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## EDITORIAL

*Hugo Vanheeswijck*

*General Secretary Verbiest Foundation*

Dear Reader,

A few days before I left on a working trip to China and Taiwan, I saw an episode of the Sunday 'faith conversation' on Dutch television. The well-known interviewer Leo Feijen spoke with Dom Bernardus Peeters, the general abbot of the Cistercians of Strict Observance, better known as "the Trappists". After his election as Superior General, now almost two years ago, Brother Bernardus travels the world to meet with his brothers and sisters of the Trappist and Trappistine families. Asked by the interviewer what had struck him most in all those travels, the abbot, after a brief hesitation, replied the following: "how the faithful in China, both officially and underground, remain faithful to their faith and give their all for it. An example to the faithful around the world." A statement that strengthens us, after 40 years of dialogue and cooperation with the Church in China and the Chinese people, to continue on this path in 2024 and beyond.



On November 26th we commemorated Fr. Theophile Verbist. Fr. Phukuta presided at a classic Chinese ancestor commemoration ceremony in the chapel of the Pastoral Centre.

In our last Courier, we announced that 2023 would be an important year for both the Verbiest Foundation and the Congregation of CICM. And it has proven to be so. Exchange with the Church in China, based on mutual trust, friendship and dialogue are the key words that characterize our 40-year-old Foundation. And we were able to put these key words into practice again in September during the visit of a delegation of Chinese bishops. For many years, the Church in Belgium and the Church in China have maintained very friendly relations, which have resulted in intensive and fruitful exchange and visitation programs made possible by the Verbiest Foundation. At the invitation of our President, Cardinal Jozef De Kesel, and with the permission of both the authorities in China and the Vatican, Bishops Guo Jincai (Chengde), Paul Pei Junmin (Shenyang), Liu Xinghong (Anhui), Cui Qingqi (Wuhan) and Priest Ding Yang (Chongqing) visited the Foundation and the Church of Belgium. High on our agenda was a meeting on reactivating our formation sessions in Leuven and we are very happy to announce that as we speak we are again preparing a Spring session for 2024! After the visit to Belgium, the delegation made stopovers in the Netherlands and France. A photo report of this important visit can be found in this Courier.

During the visit to the Netherlands, Bishop Jan Hendriks, Bishop of Haarlem-Amsterdam, reiterated the importance of Cardinal De Kesel's book *"Faith and Religion in a Secular Society."* To the question *"How should we be church and evangelize in our current society?"* the bishop referred to the Cardinal's book in his answers. You can find the full text of the homily in this Courier. As already announced in a previous Courier, this book is the starting point for our International Conference in 2024, of which the central theme is *"Church and Society"*.

On our 40th anniversary, the Foundation sends a message to all its partners worldwide: a renewed team, with a renewed vision to tackle the challenges ahead! In this Courier, Father Jeroom Heyndrickx, the founder of the Foundation, comments on this. Father Jeroom, board member of both the Foundation and the Institute, still advises us in our daily work and in his contribution he makes it clear that the Verbiest Foundation has not changed. Now, 20 years after it was transferred from CICM Taiwan to Leuven, it is also going to be administered from Leuven, by a renewed VF team. The fact that we also had to bring our statutes in line with the new Belgian legislation somewhat facilitated this exercise, but the historical importance of what has happened during the past months cannot and should absolutely not be underestimated. This message has recently already been communicated to our colleagues and friends in Rome, where I had a number of important meetings with Father Jeroom Heyndrickx. During the busy November months, I went with Fr. Jeroom and our colleague Elisa Weng, to Beijing and Taipei to also inform our partners and colleagues there of these important evolutions.

However, our full schedule of the past few months has not prevented us from celebrating the festive year 2023. On Nov. 11 in Taipei, CICM Founder Theophile Verbist was commemorated with a one-day symposium. Speakers from both CICM and from the academic world, gave lectures on the Founder and other outstanding Scheut fathers. This by the way in the presence of the already mentioned delegation from Leuven. Just before writing this editorial, beautiful celebrations took place in Belgium, on which we commemorated the Founder of Scheut and the anniversary of the Verbiest Foundation together with colleagues, confreres and friends from the Belgian Church in an ap-

propriate way.

Even though the Verbiest Foundation is no longer directed by Scheut, we continue to be inspired by the congregation. Father Charles Phukuta, Superior General of Scheut, is our vice-president and several cicm fathers are members of our board. But also in our research and publication program we focus on the history of the congregation. Further on in this edition, Sr. Gaby Yang describes the story of Bishop Alfons Bermyn. With heart and soul, this cicm father, from the village of Sint Pauwels in Belgium, devoted himself to the Mongolian local Catholic communities in North China. In her article, Sr. Gaby describes the highs as well as the lows in the life of this great missionary, rightly called *"The Great Apostle of the Ordos."*

Moreover, when we talk about dialogue, exchange and friendship, the copy of the Verbiest Celestial Globe, which is installed in the courtyard of the Atrecht College at the Leuven Verbiest Institute, is a symbol *par excellence* of this. In a contribution by Father Jeroom, we are reminded of how the Verbiest Celestial Globe teaches us even today - and perhaps more than ever - an important lesson: every country, East and West, must learn its own history, and while we may without a doubt be proud of our past, we must also be able to recognize and transcend the limitations of our past, in order to be open to other people and cultures. Building a new relationship between East and West based on equality and mutual respect is precisely the main reason why the Verbiest Institute was founded at KU Leuven, and named after the *"Emperor's Astronomer."*

*"If Damien is the most famous Belgian, then it can be said of Ferdinand Verbiest that he is one of the most misunderstood Belgians."* This is how Philippe Ceulemans, in his article published via Kerknet, describes Ferdinand Verbiest sj. This year, we celebrate his 400th birthday. To mark the occasion, the Foundation is launching a brand new publication by Noël Golvers.

We also, of course, report on Pope Francis' visit to Mongolia. The Foundation recently reactivated its research program in Mongolian Studies in close collaboration with those in charge of the Mostaert Center in Ulaanbaatar. With an article by Sr. Lieve Strahier ICM, we want to inform the reader about the importance of the Pope's visit and the reactivation of Mongolian Studies.... By the way, we are also publishing the speech that the Pope made in Ulaanbaatar on September 2: *"The Church sent by Christ to proclaim his Gospel of salvation is a Church that does not shout the proclamation of the Gospel but "whispers" it in the hearts of individuals and peoples."*

We conclude our Courier with a testimony from one of our Chinese friends who participated in the pilgrimage to the Holy Land earlier this year. An initiative, which I hope we can continue in the coming years. After all, such activities bring together Chinese believers (and non-believers!) from different backgrounds, leading to a unique experience of dialogue, encounter and exchange.

Dear reader, in the hope that the past year has been as fruitful for you as it has been for us, I would like to end this editorial by wishing you a Merry Christmas and a blessed year 2024 in the name of the 'old' and 'new' board as well as all the colleagues of the Verbiest Foundation! Through our Verbiest Courier we stay in touch!



# Verbiest Foundation (VF) is 40 years old. A new team is ready to lead VF towards a new future

Jerome Heyndrickx CICM 韩德力

VF Founder and Boardmember

VF was founded in 1982-83 in response to a call from the CICM Chapter (1981). CICM needed help to care for its *Option for China* determined by Founder Verbist. Today CICM is no more engaged in direct evangelization in China. CICM and VF today practice their traditional *Option for China* by dialogue with the Church in China and with communities of Chinese culture worldwide.

## How VF was born and pioneered dialogue with China in cooperation with KU Leuven

VF celebrates its 40th anniversary and is ready to meet bigger challenges in the future.

In 1862 Theophile Verbist founded Scheut (the Missionary Congregation CICM) for evangelization by priority in China. For 90 years (1865 to 1955) 679 CICM Belgian and Dutch missionaries fulfilled this mission in the then underdeveloped Inner Mongolia and the whole North of China. More than 250 CICM missionaries left China, some were expelled after Mao Zedong came to power (1949). Only a small group of CICM missionaries in Hong Kong and Taiwan fulfilled the CICM priority option for China. New missions were opened in more than 20 countries to send the many young missionaries that joined CICM in the 1950's & 60's. As of 1974 Scheut (CICM) became international. New members joined CICM in Africa, the America's and Asia. A new, international CICM (Scheut) was born.

CICM was no longer active in China. It was not surprising that the *Option for China of Founder Verbist* was given less attention. But that became a problem in 1978 after Mao Zedong had died. Deng Xiaoping came to power and opened the door of China. Although evangelization by foreign missionaries was no longer allowed, at least contacts with the Church were possible. As of the 1980's most China missionaries – Protestants and Catholics – developed a 'China Program' for visiting their former missions in China. The 9th CICM Chapter in 1981 discovered that CICM was not prepared to set up a "China Program". Its personnel was committed to other urgent missions. The CICM Chapter asked the newly elected General Government to take an initiative. In 1982 the CICM Chinese Province -- confirmed in this by old CICM China missionaries and bishops in Taiwan -- responded positively to the call of the Chapter. It proposed -- also at the advice of scholars in China -- to set up Verbiest Foundation in cooperation with KU Leuven rather than setting up an institute under CICM's name. The CICM China Meeting in Rome in May 1983 approved the proposal. The General Government confirmed it. VF was born.

Rector Piet De Somer of Leuven University agreed to cooperate and even accepted to be chairman. Visits to China were organized as of 1982 seeking cooperation with academic institutions – f.e. the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences – as well as with the Church. Already in November 1985 University Rector Piet De Somer invited and welcomed in Leuven the first ever Chinese delegation of Catholic bishops to be allowed by civil authorities to go abroad. Besides visiting Leuven University, they visited the then young Cardinal Danneels in



Participants to the 1981 CICM Chapter



*Seminary Formation by Fr. Jeroom Heyndrickx*

Malines, other bishops and Major Seminaries spending 13 days in Belgium. That was a historical support for the Chinese bishops who, precisely at that time – after Vatican II which they had not attended – started to reopen their seminaries which had been closed for thirty years and while the Church lived through a destructive Cultural Revolution. The bishops needed all the advice and help they could get.

Pope J-Paul II understood. He could hardly allow VF to promote a visit to Leuven by “illicit bishops” ordained without his approval. The pope silently and wisely let it happen. KU Leuven invited, not Cardinal Danneels nor VF. The visit was criticized by some in the Church. Still it was the beginning of a friendly 35-year long exchange of VF with the Church in China encouraged by Rome and still going on today. The initiative immediately yielded its fruits. By December of the same year (1985), one delegate of Verbiest Foundation Leuven (VF) was teaching Vatican II Theology at the newly opened Major Sheshan Seminary of Shanghai. The first foreign teacher after the Cultural Revolution to be invited for teaching theology.

That’s how VF was born and how it grew so rapidly. In 40 years, it organized 14 times an academic International Conference on the History of the Catholic Church in China. It published 44 volumes in English on that topic in its series “Leuven Chinese Studies” and 17 volumes in Chinese in its series “Huairan Congshu” published in Taipei. VF constantly promoted exchange visits, taught theology in Chinese seminaries, organized formation sessions for religious and lay Catholics at the invitation of various local dioceses. As of 2015 Verbiest Institute Leuven organized every year two Ongoing Formation Sessions during 4 weeks in Chinese for Chinese priests, religious and lay ministers. The group went on a pilgrimage to Rome where they were received by the Pope.

Since that time the situation has changed in China recently. Much of what VF could do in the nineties is no longer possible today. Still, Pope Francis succeeded in making a historical agreement with China. VF follows the pope and is aware that as partners in dialogue with China we must cross huge difficult historical obstacles of ignorance and mutual prejudice. In September 2023 four Chinese bishops visited VF to exchange on how we would reactivate the Formation Sessions in Leuven which were stopped after the Corona pandemic.

## **On its 40th birthday the administration of VF sends a message to all its partners worldwide: VF has a New Team with a Renewed Vision. It is ready to face bigger challenges in the future**

Preparing for the 40th VF birthday, the VF Board of Directors has in recent years appointed a new VF Team with an updated vision. This represents a message to the VF institutions, to CICM and to all cooperating partners in VF activities worldwide: VF is ready to face the challenges of the coming 40 years and counts on a renewed cooperation with all its partners worldwide.

### **For VF this is a historical evolution.**

VF today has not changed. It is still the same as in 1982 but for VF it is historical that, 20 years after it was transferred from CICM Taiwan to VF in Leuven it will now finally also be directed from Leuven; and by a new VF team. We feel it is our duty to inform our friends and partners about this important news. In 2002, after having initiated the foundation and directed it for twenty years, I retired at age 70. CICM superiors accepted my retirement. But then in 2004, CICM, after having directed and sponsored VF for 23 years, decided that the time had come to transfer VF to another organization. CICM stopped sponsoring VF activities. VF was suddenly on its own, an entity autonomous from CICM. It was transferred to the newly established *Verbiest Foundation-Leuven*, presided by Cardinal G. Danneels. Most unfortunately my successor *Staf Vloeberghs*, the newly appointed, experienced and dedicated VF Director soon died of illness. A disaster for VF. Staf’s successor faced an unexpected and confusing administrative situation. As a result a real succession has never taken place. As founder-director although ‘retired’ I had to remain active in a foundation which was no longer sponsored by CICM. Fortunately, good friends of VF generously offered the support needed enabling VF to continue facing the challenges of the growing VF activity program. That generous support even allowed VF to grow. But a confusing administrative situation made it impossible to transfer the VF direction and administration from Taipei to Leuven.

Today, 20 years later, VF wants its partners to know that a new VF Team appointed by the VF Board in recent years enables VF Leuven to take over the full administration of VF. The new Belgian Law Geens requesting all associations and non-profit corporations to adjust their statutes has facilitated this process considerably. Twenty years after I announced it, I can now retire.



*Cardinal Jozef De Kesel*



*Fr. Charles Phukuta cicm*



In 1982, when learning that CICM set up VF, Pope J-Paul II – who was Polish and famous for the role he played against Communism in his own country – strongly encouraged and confirmed the line of dialogue with China promoted by VF. Cardinal G. Danneels, chairman of VF fully approved it. Today, 40 years later VF still follows this line. It fully endorses the new agreement of Pope Francis with Beijing and follows in his footsteps even though some other institutes hesitate or even criticize. VF remains convinced that for the good of the Universal Church as well as the Church in China, the line of dialogue with China should be followed by all missionary congregations and institutes. They should not be misled by some international non-Church entities who criticize the Pope's line while they only promote their own political goals.

Even though VF is no longer directed by CICM (Scheut), it remains CICM-inspired. Fr. Charles Phukuta CICM Superior General is our VF vice-chairman, delegated by Card. De Kesel to supervise & direct VF. To assist him for this task the VF General Secretary will assist and inform him. Charles Phukuta and Jeroom Heyndrickx CICM are members of the VF Board. Peter Baekelmans CICM engages in academic research as a member of the Verbiest Institute KU Leuven. Verbiest Foundation today pursues the same goals, runs the same programs, and remains Vatican II inspired in its dialogue with China just as in 1982.

#### What do we mean by the Updated Vision of VF?

This is expressed in the *VF Mission Statement* which describes VF as an *International Christian Community of Universal Brotherhood*. It stresses internal unity and open communication between VF-sponsored institutes – in Leuven and Taipei – with members of different nationalities, cultures, and religions. *Community and Synodality* is practiced internally in the VF team-administration which invites each VF colleague to participate in the process of decision making. For its financial support VF calls on the community of friends in East and West worldwide. VF relies on their gifts to support VF activities.

Today VF understands the *CICM Option for China* as follows: *to dialogue and exchange worldwide with all Chinese countries and communities of Chinese culture*. That includes China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, S-E Asia and Chinese communities in Europe and the USA. VF continues to care for the CICM Option for China of Founder Verbist, not only in N. China as in the past, but among Chinese worldwide.

Still another new aspect of the *Updated VF Vision* can be expressed by the term *integration*. Wherever VF is active with the Church, it extends its dialogue also to society. The topic of the planned 15th Verbiest International Conference (Sept 2024) is "Church and Society" based on the book "Faith and Religion" by H. Emin. Card. Jozef De Kesel. Speakers from East and West will present academic papers based on that book. They will speak from their own social-cultural background. VF Research has in the past focused on "the history of the Catholic Church in China". In its future research VF will focus also on how the Church today, in the East as well as in the West, while being present in today's (secularized) societies will profess Christian faith while positively participating in building up their societies.

### The new VF Team is ready to exchange with partners and friends worldwide

The new team was appointed by the VF Board in the course of re-

cent years. Rewriting statutes to adapt to the new Belgian Law Geens facilitated the introduction of new needed structures. Some vacancies on the VF Board are still to be filled in. One year ago, we lost a VF founding member and vice-chairman, our dear Archbishop Joseph Tikang (Taipei). As an institute for dialogue with China he is replaced by Fr. Peter Choy, director of the Holy Spirit Study Center in Hong Kong. Mr. Toon Osaer, a prominent lay Catholic much engaged in serving the Catholic community accepted the invitation of VF chairman Cardinal De Kesel to be the third vice-chairman of VF. Sr. Lieve Strahier, ICM Superior General and former missionary in Ulanbaataar is the 4th vice-chairman of VF.



Mr. Toon Osaer



Fr. Peter Choy



Sr. Lieve Strahier

VF created a new function by appointing Dr. Hugo Vanheeswijck as *VF General Secretary* and head of the VF new Team (Daily Administration). He directs VF Activities, bridges the gap between the VF Board and DA and acts as *advisor to Fr. Phukuta*.

Research and Publications is the most developed section of VF activities. VF called on the help of more KU Leuven scholars. Dr. Kim Christiaens director of Kadoc – where the CICM China archives are kept –, Dr. Dries Vanysacker, Church historian and former colleague of VF, both join the direction of Verbiest Institute. In Taiwan the Verbiest Association for Cultural Exchange was set up. It functions as a juridical link facilitating VF cooperation with the Catholic University Fujen. VF has – till now – no such juridical entity for cooperation with institutions in China but it cooperates de facto for 30 years with the National Catholic Seminary in Beijing. Academic exchanges are also planned with universities and scholars in China.

VF disposes of the *Scheut Memorial Library (SML)*, a heritage of CICM and other donors which it wants to validate by promoting research in the field of Mongolian Studies. VF is actively trying to restore its structural link with Antoine Mostaert Center and with the Church in Ulaanbaatar in view of reactivating its research in cooperation with scholars in the field.

The VF Daily Administration (DA) replaces the previous Permanent Body. DA members are colleagues who actively engage in directing VF Daily activities. They were appointed by the VF Board and are in fact the New VF Team. They all participated in writing this report which we consider as a message of Good News of VF to all our friends and partners. I join DA team meetings not as a voting member making decisions, but to offer advice from my past experiences. *If we ignore our past, we are not ready to face the future.*

**Members of the new VF Team are:**

\* Dr. Hugo Vanheeswijck: VF Board member. Besides advising Fr. Phukuta, he chairs the DA directing all VF Academic research, which he supervises, as well as Pastoral and Cultural Activities.

\* Elisa Weng: VF Board member, General Affairs and VF treasurer of VI KU Leuven, CCL and VI Taipei.

\* Pieter Ackerman: VF Board Secretary, in charge of the VF Daily Agenda (f.e. presiding over Weekly and similar meetings) and supervising VF Publications.

\* Fr. Matthew Gong: Chinese Secretary of the VF Board, Supervisor of Cultural Activities & Acting Supervisor of the Formation Section.

\* Clara Lin: Director of Verbiest Instituut Taipei.

The New Team with an Updated Vision are the message, which VF wishes to share with all its partners. VF counts on renewed cooperation with all partners and friends of VF and CICM in the spirit of dialogue. From our 40 years' experience we are aware that big challenges are ahead. We are not naive but remain optimistic. Let's keep the line open and see what we can do together!



Dr. Hugo Vanheeswijck



Ms. Elisa Weng



Mr. Pieter Ackerman



Fr. Matthew Gong Zhixi



Ms. Clara Lin

## Church & Society

*Hugo Vanheeswijck and Toon Osaer*

In the previous 'Verbiest Courier' the Fifteenth International Verbiest Conference was introduced. The central theme is 'Church and Society' and scholars from both the East as well as the West will discuss topics taken from Cardinal De Kesel's book 'Faith and Religion in a secular society'. Answering Pope Francis call for a "paradigm shift" we will with the preparation, the conference itself, the follow-up, take a widespread engagement with contemporary science, culture, and people's lived experience of profound cultural transformations as an essential starting point. We will discuss the theme of 'Church

and Society' in a culture of dialogue and encounter between different traditions and different knowledge, between different Christian confessions and different religions, openly engaging with everyone, believers and nonbelievers.

As preview we are grateful to publish the speech and sermon that Mgr Hendriks, bishop of the diocese Haarlem-Amsterdam gave during the visit of the Chinese bishops to the Low Countries in the month of October.



## BEING MISSIONARY. FOUR CENTRAL THEMES

Johannes Hendriks  
Bishop of Haarlem-Amsterdam

When I became the diocesan bishop of this diocese in 2020, I proposed four themes that I believe are important for being a Christian and therefore for the Church in our diocese, from the perspective of a Church in a secular society, like we are in The Netherlands, where more than half of the population declares itself “non believers”:

### - We are “Church together”.

That is an important reality: we must and may do it together. As baptized and formed Christians, we face the same task together, we all share in the mission our Lord entrusted to His Church. We have the calling to inspire and encourage each other and the society we are living in and to experience our solidarity in concrete terms. We do this with reverence and respect for the various charisms, talents and forms of spirituality that exist in our Catholic Church. I think of the many volunteers who are active in our parishes. In our diocese we experience solidarity with believers of all nationalities, with young people and the elderly: together we are that body of Christ that is the Church, together we form one community.

### - Church seeks contact, as much as possible and with everyone.

She is essentially missionary. Pope Francis has underlined this: he wants a church that goes out and looks for ways to be in contact with the people in our society. What ways can we find to introduce them to the value of our faith? And the good news of the risen Lord? Often the light falls on what is not allowed: “Thou shalt not...”. Many people only know the prohibitions of faith, while you can only place them once you have discovered the treasure of faith and the relationship with Jesus Christ. It is therefore essential for every faith community in our diocese to go out, bring people into contact with the riches of the Gospel and respect the steps of their growth. That is why broader and topical social or cultural religious initiatives will also be welcome and necessary; they can help people in a secularised society to get in touch with catholic faith in this broader context and put a step forward on the path of the gospel.

### - Being a Christian expresses itself in actions.

No one can be a Christian without acts of concrete charity. In what we do for our neighbour, being a Christian becomes visible and concrete. This makes it clear that being a Christian is not about ‘nice words’, but that it is real (cf. 1 John 3:16-18). The experience of mutual love and care for the poor and people in need was the hallmark of the first Christians. Others were attracted by this and wanted to get to know the Gospel and the community of faith (cf. Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-36). Caritas is

therefore an essential and attractive aspect of our church and Christian life; commitment to charity and friendship with the poor are necessary.

### - Young people and families have the right to our attention.

Young Catholics - young people and families - do not always easily find a structure and incentive to live their faith with peers in Dutch society. They are busy shaping their lives and raising their children. It is therefore very important that we offer them community, support and education in order to realize their beautiful calling - which receives too little attention in our time.

### Conclusion

These themes are of great importance to our diocese of Haarlem-Amsterdam and we try to work on them. Of course, other themes can be mentioned that are also important. For now, I'll leave it at that. We will certainly have the opportunity to develop these and other aspects in more detail in our discussions and reflections.

Let us pray that our commitment to the gospel will be fruitful. It is only grace that can make it fruitful, it is not in the hands of man. Let us therefore implore God's blessing upon our mission! May Mary, Mother of the Church, intercede for us.

Haarlem, 11 september 2023

### Homily

How should we be Church and evangelize in our society today?

Your Excellencies, dear brothers in Christ, let me first repeat that I am



Mgr. Hendriks with the visiting Chinese bishops in Heiloo, the Netherlands



*Mgr. Hendriks in conversation with Mgr. Guo Jincai*

grateful and very pleased and honoured by your visit in our diocese of Haarlem-Amsterdam. Amsterdam is proud to have the first China town of European mainland, it is just behind the basilica you will visit today in Amsterdam. Chinese new year is celebrated there with colourful processions.

### **Our ties**

Yesterday evening I told you already something about my personal connection with the Scheutist Fathers and the church in China [*I was an altar boy in their missionshouse in my birthplace and a member of the "Hamerclub" for the missions, espec. in China*]. You will know better than me about the historical ties that bind us together.

### **Missionaries from the Netherlands**

It is almost 160 years ago now that Father Théophile Verbist during the summer of 1864, visited some seminaries in the Netherlands to win candidates for the mission work in China. Ferdinand Hamer from Nijmegen was the first to present himself. This was only a couple of weeks before his ordination to the priesthood. So he changed his direction answering - so I may say - to a Divine calling, he entered the young community of Scheutist Fathers and already one year later, in 1865 he left together with Father Verbist and a few others to set out for the missions in China. You visited already the home of the Vincen-tian bishop Frans Schraven, another Dutch missionary and bishop in China, who took a courageous stand in the time of Japanese occupation. He bravely sacrificed his life to protect Chinese women. When I was young I heard the old Scheutist missionaries who had been in China still speaking of the Chinese people with much respect for their culture, their faith, their science.

### **Mary set out...**

It came to my mind while I was reading today's Gospel, indicated for

the memorial of the holy name of Mary. It was the gospel that was central to the recent World Youth Days: "Mary set out and traveled in haste".

### **Instruments**

Together we ponder the central and fundamental question: "How should we be Church and evangelize in our society today?" This is an important question and nobody can answer it in fullness, because at the end it is grace and only grace that begets faith, so the question really is: How can we become good instruments to prepare the way for grace? The book written by His Eminence Cardinal Joseph De Kesel about faith and religion in a secular society gives us a good basis and a starting point for this reflection.

### **A star**

We ask today for the intercession of the blessed Virgin Mary for this reflection. She was full of grace and the best instrument for grace. One of the possible explanations of the meaning of her most holy Name, that we celebrate today, is that it means "Star of the sea", indicating that the blessed Virgin Mary is a guide in spiritual life like the star of the sea is a guide for sea voyagers. Both Saint Pope Paul VI and Saint Pope John Paul II entrusted the work of Evangelization to Mary, calling her the "Star of the New Evangelization."

### **Evangelizing. What did she bring?**

Today we hear about her, evangelizing. Having heard the news the archangel Gabriel brought her, she went in haste to share the news with Elisabeth. Mary's greeting and presence brings spiritual joy and exultation to Elisabeth and to the infant in her womb and also Mary herself proclaims the greatness of the Lord and she rejoices in God her saviour. I think an important pathway is shown her: the main characteristic of this first act of evangelization is: joy, praise and gratefulness, which implies: trust in God's grace.

### **The first characteristic**

Every evening we repeat these words of Mary: "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord". So that should be the first characteristic of evangelization: that we radiate the inner joy that the Lord touched our lives, that He brought us salvation, that we trust in His grace that we show our joy and gratefulness for what the Lord did to us.

### **Steadfast**

The Virgin Mary received a High calling: her Son would be a King, reigning forever; however this did not exclude suffering, we all know how her life went on... But she remained steadfast: after all, what we hear from her is that she was there during the prayer of the Pentecostal novena and the outpouring of the holy Spirit on Pentecost. Now that we honour the most holy Name of Mary, star of the sea, let us pray that she may intercede for us and help us to be instruments of grace.



# Pope Francis' visit to Mongolia

The redaction



*Our Lady of Grace, from the Sanctuary in Scheut (Brussels). In the background Mongolia, the mission field of Scheut.*

When CICM was invited in 1992 to start the Mongol Mission in Ulaanbaatar, Superior General Michel Decraene called on VF to support the team in Ulaanbaatar by initiating projects from outside. VF did so – in agreement with the Mission Superior Msgr. Wens Padilla cicm – and initiated projects for social development, health care, and scholarships. Also in our fields of research, Mongolian Studies has always been a priority for Verbiest Foundation. Unfortunately this could not be brought to further development, until now. Recent contacts with experts in Mongolian Studies not only confirm our tradition in this field, but also bring new hope for new insights and projects in

the future. At the end of November we have a formal meeting here in Leuven, where we hope to re-establish our ties with the Antoon Moestaert Center in Ulaanbaatar, hoping to boost our Mongolian Study program.

In what follows, we wish to report on the visit of Pope Francis to Mongolia. In a first article, Sr. Lieve Stragier, ICM General Superior, shares about the start of the mission in Mongolia, and the many challenges one faces when working in the very unique situation Mongolia is in. In this article, written at the end of August, she also describes the significance of the Pope's visit.

In a second part we want to present our reader remarkable parts from the speech the Pope delivered in the Ulaanbaatar Cathedral, dedicated to Saints Peter and Paul, on Saturday, September 2.

## Why the Pope is Going to Mongolia

Kerknet, August 27, 2023

Pope Francis will travel from Thursday, August 31 to Wednesday, September 4 to Mongolia, one of the smallest Catholic countries in the world. The Pope's visit should help Mongolia to help discover its own identity. Sr. Lieve Stragier, Superior General of the ICM sisters in Rome, tells that the first missionaries of Scheut settled in Mongolia in 1992. This happened after the fall of communism at the request of the Mongolian government. Mongolia asked the Holy See to establish diplomatic relations and agreed to send some missionaries to the country, which had been under Russian control since 1922. In 1990,

the Asian country, which is 51 times the size of Belgium, became a multi-party state.

'The Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, better known as the Scheutists, had been asked by the Vatican since 1922 to establish a mission there. But due to the takeover of power in 1922, that never happened. After that, Mongolia became atheistic, with severe persecution of Buddhists, a religious community that was not yet a minority at the time. It was logical that the Vatican appealed to Scheut's Belgian missionary congregation to start a 'missio sui iuris'.

From July 1992, the first missionaries initially lived in an apartment. Mongolia was still cut off from abroad at that time. The government sought relations and close ties with the Holy See, because it was charmed by the Catholic Church's efforts in the care of the sick and its social commitment. In July 1995, the first ICM-Sisters arrived in Mongolia. In that country there were then 14 baptized. Our congregation also honored the motto of the Scheutists: 'come and see'.

## Army ballroom

The Belgian sister and current superior of her Congregation, Lieve Stragier, went with 3 other ICM Sisters, all from the Philippines, to the capital Ulaanbaatar to give concrete shape to projects for the weakest, especially for mentally handicapped children and supporting the project of the 6 CICM fathers for street children: "Initially we had to use an old army ballroom for the Sunday Eucharist celebrations. But from 1996 there was a real mission, where I (in 2000) became an economist. Our first missionary assignment upon arrival in Mongolia was to get to know the extremely difficult language and country. But gradually the focus shifted to street children and children with disabilities. Our sisters also started working in a village just outside Ulaanbaatar, where they helped people find a job with a few small projects. From my experience as a teacher, I was entrusted with catechesis for adults. The year we arrived in Mongolia (1995), a group of the first local people had already been baptized. There was already an agreement at that time that we would not give catechesis to children under the age of sixteen without parental consent. Lessons were in English. We also supported the liturgy and church services with our sisters and we worked together with a kindergarten, where children



*Meeting between Sr. Lieve Strahier and members of the ICM Generalate and VF.*



Silver Jubilee of the Catholic Church in Mongolia in 2017.



Christians praying in a Mongol yurt © ICM

with disabilities were allowed to attend classes. We then also trained some of the young Christians to organize activities for this group of children”.

### **From mission post to apostolic prefecture**

Gradually the Sisters build their own center for children with a disability. This ‘Rainbow Center’ initially accommodated 35 children with a mental disability. The sisters also expanded the other project in a village 40 km outside the capital, in Showoo, where a factory with laying hens was privatized in the early 1990s.

“One of our Filipino sisters asked permission from the local governor and asked how we could help there. She was asked to teach English in the village school. After school hours she visited the poorest families in the village. She was always confronted with the same problem: the families had no work and therefore no income. There was also no water, although the village was situated along a river. But that water freezes in winter due to the intense cold. We built a deep water well and a bathhouse where people could also purchase water. The government gave a piece of land and gradually the villagers started farming. A bakery was started that evolved into a training center to learn how to bake. You must not forget that these people had lived for years under communism where everything was decided for them. Gradually the realization grew that they had to do something themselves and that they had the opportunity to take responsibility and take initiatives themselves. At that time I was still active as a catechist in Ulaanbaatar and after the lessons we went to different places in the city where street children lived. Many of those children still lived in the tunnels for the heating from the time of communism”.

According to Sister Lieve, the ‘*missio sui iuris*’ has been taking shape in recent decades and the number of believers and parishes has also grown steadily: “It was never our intention to convert people and we have never actively engaged in proselytism. But our message did appeal to a small group of people and during Easter night about 15 to 20 people were baptized every year”. Today there is a small Catholic community of about 1,300 believers. In 2002 the ‘*missio sui iuris*’ in Ulaanbaatar became an apostolic prefecture and the following year

Wenceslao Padilla became the first bishop (2003-2018). On that occasion, the Saint Peter and Paul Cathedral in Ulaanbaatar was inaugurated, modeled on the yurt, the traditional round tent of the wandering Mongolian nomads. Meanwhile, the Salesians started a technical school and a center for street boys in Ulaanbaatar and a mission station in Darkhan, the country’s second largest city. Sisters of Mother Teresa moved to the poorer neighborhoods. Giorgio Marengo has been bishop since 2020. He was created Cardinal during the consistory of August 27, 2022.

### **Sign of hope and encouragement**

Sister Lieve says it is very significant that Pope Francis will visit Mongolia from August 31 to September 4. ‘Incidentally, a one-day visit by the Polish Pope John Paul II had already been planned in 2003. Wenceslao Padilla also regularly traveled to the Vatican to report there. For the first time, the Pope is visiting a country where he can actually meet every Catholic in person. This papal visit can also help to clarify the relationship between Church and State and to make a clear distinction with Protestant groups that sometimes aggressively engage in proselytism and that give churches and their faith a bad reputation.

According to Sister Lieve Stragier, the country has undergone a strong evolution since 1998, with the arrival of shops and modern technology. First in the cities and later in the countryside, the step towards a modern society was taken. ‘But that transition was made too quickly, so that Mongolia and especially the young people are confronted with the negative sides of the consumer society. That while the country is still busy rediscovering its old values and traditions. For the Catholic Church, the time has also come for faith to take root. This cannot be imposed from abroad. Pope Francis’ visit may help the Catholic Church here in Mongolia to be like yeast in the dough. His arrival is a sign of hope and encouragement for a country that is still searching for its own identity. It also makes it clear to the Mongolian believers that they are fully part of the world church. Jesus is also one of them.’





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## ***The Pope blesses the Church of Mongolia: “God loves littleness, and through it, he loves to accomplish great things”***

*Agenzia Fides, 2 September 2023*

The Church sent by Christ to proclaim his Gospel of salvation is “a poor Church, sustained only by genuine faith and by the unarmed and disarming power of the Risen Lord, and capable of alleviating the sufferings of wounded humanity”. A Church that does not shout but “whispers” the proclamation of the Gospel to the hearts of individuals and peoples. A Church of people “with peace in their hearts” who find the source of their apostolic works of charity in the contemplation of Jesus, and “not people who run around, busy and distracted, carrying out projects”. A Church whose distinctive features can easily be recognized in the path of the “little flock” of the Catholic community present in Mongolia.

Pope Francis once again used clear and suggestive words when recalling the unique and incomparable character of the mission entrusted to the Church for the salvation of the world. He did so by embracing the members of the small Mongolian Catholic Church during the second public meeting of his apostolic visit to the great Asian country on the afternoon of Saturday, September 2. The meeting, held in the Ulaanbaatar Cathedral, dedicated to Saints Peter and Paul and also built on the model of the yurt (the traditional Mongolian mobile tent), was attended by more than 2,000 people, including some from mainland China, Russia and Korea, to listen to the Successor of Peter.

(...)

Citing Psalm 34, the Pope stressed that one spends his life for the Gospel not because of effort or to fulfill a duty, but because “one has tasted, savored, experienced God’s love. That God who made himself visible, able to be touched and encountered in Jesus”. Many faithful servants of the Gospel in Mongolia, “who are here with us now and who, having spent their lives for Christ”, the Pope said. (...) The Pope encouraged everyone “to continue on this fruitful and beneficial path

for the beloved Mongolian people”. At the same time, he invited them “to taste and see the Lord, to keep returning to that original “gaze” from which everything began. Without him - added the Bishop of Rome - strength will fail and our pastoral work will risk becoming an empty delivery of services, a roster of duties that end up inducing only weariness and frustration”.

(...)

“The Lord Jesus, in sending his disciples into the world - the Successor of Peter underlined in an important passage of his speech - did not send them to spread political theories, but to bear witness by their lives to the newness of his relationship with his Father, now “our Father”, which is the source of concrete fraternity with every individual and people”. For this reason “the Church that is born from this mandate is a poor Church, sustained only by genuine faith and by the unarmed and disarming power of the Risen Lord, and capable of alleviating the sufferings of wounded humanity”. And for this reason also “governments and secular institutions have nothing to fear from the Church’s work of evangelization, for she has no political agenda to advance, but is sustained by the quiet power of God’s grace and a message of mercy and truth, which is meant to promote the good of all”.

(...)

The decision to call Monsignor Giorgio Marengo, Apostolic Prefect of Ulaanbaatar, to form part of the College of Cardinals, - the Pope underlined - “wants to be another expression of closeness: all of you, only physically distant, are very close to the heart of Peter; and the whole Church is close to you, to your community, which is truly Catholic, that is, universal, and which attracts the sympathy of all the brothers and sisters scattered throughout the world towards Mongolia, in a great ecclesial communion”.

# A copy of the Celestial Globe of Ferdinand Verbiest sj at Leuven University (Belgium)

Jeroom Heyndrickx CICM 韩德力

VF Founder and Boardmember



## Symbol of friendship and exchange between China and Europe

An identical copy of the original bronze Celestial Sphere made by Ferdinand Verbiest at the Old Observatory in Beijing stands in front of Verbiest Institute at Leuven University (Belgium). I visited the Old Observatory in Beijing for the first time in May 1982. Professor Yi Shitong accompanied me and explained to me the history of the eight astronomical instruments. Six of them were designed by Ferdinand Verbiest (Belgium), two by Kilian Stumpf (Germany). Most impressive, I thought, was the Celestial Globe, light and elegant with fine sculptures. Experts are surprised that the bronze casting is still perfectly kept after 300 years. Professor Yi Shitong explained that, to design the sphere, the experts from the West had to overcome several prejudices of scientists of the time. He considered the making of the Celestial Sphere in Beijing as a milestone in the relations between China and the West. In China some other globes were made already earlier but they all disappeared. The one in Beijing was the biggest and is the only one remaining. I was so impressed that I told Professor Yi: Let us make a copy of the Celestial Sphere and put it at our Verbiest Institute at Leuven University because these instruments have a message for people of our time in East and West.



Fr. Jeroom Heyndrickx and Prof. Yi Shitong at the observatory in Beijing

I was impressed not only because the Celestial Sphere is a piece of art and has its own scientific importance but more even because it carries a message for our time. The globe was designed by Ferdinand Verbiest (from Belgium) at the request of Emperor Kangxi in 1675 at a time when there was open cooperation and scientific exchange between China and Europe. On the globe is expressed the most advanced research done by astronomers of China and Europe at that time. The 1888 stars on the globe represent the astronomical knowledge of Tycho Brahe (Denmark) the most advanced astronomist of the time in Europe, as well as the knowledge of Guo Shujin the oldest prominent Chinese astronomist as well as of other scientists as Xu Guangqi (China), Matteo Ricci (Italy), Adam Schall von Bell (Germany). The exchange that happened between these scientists from East and West at the Beijing Old Observatory was historical. It may be seen as a peak moment in East-West cooperation. Sure, there were also disagreements East and West at that time as f.e. the quarrel between Yang Guangxian, Adam Schall and Ferdinand Verbiest, but both sides were able to pass across the misunderstandings so that fruitful exchange happened.



Fr. Ferdinand Verbiest sj

Next to the exchange in positive sciences there was at that time also an intensive exchange in the field of human sciences. Philippe Couplet and François Noël -- both from Belgium -- translated the classical books of China from Chinese into Latin and so they introduced Chinese thinking and culture to philosophers in Europe. Famous philosophers in Europe -- as Malebranche, Voltaire, Montesquieu -- learned to know and appreciate China and its culture by reading the book of Couplet "Confucius Sinarum Philosophus" (Confucius the philosopher of the Chinese). After reading this book the previously existing contempt and distrust of European scientists towards China changed into admiration. And that developed into a historic relation of equality and mutual appreciation between East and West.





*Installing the Globe at the Atrachtcollege*

Not the scientists of China nor the European actors in intercultural exchange have changed this positive development. Politicians in several countries in the West changed it. Through their colonialism and imperialism they destroyed the positive relationship between East and West causing thereby a historical drama. In 1842 there was the Opium War. In 1900 the Boxer Uprising happened. These dramas turned the friendly relation into a confrontation which till today neither China nor Europe has been able to overcome. The Celestial Globe witnessed these dramatic events. It was already standing on top of the Old Observatory when the armies sent by eight European countries attacked Beijing and destroyed the Imperial Summer Palace. Historians say that their bullets hit and even harmed the astronomical instruments. Worse even, the German Field Marshal Count von Waldersee ordered the Celestial Sphere and other astronomical instruments to be taken to Germany where they stood from 1901 till 1921 at the Potsdam Palace in Berlin, as if they were spoils of war. The Conference of Versailles after the 1st World War in 1921 -- in its article Nr 121 -- ordered Germany to ship the instruments back to Beijing from where they came. And that's what happened.

I suggested to make a replica of the Celestial Sphere and bring it to Leuven mainly because the globe had been a witness of the good and the bad times of the relations of the West with China: the time of Verbiest and Adam Schall as well as the time of the Opium War, the Boxer Uprising, the 8 foreign armies in Beijing. We wanted a rep-



*Rector Dillemans, Mr. Liu Shan and Fr. Jeroom Heyndrickx at the inauguration of the Globe*

lica of the Celestial Sphere in Leuven because in 1982 we established Verbiest Foundation precisely to promote dialogue, exchange, and cooperation between China and Europe today. We wanted to do that by linking up with the time of Verbiest and Schall. For us the Celestial Globe symbolizes friendly cooperation on a basis of equality and mutual respect.

The opportunity to make a copy of the globe occurred in 1988 when we planned to commemorate the 300th anniversary of the death of Verbiest. In preparation to that, Verbiest Foundation, together with the China-Europe Institute of Leuven University agreed with the International Science Center of Beijing to organize in Leuven an exhibit on the History of Science and Technology in China. That exhibit, called: "China Heaven and Earth" became the biggest exhibit ever organized in Belgium. More than 250.000 visitors from Belgium, Netherlands, Germany, Luxemburg, and France came to admire the achievements of China all through history in the field of science and technology. The agreement to make a replica of the globe was not part of that exhibit but was signed at the time of that exhibit.

In China a Scientific Committee was created with Prof. Yi Shitong, Engineer Li Shuguang and the famous expert in bronze casting Mr. Rong Ke. The replica was manufactured by Beijing Metal Crafts Factory. I went personally to observe the progress of the work, together with Professor Yi. When the production was ready Belgian Ambassador Mr. Baeckelandt with Prof. Jan Delrue of KU Leuven went to Beijing in the name of Verbiest Foundation to officially preside at the official hand-over of the globe. The cost for the manufacturing and shipping were paid by Verbiest Foundation and benefactors of KU Leuven. The globe was shipped by boat from Tianjin in November 1988. It arrived in Antwerp on December 23, 1988 and was transported to Leuven. Upon arrival local experts and advisers in Leuven checked the



*The Verbiest Celestial Globe at the ancient observatory in Beijing*

globe. Among them: Vice-rector André Deruyttere, Prof. Smeyers, Prof. Boxtael, Mr. Sergeys. The technical experts of KU Leuven c/o Mr. Decoster and Mr. Van Laere – took care of transporting the globe from the port of Antwerp to Leuven and placing it precisely in the correct direction in the internal garden of Atrecht College in front of Verbiest Institute KU Leuven.

The globe was inaugurated on June 2, 1989, in a ceremony that marked the end of the commemoration of 300th anniversary of Verbiest's death. H. Exc. Mr. Liu Shan, ambassador of the People's Republic of China and Rector Roger Dillemans of Leuven University presided at the academic session in presence of the direction of the university of Verbiest Institute KU Leuven, professors and friends of the university and Verbiest Foundation. Both the ambassador and the university rector stressed the symbolic meaning of the globe. They pointed to the need to

promote unity and friendship between East and West in the footsteps of the early pioneers in the field of cultural exchange. Professor Yi Shitong and Engineer Shu Liguang were present at the inauguration. In his speech Prof. Yi said: "As a product of Sino-Western cultural exchange, the Celestial Globe of Kangxi represents the union of Chinese and Western culture, academically as well as technologically. It reflects the long traditions and achievements in Chinese and Western astronomy."

In China and in Europe we established monuments in our cities, along the streets, in parcs and institutes because we wish to carry our past along with us today. They remind us of our national leaders and heroes, men of science, philosophers, poets, and music composers. We hope that these great men and women of our past remain with us and accompany us today with their wisdom and inspire us with their courage. We walk daily by these monuments most of the time without even paying attention. Only occasionally do we look at them as if we need their advice. These monuments are alive. They speak their own language and carry a message from the past to us. Some monuments make us proud; others make us feel ashamed because we were not able to do today what they achieved in the past. Monuments are our teachers.

The Celestial Sphere on the Old Observatory in Beijing as well as the replica in Leuven University (Belgium) both proudly point a finger to the China-Europe cooperation which they achieved. They make us ashamed of the Colonial-Imperialistic events of the 19th-20th century of which the globe in Beijing was a first witness.

Everyday many groups of tourists from the Netherlands, France, Germany, and Great Britain visit the old city of Leuven. They all pass by



*Rector Dillemans speaking during the academic session in 1989*

the replica of the Verbiest Globe in front of Verbiest Institute. Tour guides tell them the history of the globe, about Verbiest and his colleagues. They listen in admiration when they hear the history of Verbiest. But they are ashamed when they hear what happened in the 19th century. The replica of the globe in Leuven reminds people in Belgium and Europe of the need to pass beyond the bad days of the past. It points a warning finger to all countries in the world saying that no country should again impose its culture on another. We now live in an age of globalization. For the process of globalization to proceed fruitfully it requires that each country in East and West should learn to know its own history, be proud of its achievements and admit its own limitations and eventually even mistakes. No country may consider its own culture as superior to any other culture. Building a new relation between East and West on a basis of equality and mutual respect is precisely the main reason why the Verbiest Institute was established at KU Leuven and why we made the replica, putting it in front of our Verbiest Institute building as a symbolic reminder to all visitors.

Many visitors enter our institute and ask what Verbiest Institute is doing with China. In admiration they learn that Verbiest Institute has existed now for 40 years. It organized 14 times an international conference where scholars from East and West - from ten to fifteen countries - meet and present their papers on the history of E-W relations, pointing to remarkable achievements while not hiding the many times we failed in the past. The institute published 65 volumes in English, Chinese and French. Its six-monthly Verbiest Courier is published in English, French, Chinese and Dutch and reports on all its activities of research and cultural exchange. Verbiest Institute spreads the same message as the Celestial Globes of Beijing and Leuven: let exchange and dialogue between East and West help us to pass beyond confrontations of the past and develop equality and friendship.



# 400 years of Ferdinand Verbiest sj

The redaction

Our Institute in Leuven was named after the Belgian Jesuit missionary Ferdinand Verbiest, who was born in Pittem in 1623. Since the very beginning, dialogue with China in a positive way, was priority. Ferdinand Verbiest is a figure who fully symbolizes this mentality, as P. Jerom Heyndrickx clearly demonstrates in this Courier in his article on the Kangxi-Verbiest Celestial Globe. Ferdinand Verbiest, by the way, is still a respected and well-known figure in China today.

From the beginning, research on Ferdinand Verbiest, and his fellow missionaries from the 17<sup>th</sup> century, was one of the research fields in which the Verbiest Institute wanted to be involved with. Several monographs in our Leuven Chinese studies series, and numerous contributions at our international conferences bear witness to this. So we would like to give attention in this Verbiest Courier to this remarkable Belgian, who would celebrate his 400<sup>th</sup> birthday this year. Below we would like to introduce the reader, should it still be necessary, to Ferdinand Verbiest, thanks to an article that appeared in October via Kerknet. Following this, we will introduce the reader to the new book by the Verbiest expert par excellence, Noël Golvers. With this publication by our collaborator of the first hour, we want to commemorate Ferdinand Verbiest appropriately, by highlighting him from 23 perhaps less known angles.

## How Ferdinand Verbiest won the trust of the emperor of China

Philippe Keulemans, Kerknet, Oct. 08, 2023

Ferdinand Verbiest was born in Pittem on Oct. 9, 1623, 400 years ago. At eighteen he entered the Jesuit order and in 1659 was allowed to leave for the Far East as a missionary. There he followed in the footsteps of the other famous Jesuit and China missionary Matteo Ricci to continue the Jesuit mission in China. His life took a spectacular turn when barely a year later he was called to Beijing, where he became an astronomer at the imperial court. The Belgian quickly gained great fame and prestige there, including the introduction of new instruments, revolutionary for China, for the already existing observatory. He also familiarized Chinese with the globe, sundials, water clocks, flood water pumps and even a thermometer and a *camera obscura*.

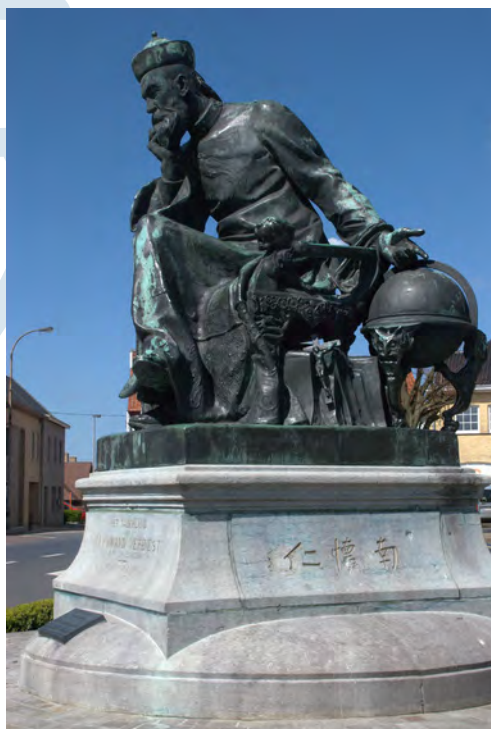
### Misunderstood

If Damien is the most famous Belgian, it is safe to say that Ferdinand Verbiest is one of the most misunderstood Belgians. An accomplished mathematician and astronomer during the Qing Dynasty, Verbiest won the trust of the difficult-to-access Imperial Court in China, and familiarized the country with the best of Western science (albeit in the hope of thus winning the Chinese to Christianity).



Rector R. Dillemans at the commemoration of the 300<sup>th</sup> birthday of F. Verbiest, organized by the Verbiest Foundation in 1988

For example, he corrected the Chinese calendar because European astronomy was more accurate than Chinese astronomy. The Belgian won the confidence of Emperor Kangxi, who was taught geometry, philosophy and music by the West Fleming. In addition, the emperor engaged him as a diplomat, cartographer and translator. When he died at the age of 64 after an unfortunate fall from his horse, he was given a state funeral. At that time, no other Westerner was given that honour. At his funeral, Emperor Kangxi praised him for his loyalty as a friend and counselor. On Jan. 28, 1687, the missionary was buried in a magnificent tomb next to that of that other legendary China missionary Matteo Ricci. His tomb was paid for by the emperor personally.



Statue of Verbiest in Pittem

As was often the case with missionaries at that time, he also experienced eventful and even perilous times in China. During a persecution of Christians, Verbiest was also imprisoned with other missionaries on charges of conspiracy and preaching a “pernicious” doctrine. His astronomical teachings were also presented as false and incorrect by his accusers. But these in turn were put in their place by the Jesuit when he managed to predict the exact time of a total solar eclipse. Verbiest was rehabilitated and through him the Jesuits also managed to get an edict issued by the emperor in 1692 giving recognition to the churches and religious freedom to Christians.

Verbiest’s great dream, to convert the Chinese to Christianity, met with less success. Yet that was initially the reason why he was so eager to go to China. In the end, it was Rome itself that undermined his mission in China and with it the opportunity to widely spread Christianity there. The West Fleming defended that Chinese priests

would pray the missal and breviary in Chinese and not in Latin, which was totally incomprehensible to them. But Rome stood firm and thus put a brake on the spread of Christianity for centuries to come. Rome

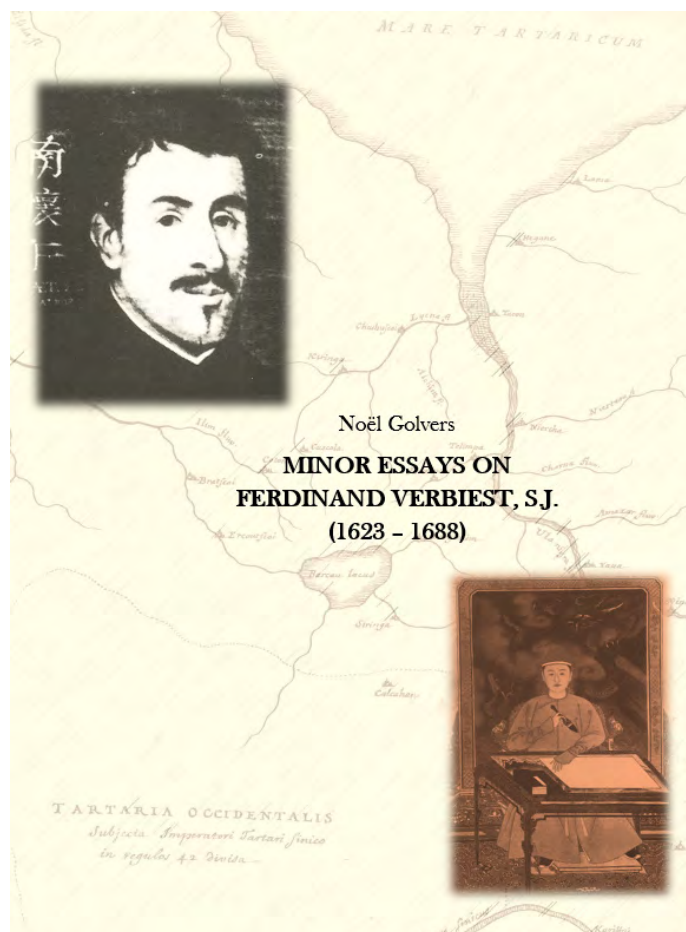
learned the hard lesson that the hearts of the Chinese people can only be won by respecting their language, culture and traditions.

### **Adventurer and multi-talent**

By opening a visitor center, the municipality of Pittem, Westtoer and the province of West Flanders are making it clear that they are not letting the four-hundredth anniversary of the birth of the Pittem missionary, astronomer, engineer and diplomat go unnoticed. A visitor center was already opened in Pittem in 2010, which has now received a thorough *makeover*. In the process, the center was renamed the Ferdinand Verbiest Experience Center. Thanks to Tourism Flanders, the visitor center was expanded with a new animation, a contemporary welcome and a multipurpose room with interactive elements. By means of maps, objects and sound and image fragments, you can learn about Verbiest's adventurous life.

### **Noël Golvers, *Minor essays on Ferdinand Verbiest SJ (Leuven Chinese Studies 45)***

This forthcoming publication contains 23 essays, the result of Noël Golvers' research of the 35 years between the commemoration of the 300th anniversary of Verbiest's decease in 1988 and the celebration of the 400th anniversary of his birthday on 9 February 2023. They are focusing on 23 less studied aspects of his life and work, and are complementing the author's previous editions of Verbiest's main Western publications, viz. his *Astronomia Europaea* (ed. 1991) and his astronomical corpus, including the 'Athenian texts' *Compendium Historicum* and *Mechanica* (with Efthymios Nicolaidis, 2009), his Correspondence (2017) and his *Postulata Vice-Provinciae Sinensis in Urbe proponenda* (2018), which delivered the main sources for the 23 essays. I grouped these essays around various aspects of Verbiest's life and work: his formation; his multiform competences unfolded in China, far exceeding the profile of the "astronomer of the Emperor"; his notable concern with the (institutional and geostrategic) position



of the China mission; his attention for a wide-ranging, even ambitious and complex-free networking by means of correspondence and textual or figurative presents, and, last but not least, the reception and impact of his works and ideas in contemporary Europe. In the China mission, he was in the years 1660-1688 a central figure ("columen missionis"), connected through his 'mentor', Adam Schall von Bell (d. 1666) to the generation of predecessors such as Johann Schreck Terrentius (d. 1630), calendar calculator and 'engineer'. With these 23 intersections our research is moving on the crossroad between mission history, history of science and book history. The 17th century mission, especially in China – perceived by the Jesuits as the most extreme among their missions, but also as the most adapted to their own inspiration and institution - was indeed a very fertile framework for various forms of intercultural contacts, meetings and scholarly-scientific communication.

## **Reflection on the biography of the great Ordos Apostle-Bishop, Alfons Bermyn CICM**

Sr. Gaby Yang

I remember clearly when Father Jeroom introduced us to the Gallo-Roman Museum in Tongeren (Belgium), he quoted the words of the Roman Emperor Caesar, "Belgians are the bravest nation in the world." By repeatedly reading the biography of Bishop Bermyn, I deeply experience this statement coming to life throughout his entire

apostolic life. For more than 90 years, from 1865 when Father Theophile Verbist, the founder of the Congregation of the Sacred Heart of Mary (CICM), led the first four missionaries to China, until the last batch of missionaries returning to Belgium in 1955, CICM has ministered in various locations in China and Mongolia, including Eastern



Mongolia, Central Mongolia, Southwest Mongolia, Ningxia, Gansu, Qinghai, Gansu, Xinjiang, Yili, and Ordos. A total of 679 young missionaries went to China, and 252 died and were buried there. In order to better preach the gospel to the Chinese people, they tirelessly mastered the Chinese and Mongolian languages, and more admirably, some of these missionaries became experts in these languages. Bishop Bermyn is one of these amazing missionaries.



Alfons Bermyn was born on August 22, 1853, in the village of Saint Pauwels, Belgium, into a devout Catholic family, as the sixth of 10 children. He arrived in China on March 10, 1878, and first studied Chinese in Xiwanzi. From 1879 to 1886, he served as parish priest in Chengchuan, Ningtiaoliang, Sandaohe and Xiayingzi. From 1886 to 1888, he was the dean of a college near Xiaoqiaopan. In 1887, he attended the 23<sup>rd</sup> plenary meeting of Southwest Mongolia. From 1888 to 1889, he temporarily served as pastor of Southwest Mongolia (Sandaohe) and built the Sanshenggong School. A similar school was established in Balagai. From 1889 to 1890, he served as the provincial of Chengchuan District. In Chengchuan, he established the first Mongolian school, and authored the "French-Mongolian Spoken Language Dictionary". From 1891 to 1897, he served as CICM provincial. In 1898, he returned to Belgium to attend the CICM General Chapter, and was ordained as the third bishop of the Southwest Mongolia Diocese in 1901. On February 16, 1915, he died of illness in Gangfangyingzi, and his body was buried on a 24-acre land. These are but a few pivotal moments of the life of Bermyn. For a more detailed account of his life, I refer to "Biography of Bishop Bermyn, Apostle of Ordos" by Fr. Joseph Van Oost CICM, which is now also translated into Chinese.

### **Fighting for Justice for the Persecuted Christians**

In the Christian village "Xiaoqiaopan", there was a small bridge by which all merchants needed to pass. An old widow who lived beside the bridge claimed that she built the bridge, and it was located on her property. Therefore, anyone who crossed the bridge needed to pay a special toll fee. The villagers were helpless. Thus, led by Father Steenackers cicm, some church members built another bridge next to the existing one and installed a sign which read: "free crossing." The widow was angered by this, and she falsely accused several key church members of killing her husband (in fact, it was a known fact that her husband had been killed by bandits seven years ago). She further bribed a local official, who ordered some soldiers to arrest these church members. A few days later, Father Steenackers was woken up in the morning by shouts and cries, and saw several innocent faithful being tied up by soldiers. Father Steenackers and another Mongolian tried to intervene, but they were outnumbered and got severely beaten up. Those arrested were brought to Xi'an Prefecture in Shaanxi Province. The government used this as a means to propagate anti-Catholic sentiments and called for the elimination of foreign missionaries and the burning of Catholic churches! After Bermyn

learned of the situation, he immediately wrote to the French Minister in Beijing, the governor of Shaanxi Province, local officials, and anyone he thought had a certain degree of influence.

At the end of 1886, news came that all the efforts of Bermyn had proven to be in vain, and the detained believers were scheduled to be beheaded. The villagers were distraught by the news. However, Bermyn persisted in his fight for justice. In order to save the believers, he took three companions with him, and crossed a distance of more than 400 kilometers on Mongolian ponies to negotiate with the officials. There seemed to be a voice in his heart saying: "We must win the case." Through his honorable character and his determination to

fight for justice, Bermyn finally overturned the judge's decision and had the imprisoned church members released. The despicable widow was sentenced to life imprisonment. Father Bermyn's wisdom left a permanent admirable impression in the hearts of the Mongolians. His resourcefulness, calmness, boldness, and astuteness were also clearly displayed throughout this episode of his life.

In 1900, the Boxers besieged the "Xiaoqiaopan" village and threatened to kill all the believers. In order to protect the villagers and the hundreds of Christians who fled there to seek refuge, Bishop Bermyn was elected as the commander-in-chief to coordinate the resistance against the Boxer Rebellion. At the critical moment of the crisis, Bishop Bermyn led a successful defense campaign against the Boxer and Mongolian attacks. He once personally led an ambush mission on a Mongolian enemy camp and was shot in the leg during the process. Nevertheless, he flashed a reassuring smile to a worried companion, and led the group safely back to their village upon the ambush. In the process, Bishop Bermyn proved to be a reliable protector, a competent guide, and a faithful pastor. He ministered to the spiritual and physical needs of the faithful. He led the faithful during a 49-day campaign of resistance which ultimately resulted in the enemy abandoning the plan to take down the village, and in their disgraceful departure.

### **Alone but not lonely, solace amidst loneliness**

To evangelize among the Mongols, Bishop Bermyn traveled through



the Ordos Desert many times. Even great missionaries have moments of human weaknesses. Crossing the pitch-black desert grasslands, there were times when Bishop Bermyn would be confused and overwhelmed. He described one of his experiences where he felt physically and mentally exhausted, almost to the point of collapse. He was engulfed by sadness and loneliness, feeling alone and abandoned, as if he were the sole person facing a world that was against him. Yet, in that moment, He prayed sincerely, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" "Lord, in this terrible desert, I can't find the path nor water, and my soul longs for you..." Helpless, he turned to the Almighty God, picked up his Divine Office, and began to pray. "God, please come swiftly and save me!" Gradually, he calmed down, and regained a sense of direction through the inspiration of the divine Word. This is a deep contemplative prayer, where one is convinced that God will not test one beyond one's personal abilities. After praying, he managed to regain his calm and reflect on the road and mission ahead.

### ***Missionary in the freezing grassland, the heart of evangelization is radiantly burning.***

During Bermyn's 37-year apostolic career in China, he always displayed an optimistic attitude. Just like the Good Shepherd in the desert in the Gospel, he single-handedly traveled throughout the wild terrains of Mongolia and the Ordos desert in order to evangelize to the Mongolians. He carried with him only a small tea brick, a small portion of puff rice, a piece of rock-hard cheese, a goatskin as a mattress, and a thick sheepskin blanket. If he couldn't find someone to host him in a yurt, he would sleep out in the open, covering his eyes with his fur hat. In the freezing winter desert weather of minus 35 degrees to minus 40 degrees, he would at times ride for as long as ten or twelve hours a day, even to the point where his body parts froze and lost mobility, and he would be forced to stop. As a result, he suffered from chronic rheumatism throughout his later years. In 1906, Bishop Bermyn attended the Beijing Bishops Conference, by then, due to the persistent exposure to extreme weather conditions, even in the middle of summer, he had to wear winter clothing and walk with a cane.

He took the opportunity to get a physical check-up, and, not surprisingly, the doctor said that he not only suffered from rheumatism but also severe gastric problems. He was advised by the doctor to rest, to which he responded: "Serving in the Ordos, even after going into the grave, I have no time to rest." This pastoral zeal saw Bishop Bermyn working unceasingly until the point of death. Father Crabbe Kamiel wrote in a letter: "During the cold winter of minus 25-30 degrees Celsius, Bishop Bermyn still insisted on visiting the faithful in the countryside every day." In 1915, during the First World War, foreign missionaries were banned from entering China, and many priests serving in Gangfang Yingzi died of typhoid fever.

On February 6, 1915, Bishop Bermyn went to a place 25 kilometers away from Gangfangyingzi to say mass. During the mass, he became severely unwell and was bedridden. Upon hearing the news, the provincial Father Van Hauwermeiren rushed over, and discussed the condition with Bishop Bermyn, saying: "Bishop, you have typhoid fever. I trust that you understand what this means. Nevertheless, everyone in the diocese is praying for your recovery. Bishop Bermyn replied with a smile, "Thank you, I understand that typhoid fever is a death sentence for someone my age. If it is God's will for me to return to Him, then let it be!" On February 16, Bermyn passed away in Gangfangyingzi, and his body was buried in the missionary cemetery on the 24-acre site.

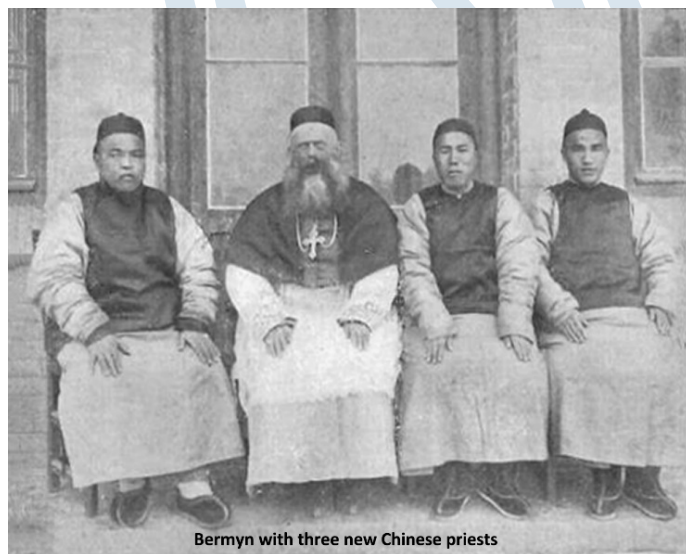
Bishop Bermyn was a prayerful person who always sought strength in his prayer. When he prayed he was like an innocent and pure child or an angel. Even during the busiest moments of his life, he spent time in front of the blessed sacrament, or silently prayed in front of the altar, pouring out his anxieties, hopes, and joys to the Lord. The calmness and serenity displayed on his face each time he walks out from the church after such an intimate moment with the Lord always amazes and inspires his confreres.

Bishop Bermyn not only focused on spiritual evangelization, but also strived to improve the living conditions of the people, fighting against poverty, hunger, floods, droughts, plagues, and persecutions with astonishing perseverance. It was not a momentary struggle but a lifelong commitment. He boldly faced those who were hostile to him, combatted physical illness, and endured mental struggles. He was selfless, and no amount of fatigue, pain, and disappointment could lessen his desire to surrender himself fully to the will of God, even until the moment he took his last breath.

Bishop Bermyn, amidst all his great qualities, is not perfect. However, the point is not to use our present paradigm to criticize the past, but to use the past to improve our present paradigm. Bishop Bermyn is definitely a historical figure whom we could learn a great deal from. "That men do not learn very much from the lessons of history is the most important of all the lessons of history."



*Fr. Bermyn with fellow cism fathers in China, 1905*



**Bermyn with three new Chinese priests**

*Fr. Bermyn with three newly ordained Chinese priests*



# PICTURE REPORT

**Chinese bishops visited the Church in Belgium to reactivate after Covid the exchange and cooperation activities.**



On September 7, after their arrival, they were welcomed by Dr. Hugo Vanheeswijck of Verbiest Foundation, by Prof. Dr. Lemmelijn, Dean of the Theology Faculty KU Leuven, by Prof. Dr. Vannysacker, Theology Faculty KU Leuven, and by Prof. Dr. Roel Leus, advisor at the KU Leuven rectorate for Chinese matters.



After lunch they went on pilgrimage to St. Damian in Leuven where they concelebrated.



On September 8 AM the bishops met with Verbiest Foundation at the Chinese College in Leuven to explore ways to reactivate their cultural exchange activities, and to jointly organize formation sessions in Chinese in Leuven for priests, religious and Catholic laity from China.



Card. Jozef De Kesel invited the delegation for lunch. Then the delegation reported to the Cardinal on the proposals agreed upon in their meeting with Verbiest Foundation. The Cardinal added his own suggestions and advice. The day was completed with a Eucharistic concelebration at the Archdiocesan chapel in presence of the newly ordained Archbishop Luc Terlinden.







*On Saturday September 9, the bishops went on pilgrimage to the tomb of Fr. Theophile Verbist in Scheut. Fr. Luc Colla, vice-provincial, welcomed them during a brotherly exchange with the cicm community. This was followed by a concelebrated Eucharist presided by Bishop Paul Pei, bishop of Chaoyang, a former Mission of Scheut. The bishops then visited the Chinese coffin of Fr. Theophile Verbist who founded Scheut. He left for China in 1865 and died there in 1868.*



*On Saturday afternoon they were welcomed at the ancient Parc Abbey of the Norbertine Fathers in Heverlee. Father Filip Noël introduced them to one of the oldest abbeys in Belgium.*





*On Sunday September 10, the bishops visited Tournai, one of the oldest dioceses in Belgium. They had an early breakfast with Bishop Guy Harpigny, an old friend who visited China in 2008. They concelebrated at the solemn high Mass and participated in the famous century-old procession. They were impressed witnessing Tournai's history since the 5th century.*







After their visit to the Church in Belgium they went to the Netherlands to make three short stopovers. They visited the motherhouse of the SVD Fathers in Steyl. In Broekhuizenvorst they commemorated the nine martyrs: Vincentian Bishop Schraven and his companions.



Bishop Jan Hendriks, bishop of Haarlem-Amsterdam welcomed them to discuss with them the 15th International Verbiest Conference to be held in 2024 and to which also Chinese Catholic scholars will be invited.



From September 12 to 15 the bishops visited the Church in France. They met with the Archbishop, the chairman of the Bishops Conference and the Nuncio. They stayed with the MEP Fathers and were welcomed by the Vincentians.





The Chinese College Leuven welcomed CICM groups from Taiwan and from Hong Kong before and after World Youth Day.



Colleagues from Verbiest Foundation make regular visits to the various CICM houses in Belgium and the Netherlands to inform the fathers on our activities. These visits proof to strengthen the relation again between the Foundation and CICM.



*Ordination Episcopale*  
**Monseigneur Edouard TSIMBA NGOMA**  
*Evêque Auxiliaire de Kinshasa (RDC)*

*9 septembre 2023*

On Saturday 9 September, the Archbishop of Kinshasa, Cardinal Fridolin Ambongo, ordained Edouard Tsimba, a missionary in the diocese of Liège in Belgium and former Superior General of CICM, as auxiliary bishop of Kinshasa.





*In October, Fr. Jeroom Heyndrickx and Dr. Hugo Vanheeswijck travelled to Rome to meet with a.o. Fr. Charles Phukuta, Cardinal De Kesel, Fr. Rocco Huang and Archbp. Celli to update our board direction and close cooperators on our current, activities and planning for the future*



*In November, VF colleagues visited Beijing to present our new VF Team, and, as follow up to the visit of the bishops, plan further cooperation. They also met with many friends, and alumni of VF.*



**To commemorate Fr. Theophile Verbist, activities were organized in Mechelen, Leuven and Taipei.**



Colleagues of VF Leuven travelled to Taipei to partake in the conference organized by VF and the Verbiest Association in Taipei to commemorate cicm founder Theophile Verbist. They took time to meet with old and new friends.



On 26 November, VF commemorated the founder of Scheut in Mechelen in the Pastoral Center. Theophile Verbist was a priest of the archdiocese of Mechelen, and received the full support of the Belgian church there in 1863 during the first Belgian Catholic Congress.





After Eucharist, presided by Cardinal De Kesel and concelebrated by Fr. Charles Phukuta, Superior General of Scheut, and Fr. Martin Mvibudulu, BNL superior, we honored Theophile Verbist with a traditional Chinese ancestor commemoration ceremony. After which we listened to a lecture by Fr. Phukuta, in which he unfolded the remarkable story of the founder.



On 27 November, we celebrated 40 years of Verbiest Foundation in Leuven with a lecture that looked back on the 40 years of VF, but also introduced the new team and the coming challenges for the next 40 years. We were grateful to receive a delegation from the Schraven Foundation, Fr. Hervé Kuafa from the Mostaert Centre in Ulaanbaatar, friends from CICM, ICM and many others during our celebrations!



On November 28, a meeting took place at the Chinese College, where cooperation with the Antoon Mostaert Center of Ulaanbaatar was formalized. P. Hervé Kuafa introduced to colleagues of the Foundation, and members of the board, the functioning and projects of the Mostaert Center.



# 2023 Pilgrimage to the Holy Land and Self-Growth

Hao Jianling

On the 21st of August 2023, Verbiest Foundation organized a historic first-time two-week Pilgrimage to the Holy Land. I joined the Pilgrimage, which was a heartfelt wish fulfilled. We were a group of 42 people, from the United States, Taiwan, Holland and Belgium, including three non-Christians, two protestants, one religious and three priests with whom I was honored to meet in the Lord.

We departed from all over the world to meet at the airport of Tel Aviv in Israel, where we first set foot on the Holy Land. The first night, we stayed in the City of Bethlehem, where we remembered the newborn Jesus, the Christ. A sense of sacredness and fear of the Lord arose spontaneously in us. This sense of holiness inspired me and accompanied me on the rest of my journey of peace.

Over the next few days, we sweat in the hot weather, following in the footsteps of Jesus. The pilgrimage took us through Israel and Jordan, visiting Bethlehem, Jerusalem, Nazareth, Amman, and many sacred places. I was deeply moved when we commemorated the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River, floated in the Dead Sea and went sight-seeing near the Galilee Sea. The daily schedule was very light, giving us time to share touching stories with mutual friends in the group. The group was made up of strong, committed and warm souls, with whom I experienced the power of faith.

Father Zong, with his great knowledge, eloquently told the story of the Holy Land on our pilgrimage. Quite the miracle because just 10 days before the pilgrimage, he had Coronary Artery Bypass Grafting surgery; he led us with perseverance on the long-distance walks. Among us, there was one elderly man from Taiwan, who had just come out of the ICU on crutches; he never gave up his determination to walk at all the holy places. When Fr. Zong poured water on the foreheads of everyone in the Jordan River, my nose suddenly spurted large amounts of blood. Many women immediately surrounded me; they gave me tissues and handed me water. Two women from Taiwan put cooling medication on my temples. My nosebleed was under control. After a few days, because of the hot weather, many members of our group suffered frequently from heatstroke symptoms and fever. My roommate, just before the pilgrimage, came down with shingles, and despite her pain, made the pilgrimage journey with courage. Our Chinese medicine practitioner enthusiastically gave massages, scraping and cupping therapy to people in need.

The Holy City of Jerusalem stands quietly under the weight of history and is at the crossroads of the world. Walking into the city, I seemed to feel the heaviness and holiness of history. I touched many stones and cuts, and all of them told a long old story. Standing on the walls of Jerusalem, looking out over this land that has endured for thousands of years, I felt a sense of fear of the lord and respect for life. Walking on the path of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, touching the Jewish Wailing Wall, and looking up at the Dome Mosque of Islam.

The beliefs of these religions intertwined and mixed, forming a unique



cultural atmosphere. I was deeply attracted by the atmosphere. Looking back on the pilgrimage, I realized that I not only had gained a deeper understanding of the history and culture of Jerusalem but had found the source of my faith. I also gained a deeper understanding of my faith; the power of faith is infinite, faith can make us indomitable in the face of difficulties, and make us self-assertive in the long stream of history. On the pilgrimage, I deeply felt a spiritual baptism and a sublimation of life. I believe the pilgrimage will not only leave a deep mark in my heart but guide me forward on the road of life.

I would also like to share with you an experience that happened to me after the pilgrimage. I returned to work and was required to count the goods in the warehouse. I climbed a ladder to a height of more than two meters to move the cardboard boxes from the upper shelves to the lower level. Since the last box was a little out of my reach, I tilted my body to pick it up, suddenly I was falling off the ladder. At the same time, my daughter intended to pick up the box. I fell past her. I instinctively tried to use my left hand to protect myself which was no help. I hit the floor on my shoulder, my head hit less than five centimetres away from a triangle steel truss. I thought that my head was saved, but that my arm must be gone. My daughter was scared silly, I sat up, held my arm and moved my shoulder, the bones seemed not to be broken. I stood up and wanted to count the last box. But I suddenly felt dizzy and fell unconscious. Then I seemed to





be with a group of people in a beautiful place, we were glad to be together. At that moment, I heard the grieving shouts of my daughter: "Mama", I opened my eyes, and there was a group of people around me. I was lying on the ground as pale as death. The ground was wet. My daughter cried and picked me up and said, "Mama, I thought you were gone, I thought that you went to heaven to meet Dad". They took me to the emergency room to be X-rayed and checked. My head, shoulder, arm and bone had no problem, just the muscles and soft tissue had been seriously strained and I had a slight concussion. I will recover after a while.

Fortunately, I am still alive and narrowly missed being seriously injured. I am very grateful to my Lord for His grace and protection, that is the strength of faith. In the days to come, I will continue to walk firmly on my journey of faith with the experiences and inspiration from the pilgrimage. I believe that as long as we have faith in our hearts, we can find strength and courage in the journey of life.





# IN MEMORIAM

## Fr. Jean Charbonnier

### A modern-day missionary

*Fr. Jean Charbonnier has always been a good friend of Verbiest Foundation. His presence on numerous of our conferences, and the cooperation we had with him when receiving guests from China has always been fruitful and pleasant. The nuance with which he approached the situation of the Church in China and his insights in the complexity of the situation regarding the dialogue between Rome and Beijing make him indeed a great "modern-day missionary". We remember Fr. Charbonnier in this Courier with an article by Ms. Isabelle de Gaulmyn, editor-in-chief, La Croix*

*Isabelle de Gaulmyn, editor-in-chief, La Croix*

The last time we saw him was in a retirement home of his congregation, in the south of France. He was a member of the Foreign Missions Society of Paris, the MEP, which, since 1658, has contributed to the evangelization of many Asian countries. In his small retired room, there were brightly-colored paintings, Chinese inscriptions and lots of Asian smiles on the photos on the wall. And an old-fashioned computer, where he searched, with dexterity for his old fingers of over 90 years, to show his visitors impressions of his latest trips to Asia.

Father Jean Charbonnier quietly passed away on June 23, 2023. Yet here was a man, a priest, who left his mark on the Church and far beyond. When he joined the MEP as a young man, he set his sights on Malaysia, then very quickly on China, living in Singapore. Attracted by the language, which he mastered perfectly, and the extraordinary richness of the culture, the country and the people. He went there so many times. For him, it wasn't a question of converting, but of evangelizing. Rather, evangelization was achieved through dialogue, understanding and exchange.

His in-depth knowledge of China made him one of Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI's advisors on the Vatican's ever-complicated relations with this country-continent. He showed great benevolence towards its leaders, sometimes to the point of minimizing human rights violations. But above all, he instilled a new vision of Catholicism in China, shedding overly Western concepts of the superiority of our model. Father Charbonnier wanted to understand the country from the Chinese point of view, not from our own pre-conceptions. He was one of the first to explain that Catholics in the official Chinese Church, the one recognized by the government, could not be pitted against underground Catholics, who remained outside state control. Between the two, there was a whole nuance of positions, depending on the region, the history, the personalities. And that we had to see China, and its approach to religion, through this complexity, taking mentalities into account. The priest was also passionate about Buddhism and Confucianism.

Father Charbonnier is heir to a long missionary tradition spanning more than three centuries. Next to the retirement home, the MEPs have their own cemetery. On a huge pink plaque are engraved the names of all those buried there.



*Fr. Charbonnier, with next to him Ms. Fr. Aubin, during our 1990 International Verbiest Conference on Historiography of the Catholic Church in China*

These names tell fascinating stories, as all these French priests lived in the four corners of Asia, from Thailand to Vietnam, from China to Cambodia, via India, Laos, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Singapore, Burma.... They did so under conditions that were often extremely difficult: leaving young, with their faith firmly anchored in their hearts, enough to accept losing their lives. An ideal dating from the 17th-century Church, which believed it could convert the whole world to its Truth, and sent religious to the sacrifice.

From this tradition, Father Charbonnier had retained the best: curiosity, courage, the desire to meet others. He adapted it to the Church of Vatican II, and saw himself not as a foot soldier of the Pope, but as a servant of Christ. At a time when his community, the MEP, is faced with the difficult task of uncovering the truth about sexual abuse and power within its ranks, at a time when the Catholic Church is constantly criticizing its priests, sometimes with good reason, I am pleased to recall this figure, who we don't know whether or not he was a saint - that's not up to us. But he was a priest who knew how to make his vocation relevant to the world.

# IN MEMORIAM

## 'My saviour lives' in memory of Wiel Bellemakers CM

*At the end of October, the sad news reached us that Fr. Wiel Bellemakers had passed away. Wiel was a welcome guest at our Chinese College, and fellow members of the Foundation carry with them fond memories of Wiel. Together with the friends of the Schraven Foundation, Wiel was involved in organizing several exchange activities with China. We witnessed his remarkable archival knowledge about missionaries from the Low Countries in China, and he always participated in our activities in Leuven. Wiel cared deeply about China, and was even destined for the mission there. But as China closed its doors to foreign missionaries, he had to put this dream away. In 1997, when the 60th anniversary of Bishop Frans Schraven's murder was commemorated, he was able to visit China for the first time. Wiel was one of the driving forces behind the bishop's beatification.*

*Below we reproduce a text written by his congregation that paints a nice picture of who Wiel was. We complement this further with photographs of Wiel, always with a smile.*

Wiel Bellemakers was born in Brunssum on 6 August 1933, and entered the Congregation of the Mission (Lazarists) in Panningen on 20 September 1950, where he was ordained a priest on 15 December 1957. Wiel was appointed to study canon law in Rome, for which he graduated cum laude. In 1962 he became director of the novitiate in Eefde, and in 1966 director of students in Panningen.

From 1969, Wiel worked pastorally for the deaneries of Apeldoorn and Deventer and also devoted himself to pastoral training. In 1974, he also started working part-time for the ecclesiastical court in the Archdiocese of Utrecht. As a court clerk, he travelled all over the country to visit people and describes it as the greatest gift in his life that he learned from his many connections how life works, sharing love, pain, sorrow, joy..., in this, the ecumenical church of Hoenderloo, where he was pastorally active for 40 years, played a major role. Sr Regien was his right-hand man. He was immensely grateful for it.

He was appointed to various administrative tasks within the Dutch Province and the Congregation of the Mission. Over the years, he was a member of the preparatory committee for the General Assembly, councillor, superior, mission procurator, delegate to general assemblies and several times provincial. With great commitment, he worked for his confreres and their works in the Netherlands and abroad. He made many trips to our working areas. Wiel was the heart of the Dutch Province.

He often worked late into the evening for the Congregation's archives. He read a lot and dug up data, bringing to life stories of confreres and the Congregation; all this he incorporated into their "In Memoriam". The China archive had his special attention, it was thoroughly studied, its knowledge during his China trips led to a lively exchange with Chinese, who still knew the Dutch confreres. Wiel documented



*Fr. Wiel in 2018 in the Chinese College, with Dr. Maria Liu, board member of the Verbiest Institute*

everything. The China trips were of great significance for the Congregation.

His health slowly declined, but he remained active where he could and kept in touch with all his connections. He was able to celebrate his 90th birthday with family and friends in gratitude. He still immensely enjoyed his last holiday and his walks with Liesbeth on the Moselle.

After being hospitalised, his condition continued to deteriorate and he did not want to be admitted again. He left thanking everyone for the love, attention and care given to him. Finally, he passed away peacefully on 24 October 2023 at the Mission House.



*VF colleagues and friends from Holland listening attentively to Wiel's stories in the classroom of the Chinese College*



# 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, Sisters of De Jacht (ICM), -- 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 Verbiest 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, Sisters of De Jacht (ICM).
- 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](mailto:verbiest.inst@kuleuven.be)

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