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EDITORIAL: Founded in Taiwan, Verbiest Foundation keeps the 'Option for China' alive

Pieter Ackerman, Director VI KU Leuven

At the end of March 2022 the secretariat of the Chinese Bishops Conference (Beijing) contacted us at Verbiest Foundation, suggesting an online meeting for a general exchange of ideas. For two years Covid pandemic has forced us to cancel the intensive ongoing projects of exchange and cooperation. Wishing to keep the line open we considered the proposal good news. The text that was presented during this meeting can be found in this issue. We hope that a positive and constructive follow-up can be given to this meeting, and plans are already being made in that direction.

In a historical overview, Fr. Jeroom Heyndrickx introduces us how Verbiest Foundation Leuven was founded in Taiwan by CICM (Scheut) and by Chinese faithful. If one wants to fully grasp the continuity of the work that was started by CICM founder Theophile Verbist, and how his 'option for China' lives on until today thanks to the Foundation, this article is an indispensable source of information. Today, the Foundation is chaired by Cardinal Joseph De Kesel. We would like to present our readers his view on how Church and Society interact. In our daily life we all experience how the society in which we work and live, has become very secular, and religion is seen as something exclusively belonging to the private sector. Cardinal De Kesel explains why privatization of religion is not a good evolution. VF Research Coordinator Hugo Vanheeswijck

Editorial



presents us in his article “World in the Church or Church in the World?”, the importance of dialogue, and that this is the only way to make change possible.

We were happy to receive again good news from the Church in China, and consider it hopeful that more and more exchange is going on, and inspiring initiatives keep on flourishing. On July 6th we even learned about the statement of Pope Francis, in which he expresses the hope that the agreement between the Vatican and Rome will be renewed. It is however our task to also mention worrying news items that reached the redaction. An overview is therefore given by the redaction of both the up-, but also the downsides of religion in China today.

In our previous issue of Verbiest Courier, we gave the reader a glance into some of the lectures that were presented during our Verbiest International Conference of August 2022. With great joy we received the news that Bishop Giorgio Marengo of Mongolia, who gave a keynote lecture during this conference, is on its way to become the youngest Cardinal of the Church. A brief newsflash is included in this issue.

In February, the Winter Olympics started in Beijing, with the ski-events taking place in Xiwanzi, a name that must ring a bell with many of our readers. Also Gianni Valente, reporter with

Christianity and China, realized this, and took the time to report on the history of Xiwanzi, and on Fr. Jeroom’s missionary dream. A reflection we cannot neglect to take up here. Another beautiful testimony is given by three colleagues who undertook a pilgrimage to Santiago De Compostella. Their journey, long overdue due to the pandemic, is described in this issue. Their experiences, fresh insights and honest reflections will most surely be a joy to read. And lost, but not least: A happy birthday! Happy birthday to the founder, and to this very day one of the thriving forces of Verbiest Foundation, Fr. Jeroom. Fr. Jeroom turned 90 years old at the end of last year. Seemingly tireless in his efforts for the Church in China, we close this Courier with an testimony in which he answers two questions: why did he become a missionary, and what has he done during those 65 years as a missionary?

Dear reader, After 2 years of Covid and other concerns, we prepare for 2023, a year of celebrations! Founded by CICM VF joins in celebrating the 200th birthday of Founder Verbist. We participate actively and initiate efforts to restore our original VF-CICM relationship. But next year, we also celebrate the 40th birthday of Verbiest Foundation! From our meaningful past we look at the future while searching for our internal unity which will give us the strength to face the challenges which we identify in the future. But more on that in our next issue!

Dialogue, Exchange & Encounter - The Way of Verbiest Foundation-Leuven

The Redaction

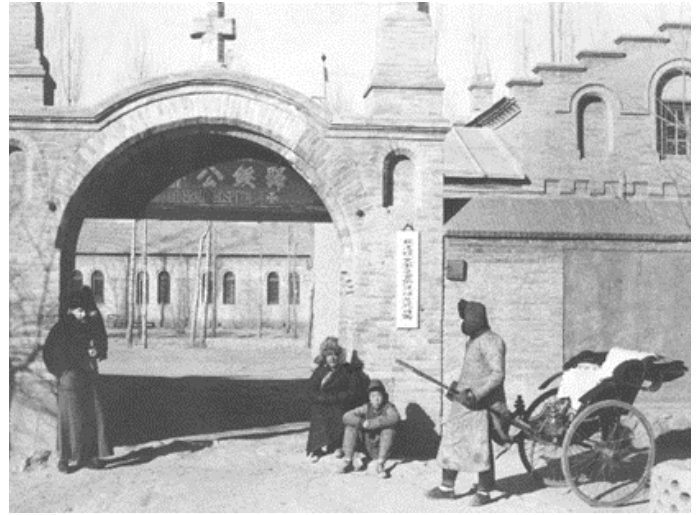
On April 26, 2022, a Zoom meeting took place between Verbiest Foundation and the Chinese Bishops Conference, at the Bishops’ request. Both sides introduced their present situation and expressed the hope to continue, after the pandemic, the exchange programs that were going on two years ago. This dialogue with the bishops of China has revived hope for continued exchange with the Church in China. The publication on the Zoom meeting with VF, in Chinese media on April 29 2022, three days after the meeting, shows that the Church in China and also civil authorities consider it important. And so does VF. The text hereunder was presented by VF research coordinator, Dr. Hugo Vanheeswijck, during the meeting, and we wish to share this with you, our reader.

Our meeting today is historical because in 2022 Verbiest Foundation-Leuven celebrates its history of 40 years since it was founded by CICM in 1982. It is very meaningful for us to represent Verbiest Foundation in this meeting with leading bishops of the Bishops Conference of China because our 40 years history have been rich in intensive dialogue and exchange with the Church of China. I am honored today to speak here in the name of the VF Board. I will first give an overview over this history and then introduce the present situation of VF. This will offer us a basis to exchange and explore more friendly exchange during the coming years.

Verbiest Foundation [VF] was sponsored and directed by CICM for 23 years [1982-2005] and is now an autonomous institute. But although CICM as congregation does not direct VF anymore, we are inspired by CICM spirituality and CICM members actively participate in VF administration and activities. CICM itself was founded in 1862 in Belgium by a diocesan priest Theophile Verbist. In article Nr 1 of the CICM constitutions the founder determined that CICM missionaries would *by priority engage in evangelization among the Chinese people*. We call that the *CICM Priority Option for China*. That option marked CICM and still marks Verbiest Foundation today. In total 679



Missionaries in a typical Chinese guest house of that time



Entrance of the hospital in Sui Yuan (Hohhot)

cicm missionaries from Belgium and the Netherlands lived that *Priority Option for China* during 90 years from 1865 to 1955 in China. They worked in the North of China from the North-East Rihe, Inner Mongolia, Datong, Ningxia, Gansu, Qinghai as far as Yili in Xinjiang in the North-West, over 3000 km. Their goal was to bring the gospel to the people of China. They shared happy and sad moments of daily life with the people by living close to them in small villages and towns all over North China. They served their needs by setting up schools to care for the education of their children. In Sui Yuan [Hohhot] they built a modern, well-equipped Catholic Hospital and dozens of small clinics in the countryside to care for the health of the people. Much appreciated by the people was their care for healthy food and drinking water. CICM organized a large irrigation system by digging hundreds of kilometers of canals using water of the Yellow River to make thousands of hectares of farmland fertile. That upgraded the comfort of people's daily life. Sharing the gospel of the Lord and building up the local Church was part of that kind of exchange and cooperation. 252 cicm missionaries died and lay buried in villages all over Northern China. This history illustrates that there is a family relationship of cicm with the people of North China.

In 1982, thirty years after cicm missionaries had left the PRC [1950-1955], CICM established Verbiest Foundation to assure that the traditional *CICM Priority Option for China* be continued. CICM was of course aware that it was not possible anymore to live that traditional CICM option inside the PR-China because foreign missionaries were not invited there anymore. But the traditional *Option for China* remains valid and meaningful to be lived *among the Chinese People* all over the world. It can also be practiced with the PRC by developing dialogue from abroad and by exchanging and cooperating in various fields. Verbiest Foundation [VF] was given the task to update and adapt the *Option for China* by developing a new relation with PR-China characterized by dialogue, exchange, and cooperation between two autonomous local Churches on a basis of equality and mutual respect, confirming each other in faith. VF has done this for 40 years. We all know that it was Jeroom Heyndrickx cicm who has all those years inspired and animated the activities which we relate here below.

The first exchange activities of VF were in the pastoral field. In November 1985 a 5-member friendship delegation of Chinese bishops presided by Bishop Michael Fu Tie Shan [Beijing]



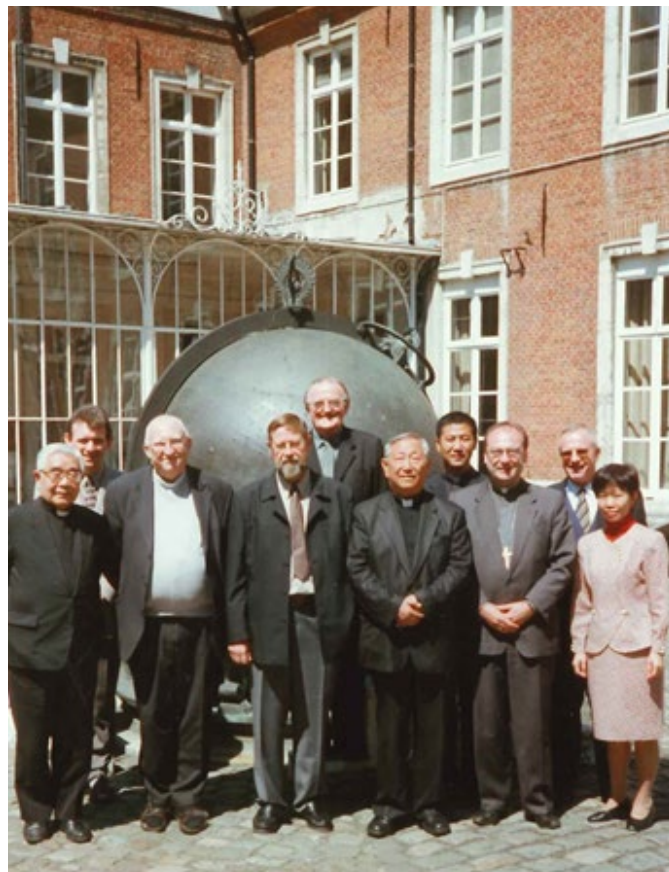
The graves of missionaries in China are being well taken care off by local Catholics



Bp. Fu Tie Shan and rector Dillemans meeting in Leuven (1985)



Cardinal Suenens, Bp. Fu Tie Shan, Nuntius Moretti



Archbishop J. Ti'kang and Bp. Jin Peixian meet Bp. Paul Schreurs and Bp. Vancottem at the Verbiest Institute in Leuven

came to Belgium at the invitation of Cardinal Danneels and the Catholic University of Leuven for a 13-day visit to the Church in Belgium and to the university. Several visits by other bishops from China followed. One delegation of three bishops presided by Bp Liu Yuan Ren were guests at the Royal Palace where they were welcomed by Queen Fabiola of Belgium. Later, in 2005 and 2007 Cardinal Danneels made two memorable China visits together with 3 other Belgian bishops. He was received by high civil authorities and the Bishops Conference He lectured at the Academy of Social Sciences and the National Seminary and visited two remote Catholic villages in Hebei and Liaoning. The pictures of these memorable visits made a great impact on our Church here in Belgium.

VF also invited members of the Chinese government to Belgium. Twice the vice chairman of the State Administration for Religious Affairs [SARA] visited Belgium at VF's invitation. In 1994 Vice chairman Mr. Liu Shu Xiang and in 2004 Mr. Wang Zho-an, then SARA vice chairman were our guests. They were received at the Belgian Ministry of Justice which takes care of religious matters in Belgium. These visits were occasions for fruitful dialogue which facilitated programs of exchange for priests religious and lay faithful. Remarkable was f.e. the graduation ceremony in 1993 of 15 spiritual directors of Major Seminaries in China who had followed an exchange session at Leuven University. 92-year-old Cardinal Suenens – one of the 4 chairmen of Vatican II – lectured to the Chinese priests. Archb. Moretti, Nuncio of the Holy See in Belgium attended their graduation. Together with Cardinal Suenens they met with Bishop Michael Fu [Beijing]. The historical photo was published in a Belgian newspaper.

To all this we should add the participation of scholars from China and the West presenting scholarly papers on the history of the Catholic Church in China and/or on Religious Freedom in the 14 International Verbiest Conferences held in Leuven and once in Beijing in cooperation with the History Institute of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. Some professors of our Catholic Major Seminaries in China lectured at these conferences. Their papers were published in the 41 issues of our series Leuven Chinese Studies.

VF and the Church in China had a rich history of pioneering exchange activities during which steps were taken from both sides in the field of dialogue. This history continued in recent years by the visits of several bishops from China to Belgium and their exchanges with Cardinal De Kesel [Malines Archdiocese] and the Church in Belgium. Most unfortunately, as we know, all this has been blocked by Covid Pandemic. But today we look to the future and explore new possibilities for exchange. To facilitate our exchange, it may be helpful to introduce the evolutions that took place in the recent two years in Verbiest Foundation.

Most important is the text of the *Mission Statement* of VF (see also at the end of this issue, ed. note) which has been shared with you in advance of this meeting. It represents the general structure, the goals and spirituality of VF. It is the basis of all our activities. Important is also the introduction to VF which was shared with you by our director Pieter Ackerman at the start of this meeting. Following are some more data:

- Cardinal Joseph De Kesel [Archbishop of Malines, Belgium] is chairman of the VF Board.
- Archbishop Joseph Tikang [Taiwan], has been vice-chairman

from the beginning.

It is meaningful to share hereby the following:

- o In 2002 he concelebrated in Liège (Belgium) with Bishop Jin Peixian [Shenyang] at a solemn Eucharistic celebration with the bishop of Liège. Their concelebration was a meaningful event in dialogue.
- o Remarkable also was the same two bishops encountering two other bishops from Belgium [Bishop Paul Schreurs and Bp Vancotthem], CICM superiors and Jeroom Heyndrickx cism at VF headquarters in Leuven engaging in dialogue on inter-church exchange.
- A recent evolution in VF was the appointment of the following 2 added vice chairpersons:
 - Fr. Charles Phukuta, Superior General of CICM.Though the CICM congregation does not direct VF anymore Fr. Phukuta accepted to join the VF Board. Cardinal De Kesel made him his permanent delegate to supervise the administration of VF activities. Fr. Phukuta visited China first in 2017 and once in 2019 when he visited the former CICM Mission of Xiwanzi. Twice the Chinese Bishops Conference invited Father Phukuta for a dialogue during a common meal.
- The VF Permanent Bureau is composed of the following members:
 - o Fr. Charles Phukuta cism, chairman, permanent delegate of the cardinal and in charge of the Public Relations of VF.

- o Fr. Jeroom Heyndrickx cism, VF Founder and Board member.
- o Br. René Stockman fc, delegated VF Board member.
- o Mr. Pieter Ackerman [Belgium, residing in Leuven], is Executive Secretary of the VF Board, Mr. Joseph Lim [Malaysia, residing in Taiwan], is the Chinese secretary. The two together form the VF PB Secretariat which supervises all VF activities on a permanent basis.
- o As Fr. Phukuta's time for PR activities is limited the two secretaries assist him for regular, ongoing contacts with the PR-China, Taiwan, Belgium, Rome.

As conclusion of this communication, I wish to state that the correct terms to describe the goals of VF are indeed promoting dialogue, exchange, and encounter. We consider encounter at the culminating phase of the process of dialogue. It is the peak point which one reaches only when the years of dialogue and exchange mature in mutual understanding and appreciation. We see this as a gradual, "Long March" via progress and achievements meeting also with failures. Our road may still be long but the moving story of the past 40 years of VF history offers hope for an even more beautiful future. Our pilgrimage towards encounter between VF and the Church in China continues. Our meeting today puts an important building stone on that path.

Verbiest Foundation Leuven: Founded in Taiwan by CICM & by Chinese Faithful

Jeroom Heyndrickx cism

Founded in Taiwan by CICM & by Chinese Faithful for Cooperation and Exchange with "the Chinese People" ***CICM fathers lived for 90 years the "Priority Option for China" of Founder Verbist***

Theophile Verbist (南怀义) founded CICM in 1862. In article nr 1 of the constitutions he determined that members of cism would evangelize "by priority among the *Chinese People*" (...*apud populos Sinenses*)¹. This is what we call the *CICM Option for China*. In the original Latin text Founder Verbist did not refer to a country but to the *Chinese people* (zhonghua-ÐÐ). For 90 years [1865 till 1955] cism missionaries were active in the whole of N. China, from Jehol & Inner Mongolia to Gansu, Xinjiang (up to Yili) (热河-内蒙古-甘肃-新疆-伊犁) 4000 km. The area was underdeveloped with virtually no roads. Missionaries

travelled on horseback, horse cart, donkey, or camel. A total of 679 young cism missionaries from Belgium and Holland followed in Verbist's footsteps to work in North China. They put the foundations of the dioceses Xiwanzi, Jining, Jehol, Chifeng, Suiyuan, Ningxia, Datong, Lanzou, Tianshui, Pingliang, Xinjiang. [西湾子, 集宁, 热河, 赤峰, 绥元, 宁夏, 大同, 兰州, 天水, 平凉, 新疆]. The number of Catholics in the region increased from 6000 to 250.000. From the highly praised Major Seminaries of Datong [大同] and Suiyuan [绥元] 250 diocesan Chinese priests graduated. They cared for all these dioceses after cism left. Four among them were ordained bishop and took over the direction of a diocese.

Cism fathers spread the gospel living in the countryside, close to the people and joining them in their hard daily struggle to improve their life situation. They contributed to improve their health situation. In 1921 Fr. Joseph Rutten cism took the ini-

¹ *Apud populos Sinenses*", words of CICM Founder Theophile Verbist in article Nr 1 of the CICM Constitutions



Travelling was not easy back in the day in China...



Health care by the ICM sisters

tiative to build a modern well-equipped hospital in Suiyuan (绥元) [Hohhot 呼和浩特], called the Catholic Hospital (公教医院). It had 150 beds, radiography section, operation room, nurses' school. Chinese doctors who graduated in Shanghai and further specialized at Leuven University (Belgium) joined the ICM sisters to direct medical services. It was the best equipped hospital of Inner Mongolia in a region of 600 km, serving a network of local small clinics from where missionaries in the villages could send their sick faithful as well as non-Catholic friends for special treatment in Suiyuan².

Soon after their arrival the cism fathers started to develop a net of hundreds of primary and secondary schools for boys and girls in the towns and villages in the whole region of North China. Offering education to girls was pioneering work at that time. Fr. Rutten actively promoted this and, with the help of school directors worked out a curriculum. He started a Normal School for the formation of teachers in Nanhaoqian [南壕堽]. Unique and historical in the whole region was their initiative in Ordos to set up schools for Mongol children and teaching in the Mongolian language. Bishop Gaspar Schotte went to Tianjin to buy heavy printing machines which were transported by train to Baotou. There they moved the machines on pontoons to cross the Yellow River, then on specially built oxcarts. Oxen needed three weeks to pull them through the sand of the Ordos Desert to Poro Balgasu Mission. There they Bishop Gaspar Schotte personally put up the press to print the dozens of manuals for the Mongolian language, literature and history all prepared by the fathers together with Mongol teachers. That Mongol school was the only one in the whole region. The school and the printing press were destroyed by the army in the 1930-40's.

Most famous was the work initiated by cism fathers at the end of the 19th century in the field of agricultural development. In the area of the Yellow River, cism fathers obtained tens of thousands of hectares of farmland. They built canals, hundreds of kilometers long, to irrigate the farmland with the water of the Yellow River. Farmers were invited to come and live in villages tilling the land at much better conditions than they were used to pay before. This was considered and praised as an important improvement to the life condition of the people in the whole region. This gigantic project along the Yellow River bend was turned over to the care of the government in the 1920's.

CICM opened Verbist Academy in Beijing where famous self-educated cism scholars engaged in academic research. Some taught in Fujen University, others cooperated actively in the research of Teilhard de Chardin. Still others became experts in the Mongolian and Chinese languages, in historical and archeological research, geography, philosophy, cartography, ornithology, Chinese religious art, architecture etc.

Cism fathers happily decided to go to China at a time when life in China was not easy. But this was their personal option and they accepted to pay any price for it. China became their self-chosen second homeland where they stayed for their whole life, some of them without returning home. Their parents too approved and accepted this Option for China of their son. 252 cism fathers spent their whole life in China, died there and lay buried there. 88 among them died very young from typhus, some only one or two years after their arrival³. Others offered their life as martyrs or died during times of China's internal unrest: 8 died during the Boxer Uprising, 12 died during the communist takeover in the years 1940-50.

2 The hospital was taken over by civil authorities when missionaries left Suiyuan in 1952. The Catholic Hospital (公教医院) developed into the Medical Faculty of Inner Mongolia University. In 2021 the hospital celebrated the 100th anniversary of its foundation. The director wrote a letter to Fr. Charles Phukuta, the CICM Superior General in Rome. They wished to invite him to come to the celebration and give a speech. Since this was impossible because of the pandemic Fr. Phukuta, was invited to pre-record his speech and sent it in. He did and spoke positively about the exchange and cooperation of the missionaries with the local community of Hohhot. The speech was well received as the director later reported to Fr. Phukuta.

3 Fr. Rutten cism took the initiative to produce inside China a vaccine that blocked the spreading inside China. When visiting Pope Pius XI in Rome, the pope (who had earlier served at the nunciature in Poland) informed Fr. Rutten that the Polish Dr. Weigle had invented a vaccine against Typhus. J. Rutten travelled to Poland and invited Dr. Weigle to come to China. Dr. Weigle joined the Catholic hospital in Suiyuan. Together with CICM they joined with Fujen and produced the anti-typhus vaccination which since the years 1930 was used and saved the lives of dozens of missionaries and of many more Chinese citizens.



Cartography in Xiwanzi, under direction of Fr. J. Raskin cism

254 cism fathers were expelled from China (1950) putting the Option for China in crisis. When China opened again (1978) cism Taiwan had to sound a wake-up call in cism.

After the *Exodus from China* of 254 cism fathers (1950), only a small group of them continued to live the cism China Option in Taiwan and Hong Kong. That minority group would later fulfill a historical task when the Option for China was no more priority for some in cism. New missions were opened in various countries. Cism also welcomed members from various nationalities. That changed cism turning the focus away from its China Option. This was understandable because cism had new concerns and new priorities. The cism group of Taiwan observed and accepted this but when China promulgated its Open Policy (1978) they felt the need to make a wake-up call by reminding the cism chapter in 1981 of its Option for China of Founder Verbist. I was part of that and find it important to tell how this happened.

In 1974 I became Vicar General in the CICM General Government in Rome. That was the time when Mao Zedong died, and China started to change. We discussed the concerns of cism at the generalate in daily meetings. I observed that the focus of cism was moving away from China turning to other needs. I fully backed the new cism initiatives in South America which was a priority for the whole Church. But I also felt that the cism General Government [GG] had the duty to remind the confreres to honor the "Option for China" of our cism constitutions. Even though the PRC remained closed for missionaries, China as a people and culture remain also a challenge for the Mission of the whole Church. Founder Verbist sent us precisely to work "among the Chinese People" and they live in many countries. Attention for the missionary needs of South America should not happen at the expense of the priority expressed by the Founder Verbist in the cism Priority Option for China. Our daily meeting agendas proved that this was happening. That alarmed me and during my 7 years in Rome I felt that – as

a delegate from the Chinese Province -- it was my duty to express that concern and I did not hesitate to do that.⁴

Moreover, there were signs that the PRC, after Mao's death would open. We started a China-desk in Hong Kong (1976) co-sponsored by the GG and cism-Taiwan to follow events in China closely. After Deng Xiaoping launched the Open Policy of China (1978), we organized a CICM China Meeting in Hong Kong (1980). 12 old and young cism China missionaries listened for 3 full days to the advice on the meaning of the Open Policy of China for missionaries. We then reflected for 2 more days on what this meant for cism. We drew up a detailed report including a recommendation to the cism Chapter to take a positive initiative in response to this new situation in China. Back in Rome I shared the report with the cism Generalate [GG]. The GG put the issue on the agenda of the 9th cism Chapter (1981) and I was tasked to introduce it.

The wake-up call of CICM-Taiwan reminded the 9th Chapter of the CICM Option for China The chapter called on the CICM GG to respond positively to the Open Policy in the PRC

During the chapter, much to our surprise, the Steering Committee postponed twice the discussion of our Hong Kong report and finally -- "for lack of time" -- even removed it from the agenda saying that time had come to elect a new general superior and council. But after the elections the new superior and council did not even allot time for discussing the Hong Kong report. The chapter was only asked, without much discussion, to vote a *motion calling on cism to take a positive initiative in response to the new situation in China*. Still the chapter approved the motion even with a large majority, but unexpectedly the approval was not unanimous and that was seen as a



Expelled from China, Western missionaries were accused of espionage

⁴ The CICM General Government had since its foundation always had several members with a China background. This diminished with the years. We would later observe that, till today, I have been the last "Chinese" to be member of the CICM General Government.

signal that the importance of one crucial aspect of our cism identity – its priority Option for China – was put in doubt by some chapter members. That alarming signal was enough to motivate the Taiwan delegation to do swiftly what the chapter requested namely to work out a proposal for the positive response requested by the chapter and introduce this to cism. They understood the signal and said: *if we don't do it, nobody will. The Option for China remains a priority in our cism constitutions.* The planning to go ahead working out a proposal started already right then and there.

Immediately after the chapter I was appointed by the provincial to work out a draft for the initiative requested by the council and submit it to the provincial council for approval. The day after the chapter – without any break after 7 years in Rome – I dived into this assignment. It has kept me going until today. In September 1981 I visited Leuven University to explore whether they were interested to participate in a joint project for exchange and cooperation with China. The initial answer was positive.

Archb. Luo Kouang of Fujen fully supported the idea of cooperating with universities promoting academic exchange. I then travelled to meet with old cism China missionaries and scholars in Europe, the USA and Japan. Some of them had spent years in a Chinese prison before being expelled. They warned me: “Be careful engaging in cooperation with communist PRC!” But even 30 years after being expelled from China the fire of their “Option for China” was stronger than their anti-communist feeling. They were happily surprised to learn about the VF initiative and applauded the proposal.

It was of course crucial to hear the opinion of the Church and of academic circles in China. Chinese Protestant Bishop Ding Guangshun offered me a good opportunity by inviting me to participate at the Montreal China Meeting in October 1981. There I had unique opportunities to spend time exchanging opinions with people as Zhao Fusan vice chairman of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Catholic Bishop Michael Fu Tieshan, Protestant Bishop Ding Guangshun and others. They themselves took the initiative to suggest cooperation with Leuven University as the ideal way for engaging in exchange with the PRC. Later, in May 1982 I heard the advice of ‘non-official’ Catholics in China during my visit to Beijing. Some supported the idea, others not. Between July 1981 and July 1982, I managed to pass twice by the cism generalate in Rome in order to inform them on what we were doing. By mid-1982 the blueprint for establishing Verbiest Foundation was submitted to the provincial in Taiwan, discussed and approved by his council.

In 1983 delegates from all cism regions met in Rome, discussed & approved VF project, but cism-Taiwan was given the burden to care on its own for all VF activities and budget

The cism GG rightly wanted the response to the call of the chapter to represent the whole cism and called therefore a 4-day general cism China Meeting in Rome with participants from all cism regions and a larger delegation from Taiwan to

introduce the VF proposal. The General Counsel announced at the opening that they would all be present but only as auditors not as participants. This surprised and disappointed us. It even raised doubts. If the GG did not vote, would they feel committed to support VF if the meeting approved it?



Archbp. Luo Kouang

In the first half of the meeting non-cism China experts gave lectures to inform the participants on the situation in China. Then the Taiwan delegation introduced VF as the cism initiative on China requested by the chapter. It was discussed in small groups and a plenary session. Finally, all participants approved VF unanimously. As announced in advance, members of the cism generalate did not participate in the voting.

After the China Meeting the cism General Counsel evaluated among them. The superior general communicated their decision in a letter asking the cism Sinica Province (Taiwan-Hong Kong-Singapore) to direct and sponsor themselves the activities of the VF Project which they had proposed. The provincial of cism-Taiwan answered that they accepted the challenge. In the name of his counsel, he applied for financial assistance from the cism generalate in Rome, in the form of a financial grant or a loan. The general superior answered that no assistance could be given. Deeply disappointed and in disbelief cism Taiwan then realized that it was left on its own.

Since the 1970's I had observed that erosion was going on in cism about the Option for China of Founder Verbiest. The failure of the 9th chapter to approve unanimously the motion in support of the cism Option for China was a wake-up call. The decision of the GG not to support the VF project which had been approved by all the China Meeting delegates, that was like a let-down and a failure of cism because Founder Verbiest had singled out Option for China as priority. But also because China represents an important people and rich old culture. Mission to the Chinese people is an important concern for the whole Church. How could cism overlook this? This awareness motivated us in the Taiwan delegation not to hesitate to accept

Meeting with prof. Zhao Fusan in Leuven (1985)



the challenge. We were aware that even though we were *left on our own.... we did not stand alone* because we had friends. For years we had worked closely with the local Church in Taiwan and were confident from the beginning that Chinese shepherds and faithful would provide the expertise and wisdom to face the challenges of directing Verbiest Foundation. VF history has proven that our hope and trust were founded.

CICM Taiwan directed VF 23 years, relying on cooperation from the Church in Taiwan

From 1983 to 2006 cicm Taiwan directed the many activities which VF initiated in a short time in the field of pastoral cooperation with the Church in Taiwan and in the PRC, the fields of academic research, and cultural exchange. Every year the cicm provincial and his council attended a full day China meeting during which it listened to the activity reports, financial reports, and budget. These were discussed and approved. Reports on the activities were published in *Pedicab* the monthly publication of CICM. The province initiated *Verbist Study Notes* where articles on China apostolate were published by confreres.

For its activities VF relied entirely on the contribution of Chinese faithful of Taiwan and colleagues from Leuven (Belgium) – Luo Youmei, Kuo Pinsheng, Staf Vloeberghs and others – to engage in these various programs. VF was a small institute, but it took daring initiatives visiting the Catholic Church in the PRC, developing dialogue and exchange with them without any prejudice or distinction between official and unofficial communities. VF did not hesitate, with silent approval of Rome, to even invite the first official Catholic Friendship Delegation of Chinese bishops from the PRC to visit Leuven University and the Church in Belgium during 13 days. Open dialogue became from the beginning the hallmark of VF. Two Bishops from Taiwan – first Archb. Jia, later Archb. Tikang – presided at a Chinese Eucharistic celebration – Commemoration of our ancestors [ÐÐÐÐ]– broadcasted on Belgian Television receiving much approval and positive feedback from faithful in Belgium. VF invited and accompanied the elderly Mr Chiang Fu Tsung, director of the Taiwan National Palace Museum on a visit to Belgium where he was received officially at Leuven University and even preached in Belgian churches.

As of 2006 VF moved to VF-Leuven & continued close cooperation with VI-KULeuven Today VF unites E&W in Christian Brotherhood for dialogue with the Chinese People

By 2006 activities of VF had grown beyond the capacity of cicm Taiwan. Cicm Rome, surprisingly, agreed that cicm Taiwan withdrew from VF, leaving it up to VF itself to find a partner to continue its activities. Cardinal G. Danneels (Malines, Belgium) had all this time closely followed and admired the initiatives of VF. He did not hesitate to welcome VF and accepted to preside at the newly organized non-profit corporation Verbiest Foundation- Leuven. A VF Permanent Bureau was established to direct VF activities daily. Verbiest Institute KULeuven assured the close cooperation with Leuven University. Later Verbiest



Meeting of the CICM China Program in 2000 in Taipei

Association for Cultural Exchange [VA] was established in Taiwan to allow smooth legal cooperation of VF with the Church in Taiwan and Fujen University. In 2021 Archb. Tikang retired as chairman of VA, but is now invited as VA spiritual director. Prof. Chen Fangchung is the new chairman, with Prof. Peter Yang Tunhe and Sr. Tessie Enriquez ICM as executive board members.

The VF Administration is presently centered in Leuven [Belgium] with H. Emin. Card. De Kesel as board chairman. VF does not consider herself as belonging to the West or the East. It sees itself as an International Christian Community for Universal Brotherhood with members from East and West. It was founded and developed by cicm-Taiwan and by the Church in Taiwan. Archb. Tikang [Taipei] is vice-chairman together with Fr. Charles Phukuta cicm Superior General who is chairman of the VF Permanent Body. Delegates from three different religious missionary congregations are member of the VF Board. While continuing the spirit of the Option for China by cicm Founder Theophile Verbist VF promotes dialogue, cooperation and exchange among the Chinese People [“..apud populos Sinenses’ ÐÐ]Ð The VF board looks forward to welcome in its board delegates from the PRC as soon as this will be possible.

Conclusion

In this article I wanted to share some facts (not all) of the 40 years history of VF (1982-2022) the way I personally experienced them. For many years I found it not important to mention these facts but I now realize that – having cared for VF from day one for 40 years, 24 hours a day – I am perhaps the only to know all the facts. I owe it to history and to our colleagues of the past and present to express our thanks and recognition for their merits and to make at least the above-mentioned history known. All what is written here is based on documents kept in the VF archives. Writing VF history without these facts would not be fair. An objective history of VF must clearly state the following crucial historical facts namely:



Visit to Xi'an in 1989 by Beda Chen, Louis Kuo, Luo Youmei and Fr. Jeroom Heyndrickx



Formation session for Chinese bishops in 2007 (Abbey of St. Andrew, Bruges)

without the initiatives taken by the cicm community in Taiwan in the years 1970-80 VF would not exist today, and without the cooperation, expertise, and guidance of Chinese Catholic shepherds and faithful from Taiwan VF would not have survived the challenges and crises it has met.

The story of VF was made possible by the close friendly cooperation and mutual trust developed over the years between cicm and the local Church in Taiwan. As far as VF is concerned, this traditional cooperation was enhanced by establishing in Taiwan the Verbiest Association for intercultural exchange as a structure making smooth cooperation and exchange possible.

Whoever understands the complexity of the history of the Catholic Church in China since the Unequal Treatises (1860) till the setting up the People's Republic (1949) will understand that it is a historical challenge to set up an institute such as VF for developing open dialogue, exchange, and cooperation "among the Chinese People" in line with the spirit of CICM Founder Verbiest. The above-described history with its moments of crisis could humanly speaking be foreseen and expected. We were prepared for it and we survived.



Fr. Jeroom Heyndrickx, Brother René Stockman, Cardinal De Kesel and Fr. Charles Phukuta

The good news of this history is **VF today**, as described above. It speaks for itself. Fr. Charles Phukuta, cicm superior general of cicm, the founding congregation, is the permanent delegate of H. Emin. Card. De Kesel guiding the foundation. He is accompanied by Archb. Tikang (Taipei). Delegates of 3 different missionary congregations – cicm, Brothers of Charity (Gent) and Claretian Fathers -- joined the VF Board which looks forward to the time when delegates from the PRC will be able to join VF. VF has grown by surviving the crises which it suffered over the years. It showed understanding when it met with critique from brothers in the Church who did not feel ready for dialogue but was pleased when learning that Pope John Paul II followed closely its initiatives for dialogue. Today VF follows faithfully in the footsteps of Pope Francis on his way of dialogue with the PRC, yet showing understanding for some who, in the present complex situation hesitate to follow.

The challenge of VF today is to remain faithful to the Option for China and to its own tradition of friendly cooperation and unity with the local Chinese Churches. *VF Today* as described above expressed its spirituality in its VF Mission Statement. To remain united in that spirituality guarantees the future of VF.

Church and Society

Cardinal Joseph De Kesel (with permission of Tertio)

Cardinal Joseph De Kesel (1947) published in June of last year his essay entitled *Faith & Religion in a secular society*. In a short period of time our society has thoroughly changed, this also includes religion. Society has become very secular and often religion has been banished to the private sector. In his essay the Archbishop of Mechelen-Brussel wonders how the Church can feel at home in this new constellation. Tertio is publishing an extract of the essay, "The Privatization of Religion".

Privatization of religion is not a good evolution

In his essay Cardinal Joseph De Kesel shows how the Church can feel perfectly at home in a secular and modern society. It is not her mission to conquer the world. The separation between Church and State is an achievement. But that does not mean that the Church does not belong to public life. The Church has a role to play in public life to represent God.

The separation of Church and State is not open for discussion any more. It is an essential achievement of modern times. Before the separation of modern times, it was only partly possible, precisely because Christianity had become a cultural religion in the West. The Church and Christianity could not be separated from the general social and political life, with all the consequences, tensions and conflicts. As is evident for all religious cultures: the whole cultural, social and political life had been penetrated by Christian ideas.

Social relevance

Certain people are convinced that modern secular culture will cause the end of any religious conviction. In my view this is an expression of dogmatic secularism. Not everyone takes such an extreme stand in the actual debate about religion and society. Along with that extreme opinion, there is another widespread conviction, probably more far-reaching than the former one. That conviction has no problem accepting that someone is a believer. In fact everybody is free to have their own convictions. But religious convictions, are considered not to have any social relevance. Of course they can have a meaning for private citizens, but not for society as such. They do not have any social meaning and should therefore not intervene in social and public debate.

The meaning of life

The privatization of religion touches the heart and the meaning of Christian faith and Christian convictions. For a believer

there is no separation between faith and life, as there is no separation between faith and society. There are questions a secular culture is not able to answer. Questions which are not even asked. Questions about the meaning of our life, meaningful questions we are interested in. These questions and answers precisely determine the meaning of life and of our society. These choices, personal as they may be, have the highest social relevance. That is the fundamental reason why the privatization of religion is not a good decision. Concerning religion it is very clear: the Gospel does not only concern my private life, but motivates my social life. It provides me with God's intention for this world, what real life and real progress mean.



Cardinal De Kesel welcomed bishops from China in 2019

For a believer there is no separation between faith and life

My point is not that religion is the only source of meaning and motivation. Also nonbelievers or people holding other non-religious opinions can live in a meaningful way and dedicate their life to create a humane and just society. Religions do not have any monopoly about it. But they are a source of hope

and meaningful life. Of course it can be the other way round. Religions can be abused and become sources of hate and violence or degenerate into a kind of opium which alienates people from themselves and from reality. Whatever is human can be abused. But that is a malpractice. That is not the essence of Christianity nor of Islam.

Source of humanity

The Gospel preached by the Church, is the good news about God's humanity. The appeal for humanity is an essential part of Christianity and the whole biblical tradition. And not only theoretically. You must be blind not to discover how the Gospel is a source for humanity. It engages us in our personal, family and professional life. But it has also a social impact. We do not live only as individuals. We are social beings, called to be in solidarity. The Gospel is not only related to the religious

dimension of our life. Maybe some people would like to see a Church related only to its religious affairs. But the Church is not a world alongside the real world we are living in. It is part of the world in which she fulfills her mission.

Responsible citizenship

The Church does not have political power, but she is part of the civil community. It is not correct either to pretend that she has nothing to do with the great challenges of society and humanity. Neither does she exist outside this world nor above it. She exists in this world and works for a just and humane world, in collaboration with other religions and with all men of good will. Whatever applies to the Church, applies to all Christians. A Christian who is dedicated to society is not only a citizen but also a Christian. Faith encourages responsible citizenship. The privatization of religion does not fit with the Christian faith. To respect faith is in favor of society and its leaders, because faith inspires Christians to dedicate themselves to the common good.

It is a mistake to underestimate religion. But still that is precisely what is done when religion is reduced to private life. This attitude reflects the secular tendency of modern culture, based upon the outdated conviction that a world without religion guarantees emancipation and progress. After what happened in Germany during the 20th century under the Nazi regime, and in Russia and China under a Communist regime, we should come to a better conclusion.

The appearance of Islam

There is one more reason to privatize religion as much as possible. It is the increasing presence of Islam in the secular West. Whether we want to accept it or not, Islam's presence reintroduces religion. However much many of our fellow citizens are convinced that religion can only be important in our private life, the presence of Islam remains a topic of public debate, not because of the importance of Islam as a religion, but because of Islamic extremism and violence. This danger exists and, after many assaults, it would be irresponsible to deny it. But it is irresponsible to identify Islam and its believers with extreme violence, as if Islam would be violent in its capacity as a religion. If so, Christianity would be just as violent. In fact in the name of Christian faith violence and injustice have been committed in the course of history. Also Hinduism and even Buddhism cannot be acquitted from violence. It is an absolute fact: whatever is human can be misused, and this applies to religions as well. Religions are not immune, especially when considered as cultural religions. This was the case for Christianity in the West and it still is for Islam in certain countries.

Dangerous

But the possibility of misuse of religion does not imply that religion is wrong. Islam and its numerous believers have been mishandled in the West, because they have been identified with terrorist violence. If you want to fight terrorist violence, then privatization and marginalization of religion are not the correct methods. It shows a lack of respect for Islam and also for the Christian religion. If privatization of Islam is the only answer of a secular society, than that will be considered not only naive but also dangerous.

A few years ago I was part of an official delegation of Jews, Christians and Muslims in Morocco. We visited some Jewish communities and of course also important Islamic leaders. We also met the Archbishop of Rabat. Needless to say that he represented a small Christian community in that Islamic country. He informed us about the limited circumstances within which the Church fulfills her mission. He does not have the Moroccan nationality, because he is Christian. That is what happens when religion is a cultural institution. A Moroccan who wants to be baptized better goes abroad. The Christian community which comes together on Sunday counts about 600 Christians, belonging to the diplomatic and commercial world and consists in the first place of young Africans, from the Sub Sahara, who come to Rabat to study.

The Archbishop is president of the board of a number of Catholic schools, where directors, teachers and pupils are all Muslims and there are no lessons of Catholic religion. In each school he organizes every year a day of reflection for the members of the direction and the teachers about the importance of education. To my question about the meaning of Catholic schools he answered: "We are Christians but also citizens of this country. It is our way to contribute to the building of a human and fraternal society". But still I didn't receive an answer to the question why the Church tried to be present, with such limited pastoral possibilities. The answer of the Archbishop touched me. He said: "The Church wants to be present to show that there is another way to God". He did not mean to show the Muslims that we are right and that they are wrong. He showed great respect for his country and the Muslim believers. He just wanted to say that it is not good for his country to have only one religious possibility. It is not good in Morocco nor elsewhere. He did not say it is to defend the rights of the Church. He tried to show what secular modernity is considered of great value.

No alternative

For that reason it is not wise to privatize religion in order to marginalize and neutralize Christianity. Not only because the Christian faith is part of our civilization and part of the historic and cultural patrimony of the West, but mainly because this tendency to privatization, especially when it becomes a general and systematic movement, creates a religious emptiness, which is going to be filled with something. What we have to avoid ultimately is that Islam be the only religious possibility in a completely secularized culture.

Our ultimate concern should be to avoid Islam becoming the only religious possibility in the context of a complete secular culture. It is an irreversible fact that Islam is an established religion in our western society. Islamic believers are our fellow citizens. It is absurd to deny that reality. It is our task to coexist in a diversity of convictions, in order to build together a human and just society. There is no alternative. But precisely for that reason it is very important that Christianity and Islam coexist with a Jewish community and other convictions. It is important that they coexist in peace, mutual understanding, interreligious dialogue and respect, free from all kinds of proselytism.

The only Option

The danger is not Islam. The danger is that Islam become the only religious option. This danger is real if the secular men-

tality develops and religions, in particular the Christian religion, are privatized and marginalized. Islam as a unique option would not be good, because in that case Islam would be kept from integration in the context of a secular culture, in which Islam is not a cultural religion. Of course it is not good for Christianity either nor for society. The result would be the opposite from what would be expected. It is very important for a secular society to respect and appreciate religion.

PS The introductions and intermediary titles are added by the redaction.

Non-religious Christianity

The Church should not turn inwards upon itself. God gave her an outward task. Pope Francis warns us continuously against a self-confident attitude. He speaks about the dynamic of the Exodus, to leave your own place and go to someone else to

spread the new message (*Evangelii gaudium*). The Church cannot understand herself, except in her relation to the world where she lives.

She is intimately connected with that world, in solidarity with the destiny of the whole humanity. It is inside of and for the world that she is called to be the people of God. Therefore all efforts to privatize the faith are an attack against the essence of Christian faith. It is her mission which is contested. The Church cannot understand herself as an institution to study her own religious problems. Christianity understands herself as a religion necessary for the life of people, for the task to coexist and to build a society. Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes in his letters written in prison, about what he calls a non-religious Christianity. What he means is the refusal of a Christianity, occupied only with the religious dimension of human existence, but not with real human life in all its dimensions, and nor with a human and just society. Christianity is not only a mere spiritualism.

World in the Church or Church in the world?¹ Option for evangelization instead of Christianization

Dr. Hugo Vanheeswijck

The infinite dialogue²

In Bakhtin's view, real dialogue is a never ending process. By the term 'dialogue' Bakhtin refers to the possibility of sharing in a ('the') transcendent truth by letting the other speak without turning him into an object and with respect to the infinite character of a dialogue that doesn't end up in a monologue. Important is: *speaking with the other*. Dialogue has to do with a non-objectivizing relationship to meaning, truth and last but not least the other. Yet, dialogue will always be confronted with limitations and even antagonism in daily reality, as Father Jeroom Heyndrickx made clear in his keynote lecture during the 14th Verbiest Conference. But dialogism time and time again offers perspective and describes being as an "open endedness". I quote Bakhtin: "*Nothing conclusive has yet taken place in the world, the ultimate word of the world and about the world has not yet been spoken, the world is open and free, everything is still in the future and will always be in the future*"³

Dialogical Construction of Identity

Coming back to the theme of this presentation. Infinite dialogical inter-subjectivity as a non-objectivized relationship to meaning, religion, truth and last but not least to the other, forms both the central idea as well as the method to study and realize intercultural processes and dialogue. The starting point is a fundamental and founding connectivity. An 'I' is, as it were, being involved from the beginning in connections and conversations. The self is connected with the whole out of which it is empowered to become an I, that will be continuously changed and re-shaped within its encounters. In the philosophical anthropology of Bakhtin our being as dialogical relatedness precedes all forms of identity building and exclusion of others.

Zizioulas and "Communal Ontology"

John Zizioulas uses the work of the Church Fathers to make an important distinction between the person, who is defined by a community, and the individual who defines himself in isolation from others, and who sees community as a threat to his

¹ Lecture by Dr. Hugo Vanheeswijck at the 14th Verbiest International Conference Aug. 24-27, 2021. Part 1 is on "Freedom of Religion". Following are Parts 2, 3 and 4.

² Option for dialogue by and within the Church is interpreted with the help of Mikhail Bakhtin's philosophy and the ideas of the Greek theologian Ioannis Zizioulas, Metropolitan of Pergamon, for whom true identity can only be found in relation.

³ Bakhtin, M.M., *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, (p. 166) trans. C. Emerson, Univ. of Minnesota Press-Minneapolis, 1984.



Cardinal Danneels in dialogue during his China visit in 2005

freedom. For Zizioulas it is because individual happiness has been made into an ideal in our time that brings human beings to ignoring and disregarding the ontological truth that becoming happy as a person depends on relationship with other human beings. In the relationship faith-society - in this paper the dialogue between the Church and the PRC - he notes that the Church is a community in which otherness is experienced as communion. I quote: "...The Spirit...guarantees that (following and being) in Christ will not end up in an absorption of the many into the one, in the loss of otherness...The Church in every respect is communion in otherness and otherness in communion..."⁴

The Church's Option for Dialogue

Following the words of the Council fathers, the Catholic Church has been striving for peaceful dialogue and cooperation, where possible. In a recent letter of the Board of Directors of the Verbiest Foundation-Leuven, the Chairman of the Board, Cardinal Jozef de Kesel wrote to all colleagues, cooperators and friends of the Verbiest Foundation (VF): "VF is a partnership for dialogue with China by missionaries, priests and lay faithful from East and West, Chinese and non-Chinese ready to face the new challenges implied in promoting this dialogue today...VF looks forward to the moment when VF can welcome board members from the People's Republic of China. We feel we need them to achieve our goal of developing a fruitful dialogue..."

A few weeks before this letter, Cardinal De Kesel - Archbishop of Mechelen-Brussel (Belgium) - published an essay, entitled 'Faith & Religion in a secular society'. In here, the Cardinal makes clear that it is not the mission of the Church to conquer the world as the separation between Church and State is re-

ality. Yet, this does not mean that religion has to be privatized and that the Church has nothing to do with public life, with culture, with society. I quote: "...After what happened in Germany during the 20th century under the Nazi regime, in Russia and China under a Communist regime, we should come to a better conclusion... It is our task to coexist in a diversity of convictions, in order to build together a human and just society...to coexist in peace, mutual understanding, interreligious dialogue and respect, averse from all kinds of proselytism..."⁵

In other words, the chairman of the Verbiest Foundation makes a plea to bring the Church in the world and not vice versa. The institutional and civil Christianity - the Christianization of the society - has to change into an evangelization of human life, into an option for the poor, the oppressed and marginalized. The Church, the community of followers of Jesus Christ, has to become salt in the earth! In this perspective, Cardinal De Kesel refers to Pope Francis. "...The Church should not turn inwards upon itself. God gave her an outward task. ...Christianity understands itself as a religion necessary for the life of people, for the task to coexist and to build a society..."⁶

Church in the World

Proclaiming and transferring the faith occurs with and in the Church as well as in the world. Yet, real evangelization is not an attempt to bring the world in the church structures and institutions. On the contrary: it is coming down to bring the Church - the community around the risen Christ - into culture and society, into the world. As Gustavo Gutierrez states: "...As a sacramental community, the Church should signify in its own internal structure the salvation whose fulfilment it announces. Its organization ought to serve this task..."⁷

Instead the Church has to go into the world and invite all human beings to make freely the choice for Christ. Already in his first apostolic exhortation, Pope Francis made clear that the Church has to evangelize in the world and not to Christianize the world by bringing the world into the Church. "...no one can demand that religion should be relegated to the inner sanctum of personal life, without influence on societal and national life...The earth is our common home and all of us are brothers and sisters. If indeed 'the just ordering of society and of the state is a central responsi-

4 Zizioulas, J.D., "Communion and Otherness : further Studies in Personhood and the Church", (p.75f.) ed. P. McPartlan (Londres et New York : T&T Clark/Continuum, 2006).

5 De Kesel, Jozef, Card., Essay 'Church and society'. Extract in Tertio, translated by the Verbiest Institute Leuven. Pp.1,2,3.

6 De Kesel, Jozef, Card., Essay 'Church and society'. Extract in Tertio, translated by the Verbiest Institute Leuven. P.3.

7 Gutierrez, Gustavo A Theology of Liberation, 15th Anniversary edition Maryknoll, N.Y.:Orbis, p.116,p147 1988.



Cardinal De Kesel and Msgr. Herman Cosijns introducing Chinese bishops to St. Johns Church in Malines (Belgium, 2019)

bility of politics', the Church 'cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice'. All Christians, their pastors included, are called to show concern for the building of a better world..."

Throughout his pontificate, Pope Francis calls on the Church to step out of the institutionalized self and go to the outskirts, to choose the poor, to become 'the field hospital of the world' and to continuously dialogue with everyone in order to strive for the 'common good' of all human beings. In his encyclical letter *'Fratelli Tutti'*, we read:

"...Once more we realized that no one is saved alone; we can only be saved together... .."

In March 2020 the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization released the (new) Directory for Catechesis. The influence of Pope Francis on this document cannot be overstated. This Directory places catechesis within the realm of evangelization. In accordance with the Church's option for dialogue, evangelization instead of Christianization, not bringing the world into the Church but as Christians becoming salt of the earth, we read: *"...Evangelizing does not mean occupying a given territory, but rather eliciting spiritual processes in the lives of persons so that the faith may become rooted and significant...."*⁸

In short, at the moment that Christian traditions in Europe have almost or completely faded and in China religion is banned from public life, it is more than ever necessary to mention God who is Love. When we proclaim His 'Good News', we do this

in dialogue, inspired by faith and never obtrusive. There lies a new mission, a work to do! It is shown that from a 'dialogical' angle cultural, religious and even political transformations are possible, entailing the beginning of a new chapter in the histories of both the PRC as well as the Catholic Church and their mutual encounters across temporary borders.



Archbishop Ti'kang (Taipei) and Bishop Jin Peixian (Shenyang) concelebrated in Liège in 2002

⁸ *DIRECTORY FOR CATECHESIS. Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization. United States Conference of catholic Bishops. Publication NO;7-669 Washington, DC ISBN:978-1-60137-669-5 NR43 p.36*

News from the Church in China

The redaction

Also the last months both negative as well as positive news about the Church in China reached us. We wish to keep our readers informed about these developments, of which some bring us great joy, but as always, there are many concerns. We wish to underline that the views expressed in these articles are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official editorial position of the Courier

150th anniversary of the Congregation of St. Joseph of the Archdiocese of Beijing



Agenzia Fides reports: Retracing history, deepening and reviving the charism of the founder by embarking on the synodal path: these are the objectives of the celebration of the 150th anniversary of the founding of the first indigenous female religious congregation in China, the Religious Congregation of St. Joseph of the Archdiocese of Beijing...After 30 years of closure caused by the cultural revolution, the Beijing diocesan religious congregation dedicated to Saint Joseph reopened in 1986, with six young people from the suburbs of Beijing. Today the congregation celebrates 150 years of foundation with great achievements in the pastoral and evangelization field... (Agenzia Fides, 2/5/2022)

China's Catholic Institute marks 20 years

Via UCA News we read on January 25th: A Catholic-run institute in Chinese capital Beijing has marked 20 years of academic research on Christianity and culture and the promotion of

evangelization in China and beyond. The Institute for Study of Christianity and Culture under the Archdiocese of Beijing was founded in 2002 by Father Peter Zhao Jianmin, vicar of the Archdiocese of Beijing, who graduated in canon law from the Catholic University of Leuven in Belgium... In 2019, during the XXIV Public Session of the Pontifical Academies, Pope Francis reportedly praised the academy for its role, especially on evangelization, over the years. "The academy ... is also a force of evangelization, which belongs to the present of the Church and her mission", the pope said...A nationwide survey by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in 2010 showed that China's 23 million Protestants accounted for 1.8 percent of its 1.3 billion people. Officially, mainland China has 6 million Catholics. The Holy Spirit Study Centre of Hong Kong Diocese estimates that China has some 12 million Catholics, including "unregistered" Catholics who reject the government-sanctioned Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association. (UCA News, 25/01/2022)

Academic Exchange

The University of Saint Joseph (USJ) in Macau has signed a deal with the newly established Catholic University of St. John Paul II (UCT) in Timor-Leste for academic cooperation and exchanges. Since its foundation in 1996, USJ has operated under the Catholic Diocese of Macau and is affiliated with the Catholic University of Portugal. It marked its silver jubilee last year and received permission from communist authorities in China to admit students from mainland China. UCT, the first Catholic university in Catholic-majority Timor-Leste, was inaugurated on Dec. 8, 2021, by Archbishop Dom Virgilio Do Carmo da Silva of Dili and Prime Minister Taur Matan Ruak...Thanks to Portuguese rule, Catholicism has flourished in Macau. About 30,000 Catholics live in nine parishes of Macau. Timor-Leste is a tiny Southeast Asian Catholic-majority nation of 1.3 million. A Portuguese colony from the 16th century to 1975, it gained independence in 1999 from decades of Indonesian occupation following a bloody war of independence. About 97 percent of Timorese are Catholics and the Church is highly regarded for its role in gaining independence from Indonesia. (UCA News 1/03/2022)

China tightens restrictions and bars scholars from international conferences

Strict COVID prevention policies had already stymied the volume of intellectual exchanges between the PRC and the rest of the world. Those who study China have found themselves isolated by border closures that have made travel to and from China nearly impossible, rendering archives and field sites in

China inaccessible for the last two years and counting. Since 2016, China's education ministry has required its academics to seek university approval for all overseas trips and collaborations. In September 2020, universities began applying these rules for online events held by international organizations, as well, though such rules had not been extensively enforced until now. (NPR, USA 30/03/2022)

Stop Evangelism?

China's new internet regulations went into effect March 1, laying out broad restrictions on religious communication, teaching, and evangelism... While some church leaders are concerned that online religion restrictions may scare off Christians, others hope Chinese believers will continue to sow the digital mission field. As the new measures come into force during the ongoing pandemic, where will the internet mission of Chinese churches in China and overseas now go? CT Asia editor Sean Cheng interviewed several Chinese pastors and Christians (for security reasons, the names of Christians in China are pseudonyms), including: Sean Lu, youth pastor of a church in China, now studying for a PhD in theology in the US: Lu: The church must prepare for the worst and respond for the best. If, as the authorities say in the press release, the government will "ensure that the measures are implemented," this is likely to have a big impact on the government's goal of "de-religionizing the internet." Of course, this is only relative because it is impossible to eradicate religious contents in an absolute sense. (Christianity Today, 3/03/2022)

From Rome to Hong Kong

During an audience in March, Bishop Stephen Chow of Hong Kong made a request to the pope. "I asked him if you would mind sending his greetings and some encouragement to the Catholics in the mainland and in Hong Kong under the stress

of Covid," the bishop said. "The Holy Father accepted immediately, and I used my iPhone to make the two videos." The political situation in Hong Kong has been tense, especially since the imposition of the national security law on July 1, 2020, the subsequent repression of democracy and many civil liberties—despite largely peaceful protests—and the arrest of prominent advocates of democracy, including several Catholics. In the second message, Pope Francis addressed the more than 10 million Catholics in mainland China "at the time of pandemic": *Dear brothers and sisters, you Catholics, I greet you with gratitude and love. Thank you for your testimony of faith. Thanks for the love of the Lord Jesus Christ and the holy mother of God, Our Lady.* (America Magazine, 23/3/2022)



Arrest of Hong Kong cardinal

The arrest of Hong Kong's bishop emeritus, Cardinal Joseph Zen, 90, hardly came as a surprise, UCANews reports... While Cardinal Zen's support of protesters and agitation for democracy made him unpopular with Hong Kong authorities, the wider concern in Beijing has been his ongoing critique of the Vatican's controversial and still secret 2018 deal with Beijing regarding the appointment of bishops... Cardinal Zen's arrest is problematic for the Vatican in a number of ways. Its deal with Beijing is up for its two-year renewal by September and this will surely cloud any talks already underway. While Rome, too, will be unsurprised by his arrest, any moves to advance the case and perhaps put the nonagenarian in jail will only give Pope Francis' increasingly noisy critics more ammunition. Beijing/Hong Kong should also tread carefully as Cardinal Zen has become a symbol of religious opposition to the Chinese party-state... Persecuting religious heroes, or if they die while under investigation or jailed, creates martyrs, symbols to rally opposition. And this is true as much for the CCP as for Pope Francis and his allies in the Vatican. (UCA News, 12/5/2022)

Youngest cardinal from Mongolia has vital role to play

UCANews, June 3, 2022

Bishop Giorgio Marengo has roots in Italy and is expected to link Europe and Asia in more ways than one

Making someone a prince of the Catholic Church in a sparsely populated Asian country sandwiched between communist China and authoritarian Russia has much to do with faith and pastoral requirements. But its apparent geopolitical expediency cannot be ignored.

By conferring a red hat on 47-year-old Bishop Giorgio Marengo, the apostolic prefect of Ulaanbaatar in Mongolia, 85-year-old Pope Francis has found his youngest cardinal. Bishop Marengo came to serve Mongolia in 2002, hardly two years after his ordination as a priest. Church records show it is a tiny mission with fewer than 1,300 Catholics in a population of 3.5 million, served by two Mongol priests, 22 foreign missionaries and 35 nuns. The newest and the first cardinal-elect from the East Asian nation will be eligible to vote in papal conclaves for 33 years. There is a widespread perception among Vatican watchers that this will be Pope Francis' last addition to the College of Cardinals and, therefore, he wants to put things in a correct perspective. The pope has started paying attention to the small communities of faithful scattered throughout the world, Italy-born Bishop Marengo said soon after the pope made the announcement of his elevation in St. Peter's Square.

"... I believe that the pope's gesture was a missionary gesture, to express attention and care to a small community and to all the small communities of faithful scattered throughout the world, in those lands where they are a small flock," he said. Mongolia shares a 4,630-kilometer border with China and shares many cultural aspects with the communist nation's people. China houses more Mongol people than Mongolia itself.

He was referring to the scarce population of Catholics in the difficult terrain of Mongolia, and Catholics in neighboring China and Russia, which have locked horns with the US, the European Union and NATO.

Mongolia may be a democracy but the landlocked Buddhist-majority nation is already a key commodity transit point for the two autocratic regimes.

In the Ukraine conflict, Mongolia, a former Soviet satellite nation until 1990 and dependent on China as a market and conduit for its copper and coal exports, has stayed neutral by refusing to join the US-led NATO coalition against Russia. Four days after the Russian invasion of Ukraine on Feb. 24, Mongolia signed a memorandum of understanding on the long-

planned trans-Mongolian gas pipeline deal that will supply Mongolia with gas from Siberia's Yamal fields and will allow Russia to transport gas to China. The EU gets 40 percent of its energy from Russia and is reducing its dependence on it. Mongolia is playing a vital role in finding markets for energy from Russia, which is facing US-led international sanctions. If the Ukraine conflict is prolonged or if China and Russia form an anti-Western alliance, Mongolia's political orientation may change once and for all. That does not mean that the West is deserting Mongolia, three times the size of France with half its population in capital Ulaanbaatar. In May, the UK's Asia minister of state, Amanda Milling, visited the country to coax it along with the Western discourse.



Though the Vatican has inked a secret pact with China on the appointment of bishops, the 2018 deal is believed to have clauses against the Holy See conferring the red hat on prelates living in China. The Vatican has selected the Catholic leader of Mongolia, which has anthropological ties with China, as its man in the region. In the case of a stand-off between China and the West, the Vatican can use the youngest cardinal from Mongolia, a nation that stretches between imposing mountain ranges in the north and arid expanses in the south, as a go-getter. The appointment also comes as Mongolia observes the 30th anniversary of the rebirth of the Church and the establishment of diplomatic ties with the Holy See. The Church in Mongolia is part of the newly formed Bishops' Conference of Central Asia.

"Dialogue with the Buddhist world, which is a majority in Mongolia, is fundamental for us. It is part of our mission. I am sure it will bear good fruit," Bishop Marengo said while leading a Buddhist delegation to Rome at the time of his appointment.

Asia already has 15 cardinal electors. The new consistory will increase Asian representation significantly to 21 with six new cardinals from Asia. Though Africa also had 15 cardinal electors, only two prelates got the red hat this time. In that sense, the pope has put Asia ahead of Africa. Already the Papa Rosso, or the Red Pope, is from Asia in 64-year-old Cardinal Luis Tagle from the Philippines. His position as head of the Vatican Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples is second only to the pope. Cardinal Tagle was last week given the additional charge of heading another important Vatican office — the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments. The selection of Bishop Marengo, who has roots in Italy, is a clear sign that the young cardinal is expected to play a vital role in linking the Church in Europe and Asia in more ways than one.

The Beijing Winter Olympics, Xiwanzi's Christian stories and Father Jeroom's missionary dream

Gianni Valente, *Christianity and China*, February 4, 2022

The Winter Olympics in Beijing, which began today, intersect in a unique way with the past and present of Chinese Catholicism, with its apostolic joys and sufferings. Some of the sporting events will take place in Beijing. But the ski events will take place in the mountains 250 kilometres northwest of the capital. It was in these mountains, in the village of Xiwanzi, that in December 1865 the Belgian Catholic priest Theophile Verbist, together with his first companions, took the first steps in China of the Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (CICM), the institute of the so-called "Scheut missionaries" that he founded with the vocation of proclaiming the Gospel in the Celestial Empire.



From 1865 the Scheut Fathers developed Xiwanzi into a Catholic village of 5000 believers. Mgr. Leo De Smedt built the beautiful cathedral

The beginning of that missionary adventure, and all the steps that followed, were narrated in the latest bulletin of the Verbiest Foundation in Leuven by Belgian priest Jeroom Heyndrickx, also a missionary from Scheut.

Father Jeroom, 91 years old, spent his long life as a missionary and scholar, passionate about the Christian life that he saw blossoming and growing in Middle Earth, in the midst of so many hardships and tribulations. His testimony unfolds as a pure *confessio*, a simple attestation of the mysterious occur-

rence of grace amidst the happy and painful events of history.

The mountain resort hosting part of the 2022 Winter Olympics is Chongli. This will be the name used by the world's media during the Olympic Games. But the missionaries of Scheut at the time preferred to use the name by which the place is popularly called by the locals.

In the mountains, groups of Chinese Christians from other regions had already sought refuge from per-

secution in the 18th century. They lived in caves dug into the mountains, where they were able to withstand both the winter cold and the heavy summer heat. Some Catholic families,' reports Father Heyndrickx in his reconstruction, 'have also lived in the same caves in recent times.'

Before the end of the 18th century, and then in the first decades of the 19th century, these mountain communities of baptised people had already been identified and visited by Jesuits and Lazarists. There were already thousands of them, and the rhythms of their lives were marked by prayers and the sacraments celebrated in the church they had built themselves. Then the fathers of Scheut arrived. In a few years, Xiwanzi had become a Catholic village with 5,000 souls, the centre of a flourishing diocese with more than 20 "missionary stations".



Participants to the 2012 Verbiest China travel praying inside the newly built cathedral of Xiwanzi



The cemetery of Xiwanzi



Bp. Leo De Smedt cism (centre)



The new, modern city of Xiwanzi

For generations, the Christian life of the village proceeded in peace. CICM preached the Gospel, and in the meantime a school for boys and one for girls was built, as well as a seminary for priestly vocations, together with a hospital and an orphanage, a printing house and a library. Dozens of French, Belgian and Dutch missionaries pray and work every day proclaiming the joy of Christ, and finding comfort in the spectacle of new life they see flourishing among the baptized. At the end of their beautiful lives spent preaching, teaching and working in “that other world” of China, they fall asleep in eternal peace in the cemetery of Xiwanzi, in the place that became their home and gladdened their apostolic hearts. Bishop Leo De Smedt, who led the diocese from 1931, had a cathedral built on the hill that became famous throughout northern China. “There were more than 250 Scheut Missionary priests,” recounts Father Jeroom, “who in those decades gave the joy of their youth by following Christ in China, and now their remains rest in Catholic cemeteries in the provinces of North China”.

Then, the fruitful and uninterrupted bond that for decades united the missionaries of Scheut to the Christians of Xiwanzi suffered a crash that seemed fatal. It happened in December 1946, when the village was invaded by the Eighth Red Army, a large field unit of the Chinese Communist Party. The cathedral, schools and seminary were left in ruins. Many died, many disappeared. The old bishop De Smedt arrives in Belgium and tells these tragic stories in the schools, including that of the Flemish city of Sint Niklaas. Sixteen-year-old Jeroom is among the pupils listening to him. His boyhood heart was deeply touched by those very stories of martyrdom: “I decided on that very Sunday evening: I want to enter the congregation of CICM, to go to Xiwanzi. Now, after 70 years,” adds Father Heyndrickx, looking back on his life, not without emotion, “I am still involved every day with China, recommending and promoting unity and dialogue in today’s China. It then happened that Bishop De Smedt, instead of spending his last years in peace in his homeland, told everyone that he could not leave

his diocese: he returned to China, was arrested and died in prison in 1951. He was succeeded by the young Chinese bishop Melchior Zhang Kexing, who also went straight to prison. The Christians of Xiwanzi who were still free, isolated themselves in the mountains. From the 1950s until the Cultural Revolution, they continued to share their faith in secret, in hiding.”

It all seems to be over for the Scheut fathers, but it was not.

More than 30 years later, in 1980, Father Jeroom and other members of the Verbiest Foundation were allowed by the Chinese authorities to visit for the first time the ancient





In 2018, Fr. Charles Phukuta cism visited Xiwanzi

Scheut missions scattered throughout North China. This time, they were not allowed to meet the Xiwanzi communities, which were classified as “clandestine” by the Chinese authorities. But the Foundation did not force it, because they felt that in those circumstances, an attempt to meet with the underground communities without permission from the civil authorities could have compromised their intention to patiently foster ecclesial reconciliation over a long period of time. Things move forward one step at a time,

one concession at a time. Thirty years later, in 2012, the Scheut missionaries were granted permission to visit Xiwanzi and other memorable sites of their missionary adventure every year. They find the communities of Christians who, along with their baptism, have passed on from generation to generation the grateful memory of the work of the first missionaries who arrived from faraway Europe. Father Jeroom and his friends also saw the new cathedral being built bit by bit, using the white stones already used for the church destroyed in the dark years. Step by step, year by year, the guests from afar get permission to meet and then to pray and sing together with the Christians of Xiwanzi in the new cathedral. They visit the restored ceme-

tery and pray with particular emotion in front of the tombs of the four bishops. Not even that shrine has been lost, and even the memory of those times of suffering and pain can be filled with tears of gratitude.

In 2018, the superior general of CICM also went on pilgrimage to Xiwanzi. The group from Europe met 500 men, women, boys and girls from the local Catholic community in the cathedral. Permission to share the Eucharistic celebration had not yet been granted by the local authorities, but the European guests left a monsternace in the cathedral, a sign of a common path rediscovered against all hope. Then came the news that the 2022 Winter Olympics would be held in Xiwanzi. In just a few years, a small modern city was built in place of the old village, destined to house at least 60,000 inhabitants. In the midst of the new buildings, the white stone cathedral stands out. The station of the high-speed train linking the new ski resort to Beijing stands next to an old chapel built in 1904 by the Dutch missionary Hadriaan van der Heijden, who wanted to be buried there. Now, even that small building, once filled with prayers and candles, has been recognised by the state as a local historical monument.

Ever since Xiwanzi-Chongli was designated to host the 2022 Winter Olympics, Jeroom and his team have been cherishing the dream of being present at the Olympics and perhaps celebrating the Eucharistic liturgy in the cathedral together with their Chinese brothers. Then came the Covid-19 pandemic, which killed that dream too. But they do not despair. The history of Xiwanzi, where the cathedral stands out among the new buildings, has persuaded them that there will be other occasions. **And that old friendships, guarded by Christ, never die.**

The chapel of Hadriaan van der Heyden cism (Waalwijk) in Qipanliang built in 1904, near the highspeed Chungli train station, and which is now declared a monument of cultural exchange



Pilgrimage of Camino de Santiago - The most valuable experience in life

By Maria, Matthew & Gaby



Since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, all kind of efforts have been done by various countries around the world to develop vaccines and medicines to fight for the virus in order to save people's lives. Covid-19 epidemic has made more people pause, to wonder and overthink life.

We, who are always busy in daily lives, should take the time to stop, and to reorganize and reintegrate our work, life and study. We are inspired by the Bible to ponder: "By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day He rested from all his work. Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done." (Genesis 2:1-3) With these intentions, we embarked on the Camino pilgrimage to Santiago, which we had planned two years ago. It was believed to be the ancient pilgrimage of the disciple of the Lord St. James, in which he has travelled thousands of miles, going through mountains and rivers, even risking his life, in order to preach the Gospel.

More than a thousand years ago, the tomb of Saint James the Apostle, was rediscovered in Spain because of a bright star. Therefore, the city was since then named: "Santiago de Compostela", which means "Santiago of the Stars Field". Since the Middle Ages, it has become one of the three most famous pilgrimage sites in the world, and was listed as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1985.

With the blessings and prayers of the colleagues of the Verbiest Foundation (VF) Leuven

Together with all the members of Verbiest Foundation, the vice chairman of the Foundation Father Charles Phukuta had paid a great attention and concern to our pilgrimage. On the day before we left for Spain, Fr. Jeroom Heyndrickx and the colleagues of Leuven office held a Eucharist liturgy in the Chinese College Leuven (CCL) as a sending ceremony to us. Pieter Ackerman, the executive secretary of the VF, read the letter of Fr.

Charles Phukuta with wishes and prayers. Besides, colleagues in Taipei prayed for us by having a Eucharist celebration on May 3. Three of us deeply felt the support and encouragement, as well as the spirit of communion in the Foundation.

Having the trust of VF colleagues, as well as the recommendation letter the priest of St. Damian church Leuven, we managed to arrive in Spain and started our walking pilgrimage on May 2. We chose the last 200 km of the ancient "French pilgrimage route", starting from Ponferrada, which is about 210km away from Santiago, and it took us walking for 30km per day, until we arrived in Santiago on May 8 afternoon. We prayed the Rosary together on the daily journey, and followed with personal prayers, in which intentions go to the world peace, the Verbiest Foundation, individuals, relatives and friends, as well as all those who asked for our intercession, and closed our prayers by singing the 'Our Father' and 'The Hail Mary'.

As a Chinese saying goes: "Travelling brings about far greater benefit than mere book learning" (读万卷书, 不如行万里路). On the first day of the pilgrimage, we began to learn and experience with great surprises from the pilgrimage. Not only was the weather sunny and pleasant, but for the first time, the seashell pattern road sign appeared so clearly along the roads, that every pilgrim would identify and follow in their footsteps to Santiago. It reminded us as if the three kings saw the bright star which led them to worship the newborn Saviour, and our hearts were filled with the joy of the Gospel. Surprises kept appearing to us one after another. Before we finished one kilometre on the road, we met people who came from all over the world, men and women, young and old, carrying backpacks of big and small, walking in duo or in trio. Some walked alone silently, with serenity and peacefulness.



Mutual Confirmation in Faith

What moved us even more was that every pilgrim greeted each other with a same word. No matter where they come from, with what language they speak, they all greet each other with "Buen camino" (which means 'good luck', 'keep it up', 'good journey') and "Hola" (meaning "hello"). The first Spanish verse we learned on the first day of our pilgrimage was, "Buen camino", and since then we happily greeted every pilgrim we met on the road with "Buen camino".

The first pilgrim greeted us was Peter from Switzerland, who had just started his retirement. We learned that he started his journey from Saint Jean de Pied de Port in France, and he had walked for 500 kilometres for 22 days, and it still took him an-



ers, massive grasslands and wildflowers, pass through countless forests and villages, enjoy watching the herds of Spanish cattle, and historical sites along the way. Camino pilgrimage, often times, also leaves spiritual experiences to the non-Christian pilgrims, and that's why many people from all over the world are attracted to experience this unique spiritual journey. People that we met and talked with us were from the United States, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Korea, and from Europe. Some came with intentions to exercise and to challenge their physical capacity. All these assorted reasons have enriched and amazed our pilgrimage.

Universality of the Catholic Church

Prayer is the most important intention of the pilgrims. When we prayed the Rosary by singing: "Ave, Ave, Ave Maria", a gentleman in his 60s from the United States also followed us and praised the Virgin Mary in his own language.

As we approached the destination, we encountered more and more people coming from all different directions toward the Basilica of Santiago, as well as large pilgrimage groups of dozens of people, and small groups with some children. It makes us feel the power of faith and the universality of the Catholic Church, regardless of race, language, geography and occupation. The church is like a towering tree, where all kinds of birds can perch and rest. There are Mass in the basilica from morning to night, we attended a Spanish Mass at 7pm. The whole basilica was full of pilgrims, seats were not enough for all and many were standing. In Europe, we often hear people say "the churches in Europe are empty, or there are only old people", but it is not the case for this church, as you can see young people here showing their devotion and passion of their faith.

The next morning, we were proud to receive a certificate of completion of the pilgrimage. As the famous Chinese saying: "he who does not reach the great wall is not a true man", the exhaustion of our seven-day journey was swept away at that moment. We attended the International Pilgrimage Mass at the Cathedral of de Compostela at 12pm. During the Mass, we thanked for the smoothness of the pilgrimage, and thanked for Verbiest Foundation and those who had offered prayers to us and kept them in communion in our prayer. We took the same prayer with us to our next pilgrimage destination, Lourdes in France. We asked Our Lady of Lourdes to pray for us and protect us.

When we returned to Leuven on May 16, we attended Fr. Jeroom Heyndrickx's 90th birthday celebration in his hometown, Haasdonk, where we had the final stamp on our pilgrimage visa, which made our entire pilgrimage of Camino more complete. The pilgrimage is over, however we will not forget to greet everyone we meet in the future with "Buen camino". Let's confirm and cheer for each other in our faith!

other 270 kilometres to reach Santiago. We saw a large shell hanging on his backpack with a very special pointed red cross carved on it, which is the sign of 'Camino' route. Curiously, we asked him where did he get such a beautiful shell, and he told us that he bought it from a shop in Switzerland before leaving for the pilgrimage. Then we discovered that many pilgrims had a similar shells with them, hanging in their backpacks. Peter told us that we need to buy a (CREDENCIAL) pilgrimage visa, with which we must collect the stamps of each place where we would stop by, that are churches, hostels or hotels etc. A pilgrimage pass is not only a 'visa' to the journey, but also a beautiful memory of the pilgrimage. Therefore, each of us bought a pilgrimage pass for ourselves, and started to collect stamps in every church and guest house we went. After seven days of walking, the stamps of our visa were full, and it was a great joy.

Experience gained from the pilgrimage

From the individuals whom we talked to, we found that everyone has his or her own personal and unique intention and goal to the pilgrimage. Some pilgrims want to improve their beliefs and purify their souls; we met a young Chinese man who owns a restaurant in Barcelona, decided to be on Camino because of difficulties in life. He was advised to make this pilgrimage to relieve his stressful life. Another pilgrim was a German Protestant, who treated Camino as a way to resolve his grief for the death of his wife who passed away in her fifties in March this year....

We still remember clearly before we arrived in Santiago on May 7 morning, an Italian couple who live in Switzerland. The couple started their departed from Switzerland and had travelled for 86 days, going through more than 2,200 km, carrying with them large backpacks and a tent. "What motivates you to travel such a long and arduous journey?", we asked. The man replied to us with a smile, "love". And this is the third time they have made such a pilgrimage. Our response to him "Your day of victory is coming soon" and he replied, "No, that will be our time of contemplation when we get there". Frankly speaking, we were struck by his answer, and put us to shame by their inspiring motivation. We have learned a great spiritual lesson by their simple words.

Some pilgrims choose the route in which they can get closer to the nature, where they will cross mountains and riv-



My Vocation: Meeting People in China.

Reflections at my 90th birthday

Jerome Heyndrickx cicm

To friends who celebrated my 90th birthday, I offered to answer two questions which I have often been asked. *When and how did I ever decide to become a missionary in China? And what have I done during my 65 years as a China missionary?* I tried to formulate a short answer.

The idea to become a missionary grew in me since I was a child and young student, together with several other dreams I had for my future. Language study has always been a priority interest. Our teacher in the Poesis class of classical secondary school Anton van Wilderode, the famous Flemish poet, challenged us to translate some verses of Virgilus' Latin poetry. I would have loved to become a teacher of Latin & Greek. In the KSA - our Student Association - we put on stage the Christmas play of another Flemish author Felix Timmermans "To where the star stood still" in which I played one of the main roles. The director of an Antwerp Theatre School came to invite me to enter his school and become a professional actor. I was delighted. Why not combine teaching with acting? There were still other roads. But all that did not happen.



At the age of sixteen, I decided that it was my vocation to enter the CICM missionary congregation and go to China. This happened as follows. I was a border student in the fourth year of Latin-Greek secondary school in Sint Niklaas. One Sunday afternoon Bishop Leo De Smedt CICM, bishop in China gave us a lecture. He told the moving story on how in December 1946 his Catholic town of Xiwanzi was invaded by the army burning down the buildings, schools and destroying the beautiful cathedral. 200 people died in the attack, a hundred more were taken along on the snowy mountains and never returned. The 78-year-old bishop ended his story saying: "I am old, but I want to return to my town Xiwanzi to be with my people". I remember that I left the hall silently, not saying anything to my friends. And that same night I decided: *I want to enter CICM, go to China, to the village Xiwanzi.* That happened in 1948. At the age of 18 [1950] I entered the novitiate of cicm.

Seven years later, in 1957, I left my home as a CICM missionary not to go to China because that was closed to missionaries, but to Taiwan, part of China. I had to drop my Xiwanzi-dream from my horizon, but the ways of the Lord are mysterious. Eventually I still arrived in Xiwanzi long after we had established Verbiest Foundation in Leuven (1982) and was allowed to travel to China to promote dialogue and cooperation. By that time the old Bishop De Smedt had died in prison in China. His tomb could not be found any more. I did meet privately with old Bishop Melchior Zhang who had succeeded De Smedt and then spent 36 years of his life in prison and labor camp. Deeply moved I listened to his soft-spoken voice telling me the story of these 36 years without any sound of anger or hatred in his voice. A saintly person. At the end he gave me the vest which Bishop De Smedt wore when he died and which he himself afterwards had worn for 36 years. A holy relic.

Even then my dream of going to Xiwanzi, the village of Bp. De Smedt was excluded because after their village had been destroyed, the Christians went into opposition and became "underground" (not recognized by the government). I was not allowed to meet them. Still, I finally got to Xiwanzi but only thirty more years later, in 2012. I went there with permission though under strict control. But the control diminished with the following visits when I went even with delegations from Belgium. My dream of 1948 was realized in 2012. Today I am a friend of Xiwanzi. I go there and invite Christians to join us as we follow Pope Francis on the way of dialogue with China. We fully realize how difficult, even painful it is for them after their dramatic experiences to walk along that road. Yet dialogue is the center of our conversations. With the Pope we believe that this is the only way for us to go. That's how it now became the main goal of my missionary life: to bring people together from all different walks of life, from different faiths and different ideologies, to meet with them, dialogue with them in mutual respect. This is entirely in line with our gospel. I never regretted the decision I took that Sunday evening in 1948 in the secondary school of St Niklaas.

And now our second question: *what have I done in these 65 years in China and in Verbiest Foundation Leuven (1957-2022)?* I will answer this question in two words: *meet Chinese people.* That answer may surprise some friends. In their mind the task of a missionary is: *to save souls, baptize babies.* Yes indeed, we are sent to testify and baptize. But you do not impose baptism on people. First and foremost, we want to meet with people, listen to each other, learn to understand each other better and show mutual respect. We speak about the gospel with those who ask and are ready for it. The stress is on dialogue, meeting people, foster unity and peace. I consciously opted for that priority for myself before I went to China. This is how I did it.

Already in 1954 when I studied theology in Leuven, I asked myself the question: what am I going to do in China? I was in correspondence with a Buddhist young man in India. I asked him to tell me who Buddha was for him, and I would tell him who Christ is for me. This was the content of our correspondence. Besides this and while studying theology, I read books on Buddhism written by Professor Louis Poussin de la Vallée and books on Hinduism. It developed in me a great respect for Buddhism, Daoism, Hinduism, and other Asian religions. Later in Taiwan and China I stood dozens of times in temples quietly and silently admiring people as they burned their incense. While teaching pastoral theology in Chinese seminaries, I constantly reminded my students of our duty to *respect all people in prayer, whichever faith they profess.* We profess different faiths, but we feel as if we belong to the same family. Unfortunately, we do not know each other well enough so we urgently need to first listen to each other. An open listening mind makes the first step to a mutually enriching dialogue. And if our partner also is open to us, we will not omit to speak with enthusiasm about our own faith in Christ and His gospel which is for us the most beautiful faith that exists. We promote and proclaim that, as the Lord told us, and we will also baptize as soon as somebody asks for it but at no time do we impose it. Priority is meeting people whichever faith they confess. A simple meeting may one day reach its peak in an “encounter”, when mutually deeper understanding and appreciation has grown but that does not happen so easily. *The way to the heart of the other is long!*

After Mao Zedong had died Deng Xiaoping opened China in 1978 for cooperation and exchange with other countries. My old dream of 1948 revived unexpectedly: the dream to go to China, particularly to the village Xiwanzi in the cold North of China. 679 Belgian and Dutch cism missionaries had worked since 1865 in that most underdeveloped region of China over a distance of 3000 km (as far as from Leuven to North Africa). They built schools, opened the biggest modern hospital of the whole region, built canals to irrigate tens of thousands of hectares farmland and built churches where Christians prayed. Now that China was opening again after the confusing years of the Cultural Revolution, cism wished to know whether those Christian communities still existed and how they were doing.

That's why cism established the Ferdinand Verbiest Foundation at Leuven University to engage in cooperation and exchange in academic research and develop a new relationship with institutes in Communist China. It would allow us to meet our former Christians and exchange with them. A totally new field of activity opened for us: promoting dialogue and encounter between cultures and different ideologies including commu-



nists, atheists. Many thought that Verbiest Foundation entered the field of diplomacy, but that was not the case. Our work bordered with diplomacy because it included contacts with the Church as well as with civil authorities in China as well as contacts with the Vatican. Fortunately, by my 7 years stay in Rome I had become somewhat acquainted with the Holy See by meetings at the Propaganda Fide and with Pope John Paul II.

We aimed at developing friendly dialogue allowing free and frank communication while avoiding conflict. It was a challenge to achieve this in a relationship with Chinese Communist authorities and yet remain friend with all Chinese Christians – those officially recognized as well the underground – with Christians in Taiwan and with the Holy See, where I became member of the Commission for issues of the Church in China. Till today different viewpoints exist among the Communists in China but also in Rome.

In the past forty years I met and dialogued with three different popes: most of all with Pope John Paul II, also with Pope Benedict and Pope Francis. Verbiest Foundation promotes dialogue and follows closely in the footsteps of Pope Francis who shows us that dialogue is the only way to go.

But there is opposition inside the Church and also inside the PRC. Some people openly block dialogue. But whoever knows the history of imperialism of the past 200 years is not surprised about this. Misunderstandings of the past must be cleared up,

Jeroom's 90th birthday was celebrated in Haasdonk. A mass, in presence of the mayor, took place, and a reception followed. Fr. Jeroom was rewarded the title of "honorary citizen" of Beveren, the first one in history!



that precisely is part of the way of dialogue. But people disagree on the way to do that. While disagreeing hundred percent with those who block dialogue, we avoid conflict with them and even show understanding. This however is a complex but very evangelical task which calls for a constant balancing effort. One meets with disappointments that tempt you to give up. But whoever believes in the gospel ignores the word *giving up*.

We honor the same attitude in our dialogue with atheists and communists. We do not know them well enough, and they do not know us either. Yet we know that even in communist, atheistic China many people respect and are interested in the gospel. In Beijing Diocese at least 2000 adults are baptized in the Catholic Church after having followed class on faith and gospel for a year by people who personally accompany them on their way. Chinese priests, religious and lay faithful are trained in seminaries to witness for the gospel in a fully secularized materialistic society in full respect for those who do not believe. Isn't it remarkable that this is allowed to happen in Communist China?

At the age of 90 I live happily in the vocation which I chose at the age of 16, hoping that it may still last for some time. It is a regretful anomaly that today there are no more missionary vocations. Never has there been such an urgent need in the world to bring people from different religions and ideologies together in mutual respect and on a basis of equality. The world has become our village. Every day we experience how miserable our world is because mutual respect among people is lacking. I feel happy that being 90 years old, I am allowed to cooperate in promoting dialogue and encounter of people of different world views. I see it as a service to the Church but also to society. And in doing this I feel strengthened and confirmed by the support and friendship of friends of my hometown and home country. I experience this as His blessing.

May we ever feel His presence in the soft breeze of our friendship and continue to confirm each other in faith. That is in fact the meaning of the Mission which He gave us.

*Yes my friends, this farmers' son from Flemish Waasland
Still tills the land with as plough his cross, because
Thanks to the softly whispering breeze of our friendship
And the hymnal song of my homeland ringing in our hearts
Our Mission goes on.*

Ferdinand Verbiest Foundation

Mission Statement

Ferdinand Verbiest Foundation (VF) is legally established in Leuven, directed by the VF Board, and presided by H. Emin. Card. Jozef De Kesel. During its IXth Chapter (1981), CICM (the Scheut Fathers), after 90 years (1865-1955) of missionary activities in North China looked for a new way to live the *Option for China* written in their Constitutions since 1862 by Founder Theophile Verbist. In 1983 CICM established VF to update its *Option for China*. VF was given the task to develop a new relation of cooperation and exchange with China (the PRC) and Chinese (Zhonghua 中华) communities worldwide. Since then, VF honors the traditional CICM Priority Option for China by promoting dialogue, cooperation, and exchange.

For 23 years VF grew and developed in Taiwan thanks to CICM and to the dedication and essential contributions of lay faithful and Church leaders of Taiwan. In 2006 CICM transferred VF to Verbiest Foundation-Leuven in Belgium where it is now legally registered. In view of its goal and openness to the universal community VF does not consider itself as *belonging* to any country or local Church. It sees itself as an International Catholic Community inspired by the gospel and by Vatican II.

The VF community includes members from East and West: diocesan priests, religious missionaries from three different congregations – CICM (Scheut), Clarian Fathers CMF, Brothers of Charity FC (Gent), -- non-Christian members as well as lay faithful. Each of the members contributes to the goal of the foundation from his own cultural, social, and historical background. They work in institutes in Leuven (Belgium) and Taipei (Taiwan). The VF Board hopes that it will soon be possible to welcome a VF Board member from the People's Republic of China which is necessary to realize its goal.

VF is open to dialogue with atheism, different philosophies, and religions to foster mutual understanding, brotherhood on a basis of equality and mutual respect while pursuing progress and wellbeing in our modern secularized societies. The VF goal is best expressed in the phrase *Seeking the Common Ground* i.e., we search to discover the issues on which we agree with our partners in dialogue while *showing mutual respect* for the issues on which we do not agree.

VF has developed three activity programs to realize its goal:

1. A Program for Pastoral & Social Exchange and Cooperation,
2. An Academic Research Program
3. A Cultural Exchange Program

In Leuven Verbiest Foundation runs two institutes which are jointly administered. It cooperates with Leuven Catholic University through its Verbiest Institute KUL located in KUL premises. Chinese College Leuven (CCL) is a VF home where colleagues who do research or engage in VF activities accept to live together in a CCL community of Christian Universal Brotherhood.

In Taiwan VF honors and continues the heritage and part of the program inherited from the *Taiwan Pastoral Center (TPC)*. This includes programs for formation of ministers in the pastoral, catechetical and social fields. VF cooperation with Fujen Catholic University is fostered by the *Taipei Verbiest Association for Cultural Exchange*.

What is the Ferdinand Foundation? What is she doing?

- > CICM (Congregation of Missionaries of Scheut) was founded in 1862 by Theofiel Verbist (Antwerp). Between 1865 and 1955 679 missionaries worked in North China: in Inner Mongolia, in Jehol, Datong, Ningxia, Xinjiang, Qinghai. They evangelized, they built schools, hospitals and developed agriculture. Some Scheut missionaries became famous around the world through their research on the Chinese and Mongolian language and culture. Having been banished from China, after 1949 by Mao Zedong, they opened missions in Taiwan, Hong Kong, in Singapore and later in Republic of Mongolia.
- > When China opened again to establish collaboration with the West, Scheut created with the Catholic University of Louvain, in 1982, the Ferdinand Verbiest Foundation, bearing the name of the famous Jesuit missionary eighteenth-century Belgian astronomer, teacher of Emperor Kangxi. His Eminence, Cardinal J. De Kesel (Mechelen) chairs the Foundation. Board members represent different congregations of missionaries: the mission of Scheut, the Claretians, the brothers of Charity.
- > The Verbiest Foundation wants to develop a new relationship with the Church of China. Similar to the age old collaboration of missionaries of our countries with China, she wants to stimulate a contemporary collaboration between the Church Belgium and China. This should be based on equality and mutual appreciation.
- > The Foundation sponsors the activities of the Institute Verbiest KULeuven (Naamsestraat 63, bus 4018, 3000 Leuven), those of the Chinese College in Leuven (Vlamingenstraat 1) and those of the Institute Verbiest in Taipei. Through these institutes, the Foundation wants to develop research on the history of the Church in China as well as developing there pastoral collaboration with the Church.
- > To help the Church in China most effectively, it is better to invest in the training of ministers of the Church. For this purpose, the Foundation offers scholarships for the formation of priests, of nuns and lay people. Note that a formation, insured in China, is preferred. The foundation also aimed at higher institutes in China. Likewise, there are priests, nuns and lay people who are invited to receive special training abroad. After their studies, it is advisable that they return to China to serve their own Church. Colleagues from the Foundation are in touch with bishops and religious communities in China. They make sure that the support is used good and correctly.
- > In addition, the Foundation also responds positively to requests for help for (small) development projects in the dioceses of North-West China: Gansu, Qinghai, Inner Mongolia, Ningxia, etc.
- > Financial support can be sent to: the Ferdinand Verbiest Foundation, Vlamingenstraat 1, 3000 Leuven - Current account: 735-0183437-95 (KBC Bank NV, Mgr Ladeuzeplein 19, 3000 Leuven, Belgium (BIC: KREDBEBB, IBAN: BE76 7350 1834 3795) If you wish, you can always take up contact with our secretariat via verbiest.inst@kuleuven.be

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