

> Josef Eugster, the foot minister

People 4

4 People

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Stories by MAJORIE CHIEW

FATHER Josef Eugster, 65, has spent most of his professional life on his knees, praying for the souls of mankind. But now this Swiss priest is taking care of their feet as well.

In fact, spreading religion and practising foot reflexology have become twin missions in his life. He sees it as a divine plan for him.

Is his little diversion into foot reflexology seen as a clash with his lay job of preaching?

He thinks not.

"Eighty per cent of my time is for the church. I visit the sick, teach children and prepare for sermons," he says.

Josef divides his time between night establishments in Long Beach, east Taiwan.

However, in the beginning his superiors weren't very pleased, saying the hospital and the government could take care of the people's health problems.

His foot reflexology work was topped for three years before the ban was lifted due to public pressure.

On his fourth trip to Malaysia, Father Josef was invited by Geraldine Tay, president of two Shur Health Institute International, in Kuala Lumpur to update her foot reflexology classes in his latest techniques.

Father Josef belongs to the Swiss Missionary Society of Bethlehem. In 1970, he was sent to Taiwan. He was quite reluctant to re-locate such a distant place.



Minister of feet

Even the Father of modern foot reflexology in East Asia needs to rest his feet. Father Josef Eugster takes a break with his tired feet up. — Pix by Noraffi Ehsan

But, as they say, those who resist end up the most fervent converts. Josef has stayed on his posting for 35 years, and returns to his native country, every three years, to visit his seven siblings.

I asked him about his "defining moment" — how he got "a new mission".

He had prayed for a method to

attract the faithful because his sermons were not pulling in the crowds.

"The Big Boss (that's God) gave me rheumatism in my knees instead," joked Father Josef.

He suffered for three years before another fellow missionary asked why he was limping.

Brother Lawrence Schelbert, whose mother practised foot reflexology, advised him to work on his feet.

He gave Josef a book *Good Health for the Future* by Hedi Masafret, a nurse who ran a foot reflexology centre in Switzerland. Josef took the advice and started working on his feet.

He claims that his health improved, and took it as a sign from above.

He has used his skills as a complementary practitioner for various ailments.

The expert in foot reflexology however insists that "there is much to learn."

Grateful patients have given him plenty of gifts. Among them: calligraphy paintings.

Chinese teas and 100 different foot reflexology tools.

I asked Josef if he could diagnose my health problems and he willingly obliged.

Several times, I felt jabs of pain as he worked on my foot. I was flabbergasted when he told me that I had a bad left knee (even though I didn't tell him so).

As he taps me on my hand, he leaves me with simple practical dos: "drink plenty of water, avoid sweet drinks, take less meat and sleep before 11pm."

When he has free time during the weekdays, Father Josef loves gardening, swimming and fishing. In his garden, he has planted vegetables such as cauliflower, carrots, beans and tomatoes.

Father Josef has been called the Father of Modern Foot Reflexology in East Asia. He has written three foot reflexology books in Chinese. His method, *Father Josef's Foot Reflexology*, was influenced by Chinese medical culture and works on the reflex zones of the feet to maintain good health.

In the book, *Father Josef's Foot*

Reflexology, he writes: "Foot reflexology represents hope of life, sharing of love among people, regardless of differences in nationality, race and space."

He has largely been credited with starting foot reflexology in Taiwan, spreading its popularity to Malaysia, Singapore, Japan, Hong Kong, Europe and the United States. Today, many reflexology centres in these countries bear his name.

"Foot reflexology was lost in the East and I revived it in 1979 (in Taiwan)," he claims, adding "foot reflexology is for everybody."

The late Pope John Paul II was one of Father Josef's patients.



Touching the pope's sole

THE late Pope John Paul II was probably his most famous patient. Father Josef Eugster recalls that he had to go through three tests before he was allowed to treat the holy man on Nov 26, 2003.

He massaged the Pope's feet for 30 minutes.

Josef's first client was far more humble. He was a 74-year-old farmer who apparently suffered severe back pain.

Father Josef tried foot reflexology and the farmer felt such excruciating pain that he fled and went into hiding.

After tracking him down at a neighbour's house, Father Josef coaxed him for a foot massage "one last time".

That night, the farmer called and said he could turn his body.

In *Father Josef's Foot Reflexology*, he claims also to

have helped a well-known announcer of a radio station who suffered from a life-threatening thyroid disease and had bulging eyes.

"After four or five days of massaging her feet, the neighbours asked me if we were killing pigs every day," he recounts humourously.

