

Transformative Encounters Beyond Borders

Rosa Angelica Libron, SSpS

I first set foot on Korean soil as a missionary in August 1996. The next eighteen years brought me to the peripheries of the eleventh largest economy in the world. Among the people I shared life and mission with were those living with HIV/AIDS (PLWH), as well as the labor and marriage migrants from developing countries in Asia.

I lived 24/7 in a shelter for Korean men who were in advanced stages of HIV infection. Under the Seoul Archdiocese, we, the Holy Spirit Missionary Sisters, were providing them with proper nutrition, comfortable accommodations, and loving care. However, what they seemed to value most was being accepted and belonging. One resident shared with me: “Before we even have our physical death, we already have died twice: first, when we declared being gay, our families disowned us; second, when we disclosed our HIV status, friends and co-workers broke ties with us. You come from another country; you are actually a stranger to us, but now you have become our friends and family.” Little did that friend know that they had first given me a home in Korea and their determination to live always made my heart burn not only for mission, but with greater faith in God who heals and transforms.

Receiving a positive HIV diagnosis can be life-changing. Getting over the shock can take much time and energy. Oftentimes, I was edified by the efforts of my PLWH-friends to overcome their feelings of anger, fear, shame or regret, and then with renewed hope, move forward with life.

After one year of service in the shelter, I was tasked to open a center that would respond beyond basic needs and medical care, one that would empower our PLWH-friends towards fuller lives and reintegration into society. We were to reach out to at least a hundred, most especially those who were withdrawn and living alone in Seoul and neighboring cities. One bonding program was the weekly recreation like sports, movies and visits to a park or museum that was capped off with a meal at a restaurant. Organizing each outing for around twenty people was tedious, but the transformation in our PLWH-friends, from isolation to establishing new friendships, from depression to smiling faces and spontaneous laughter, never failed to invigorate me. Eventually, the community grew.

Although not all were Catholics, we had monthly Masses where the gift of life was celebrated and those with birthdays were honored. Unforgettable is the man who cried because it was his first time to blow birthday candles. From the experience of love-in-community, others asked to be baptized and accompanied in their faith journey. As support to start anew, scholarships to alternative professions, as well as assistance to find jobs were given. Slowly yet so meaningfully, signs of new life were manifested in the mutual sharing and empowerment among PLWH-friends. Indeed, in God’s mission, His grace transforms every encounter where each individual is valued regardless of sexual orientation, religion, culture, or health status.

Sister Rosa Angelica Libron, SSpS, served in South Korea for eighteen years (1996-2014) in leadership, formation, counselling, and social work.