start of the Korean War and is intended "to raise the level of consciousness of the people to the spiritual and temporal needs of the people of North Korea."

Father Hammond is optimistic about the eventual reunification of Korea and said the efforts of the church, both in Korea and Rome, are important to the process.

A native of Philadelphia, Father Hammond was assigned to Korea after his ordination in 1960. In addition to his parish and other duties, Father Hammond has served three terms as Maryknoll regional superior.

Although he misses eating scrapple and taking trips to Ocean City, N.J., Father Hammond said, "I feel fortunate to have spent 47 years in Korea. In a sense, I am the eyes, the ears and the lips of the American Catholic people."