



# courier

# Verbiest

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### EDITORIAL



Leo PP. XIV

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Devoted as we are to promoting dialogue with the faithful in China and in Chinese overseas communities with the Holy See for our guide and inspiration, it goes almost without saying that the election and accession of Pope Leo XIV has been a memorable event, for the Verbiest Foundation as well as for all our sympathisers and readers of this Courier. We trust that the dialogue with China inaugurated in 1970 by Pope Paul VI shall be maintained. If over the past fifty years there have been the occasional setbacks, these have invariably been met with perseverance, restoring a measure of mutual trust, which in its turn has inspired new hope. In this context, the appointment (on September 10 last) of Joseph Wang Zhengui as the first bishop of the new Diocese of

Zhangjiakou, by the terms of the 2018 China-Vatican agreement, is not only encouraging but is as well a recognition of the historical cradle of the Scheut mission in Northern China, i.e. the Diocese of Xiwanzi and Xuanhua, now modernised as "Zhangjiakou". The Verbiest Foundation shall observe with keen attention how Pope Leo XIV intends to actualise the interpretation for a new era, of a framework for dialogue that was created now more than half a century ago.

In the last Courier (of June) mention was made of a "crisis" that unexpectedly hit the Verbiest Foundation and its founder. All of you who support the Foundation and wish it well, surely will find comfort in the fact that great efforts have been made this year to surmount this crisis. The discord that a few individuals attempted to sow is a thing of the past. The Foundation's new core direction is committed unswervingly to continue furthering the objectives of our founder, Father Jeroom Heyndrickx. From China and from Chinese communities elsewhere, and naturally also from Belgium, many people expressed disbelief at what befell us, and by the same token assured us of their undiminished confidence. Of erstwhile friendly institutions that groundlessly dropped us, the new direction hopes that they shall come to reconsider.

After all, all the activities that were scheduled for the year 2025 have been carried out successfully. This Courier testifies to that fact, both in words and in pictures. The summer training session for religious sisters from China, painstakingly prepared by the Foundation's Chinese co-workers, accordingly passed very smoothly and ended in a pilgrimage to Lourdes; it was but one highlight in this year's calendar. The pictures of it, we think, speak clearer than words.

EDITORIAL

From September 22 to 24, a delegation of Chinese bishops visited Belgium at the invitation of the Verbiest Institute. The delegation was led by H.Em. Bishop Guo Jincai, Vice Chairman of the Chinese Bishops' Conference and Rector of the National Seminary in Beijing. Right after their arrival, co-workers of the Institute accompanied the delegation to Mechelen, where H.Em. Archbishop Luc Terlinden, Mgr. Herman Cosijns and Secretary-General Bruno Spriet of the Belgian Bishops' Conference gave them a hearty welcome. After a general introduction on the state of the Church in China by Bishop Guo, H.Em. Bishop Cai Bingrui of Fuzhou (Fujian Province) and H.Em. Bishop Sun Wenjun of Weifang (Shandong Province) presented the situation in their respective dioceses in somewhat more detail. Archbishop Terlinden outlined the situation of the Church in Belgium.

Changes in the world around us can constitute challenges, but equally can act as a spur to enrich our dialogue with China and to render it more fruitful for both sides. Can evangelisation be helped by the internet, can we make artificial intelligence an ally? May not modernisation and material progress just as well inspire new vocations? How do we carry forward, both in China and in Europe, the constructive reflection launched in China by H.Em. Cardinal Joseph De Kesel on the subject of Church and societal secularisation? In a brotherly spirit an exchange of ideas spontaneously took place on these themes of immediate relevance.

The visit to Mechelen concluded with an invitation extended by the Chinese delegation to the Archbishop, to travel to China at an appropriate time in the future. As in the past, the Verbiest Institute and the Verbiest Foundation are most willing to cooperate towards organising the next encounter between the Belgian and Chinese Catholic Church, well knowing how precious and instructive such an exchange is to both sides.

Fr. Matthew Gong, Rector of the Chinese College at the Verbiest Foundation, could then share information with the Chinese bishops on the curriculum offered annually in Leuven to Chinese ecclesiastical officials, thus laying the ground for the more academical part of the delegation's programme. Indeed in the afternoon of September 22 a visit to the Theological Faculty of Leuven University was organised, including a tour of the world-famous Preciosa department of the Maurits Sabbe Library. Professor Wim François there introduced the international courses on offer by the Faculty. Also and more in particular the Chinese bishops were shown early testimony of the cultural exchanges, fostered by missionary work, between China and Europe ever since the 16th century, in the form of Chinese books printed in Europe and atlases produced for use in China. Whatever one takes the modern concepts of acculturation or sinicisation of the Church to mean in practice, such concepts can only derive their necessary depth from being nurtured by the impressive theological

tradition that is on display in the rows of volumes in this Library.

A work meeting at the Chinese College occupied the next day. The exchange gained substantially in value by the circumstance that two delegation members had themselves once been students of Fr. Jeroom Heyndrickx, so that the subject of "formation", both now and in the future, of priests, sisters and lay believers in China, became more tangible thanks to shared practical experience. The emphasis lay on training students at the National Seminary and in the dioceses in canonical law, which in the Chinese setting is not without its obstacles. The bishops openly discussed the challenges involved and spoke of their hope for a better future. Their labours, though, continue unabated. Support by the Verbiest Foundation strengthens their resolve, the more so as the Chinese government recognises and appreciates our partnership.

Lucia Wong, speaking for the Verbiest Institute, informed the delegation on publications financed and produced of late as the result of research projects undertaken about the history of the Church in China; while Matthew Gong stressed the importance of cultural exchange projects such as the Spring and Summer sessions organised this year with equal success as in previous years.

The future looks more than promising. Next to a counter-visit to China that may materialise before the end of the current year, we look forward to substantial joint activities in 2026 and 2027. Certainly 2026 will be a year of historic significance, marking the centenary of the first ordination of Chinese bishops – an occasion that we hope shall be celebrated with some lustre. H.E. Bishop Guo Jincai and his delegation departed from Belgium with plenty of photographs and with, no doubt, a full notebook of ideas for cooperation such as this one, pending translation into reality.

This Courier also includes an account by the Verbiest Foundation's Representative for Asia, Joseph Lim, of a visit that he and two directors made to Hong Kong and Taiwan from September 16 to 22. At one level the new directors aimed at getting to know their counterparts in the Verbiest Association in Taiwan, as well as several of our partner institutions in the region. On another level the visit served as a reminder, much though memories of the Covid-19 pandemic are already fading, of how together with our Taiwanese friends we are capable of much more than if we act alone, and what we can do together to bridge the distance that our forced isolation at that time imposed upon us.

In Taipei, finally, a memorable gathering took place with seven Chinese sisters and five Chinese priests studying at the Faculty of Theology of Fu-jen University with scholarships provided by our Foundation. The eldest of them had



come from the mainland two years previous, the youngest had left Shaanxi for Taiwan only two weeks before. Some hailed from catholic families with a centuries-old tradition in the Faith. One after the other shared with us the story of their motivation, of the privilege

of completing their studies here, and of their joyful prospects; it is no exaggeration to say that they positively beamed. For the Verbiest Foundation that in itself – as well as the trust you kindly continue to place in us – is a priceless reward.

*The direction of the Verbiest Foundation*

## THE VF DIRECTION VISITED HONG KONG & TAIWAN – THREE CHINESE BISHOPS VISITED BELGIUM

*These two visits reveal the Renewed Identity of Verbiest Foundation*

*VF administration*

In 1982, Verbiest Foundation (VF) was founded by CICM which also sponsored and administered it. For 22 years VF was legally a Church-administered entity. VF today still considers those years “the best of its 45 years’ history”. It regrets that this ended in 2006. Since then, VF needs to clarify its new identity as an *autonomous, Christian organization, Gospel-inspired, motivated by Vatican II, in service of the Church in China and promoting dialogue with China and Chinese institutions*. [Three keywords: **Autonomous – Christian – China-oriented**]. It took years for VF to clarify that Renewed Identity. The two above-mentioned visits reveal that significant steps were made confirming that the Renewed Identity is being realized (see photos 1-2).

Verbiest Courier wishes to explain to all friends of VF this historic evolution in VF starting as of 2006. Three events clarified the Renewed Identity of VF and its relations with its Chinese partners.



*Chairman Karel and Vice-Chairman Dominik*



### **1 - After CICM withdrew from VF (2004-2006): Engaging Chinese colleagues was a historic and much needed decision of VF.**

To survive after 2006, VF had to put up the administrative structures it needed and find financial means. To do that without the support of CICM – which had pulled out of VF – took VF fifteen years. Administrative documents confirm that as of 2020 VF spoke openly of a “Renewed VF” [Not of a “New VF” because VF basic goals had not changed]. By that time VF had found the financial means which allowed it to function on its own. But promoting dialogue with PRChina was delicate and challenging. VF decided that only Chinese personnel would be able to cooperate and exchange efficiently with PRChina in the fields of Formation, Research, Publication and Cultural Exchange. It engaged sufficient Chinese colleagues in Taiwan and Leuven to do that. By 2022 VF had the structures it needed. This renewed VF significantly (see group, photo 3).



*Matthew Gong, Theresa Hao, Lucia Wong, Jing Van den Berg, Simon Zheng, Clara Lin, Stella Chen, Gaby Yang*

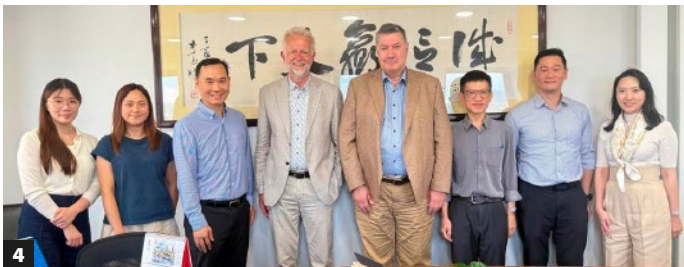


By 2023, VF felt ready to adapt to the New Belgian Law Geens and appoint a new VF Team to direct the Daily Administration (DA). But precisely that same year VF ran into a crisis, which unexpectedly started from inside VF. The crisis first affected the VF Chinese colleagues and reached a dramatic peak on 28 November 2024 when most VF board members resigned which forced VF to establish a new board immediately. All through 2025 the new VF Board confronted the harmful crisis pleading at the same time for dialogue and reconciliation with former board members. Until finally their call to link up with the Bishops Conference (BC) opened dialogue, creating hope for normalizing the VF situation in Leuven. Only in September 2025, could the VF Board start caring for its other urgent needs in Hong Kong and Taiwan, which were also affected by the crisis. Making a personal visit was the best way to clarify that.

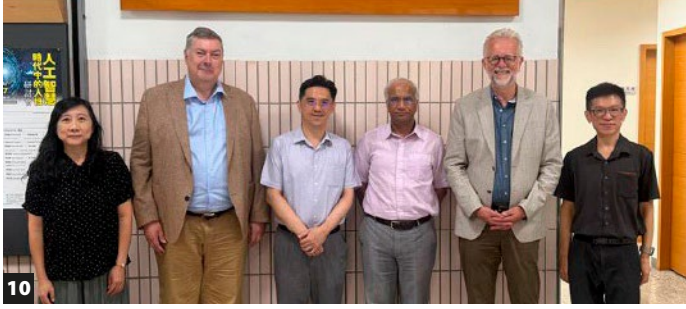
## **2 - September 2025: VF chairman & vice-chairman visited partners in Hong Kong, Taiwan.**

The VF Board decided to send its chairman and vice-chairman to Hong Kong and Taiwan to meet partners and to rebuild a relationship of friendly cooperation. Only personal communication and encounters could clarify and renew old friendly relations of mutual understanding and cooperation during a two-week historic and intensive visit. Each one of the following photos speaks a thousand words. No more words are needed to confirm the overall success of that initiative.

- In Hong Kong they engaged in intensive meetings and personal encounters with the partners of VF Hong Kong Ltd. This renewed the partnership of VF with Hong Kong Ltd (see photo 4).
- Vicar General Fr. Peter Choy of Hong Kong Diocese with partners at the Holy Spirit Study Center (HSSC) – a.o. Patrick Taveirne cicm – heartily welcomed the VF visitors renewing VF exchange with HSSC, which has started in the early 1980s (see photos 5-6).
- Joseph Lim Jun Xiong, the newly appointed VF Board Representative for VF activities in Asia accompanied the visitors in Hong Kong and flew with them to Taiwan to renew also there the old relationships with VF partners (see photo 7).
- In Taiwan, the first visit went to Verbiest Institute at the Central Building for a report and sharing on the local activities and structure of the office with Clara Lin, Stella Chen & Chen Cui Wen (see photo 8).
- There was a meeting with Chairman Chen Fang Chung and the old friends of the “Taiwan Verbiest Association for Cultural Exchange”, established in 2017 as the partner association of VF for cooperation in Taiwan. Old friends renewed and prolonged the cooperation (see photo 9).
- VI Taiwan has a yearly program of academic activities with the Academia Catholica of Fu Jen Catholic University. Our







visitors were kindly and friendly welcomed by Director Prof. Salvamani and his staff for a report and exchange of plans (see photo 10).

- There was a family encounter with the 4 elderly Belgian CICM members in Taiwan: Fr. Antoine Maes, Fr. Marcel Goffart, Fr. Frans De Ridder and Fr. Willy Ollevier at the ICM home with Sr. Maria Claeys icm; with a brotherly/sisterly frank exchange on how to continue in the future the CICM Option for China defined by CICM Founder Verbist (see photo 11).

Both Karel and Dominik, chairman and vice-chairman, returned happily and satisfied to Leuven, aware that the goals of this visit were clearly and largely achieved. Unclarities, if any, were cleared up. Roads were opened to restore the old relations among partners in both places. The renewed friendship enables both sides to face the existing challenges. Mission accomplished.

### **3 - Three Chinese bishops visited the Bishops Conference, KU Leuven and Verbiest Foundation.**

The fact that bishops from China have in recent years visited the Church in Belgium every year is unique. It proves that our mutual relations are excellent. This has to do with the pioneering role VF-Leuven has played ever since 1982 to promote open dialogue and friendly exchange with China. The visit of the three bishops from China and their delegation to the Church in Belgium, to KU Leuven and to VF-Leuven was as remarkable as the visit of the VF Direction to Hong Kong and Taiwan (see photo 12).



Archbishop Luc Terlinden with Msgr. Herman Cosjins and Secretary Bruno Spriet welcomed them at the archbishop's house in Malines. After an introduction of the guests and hosts, there followed a long exchange on the activities of exchange between Belgium and China during the past year and those prepared for the coming year. Fr. Matthew Gong participated in the report and Zheng Yong Jun translated (see photo 13).

The bishops were also offered a visit to the theology library of the KU Leuven where they showed much interest in the old volumes on the Church in China (see photo 14).







The bishops were received by Verbiest Foundation and by the whole community of Chinese colleagues at the Chinese College in Leuven. Chinese was the language used for communication which immediately created an open and friendly atmosphere. This was stressed in the welcoming address where the bishops were told: *"In 1985, Bishop Michael Fu Tieshan came here heading the first friendly delegation coming from China to the West. Since then, there have been many exchange visits from Beijing to Leuven and vice versa. Today, forty years later, we welcome your delegation. We want you to know that the Chinese College has become a home in Leuven for the Church of China. Your bishops, your priests, religious sisters and faithful, are always welcome to stay and pray with us, to study here and exchange with us confirming each other in unity of faith"* (see photos 15-16-17-18).

This set the tone for a 3-hour long fruitful and friendly exchange. The visiting bishops and the welcoming Verbiest Foundation discovered both that their intensive exchanges during recent yearly visits enhanced significantly the mutual friendly and fruitful relations of exchange. Some highlights were:

- 1- Both sides hope that Exchange Sessions will continue to be organized for priests, religious and faithful from China as they were organized during several years.
- 2- VF has translated into Chinese and published the classical manual of Fr. André Fossion SJ of Lumen Vitae Institute "La catéchèse dans le domaine de la Communication". The content fits the curriculum of universities and/or Major Seminaries. It is part of the curriculum of the sessions at Chinese College Leuven. VF suggests exchanging a VF teacher to teach that course at the National Seminary.
- 3- The book of Cardinal De Kesel – Religion and Faith in a Secularized Society – was also translated into Chinese and published by VF. In formation sessions in Taiwan as well as in Leuven, VF has been teaching a course on the cardinal's book. VF suggests exchanging a VF teacher to teach also that course at the National Seminary or other seminaries in China.



The content of the exchange revealed that not only the visit to Hong Kong and Taiwan by the VF direction initiates a new phase in the exchange with its partners, also the September visit of the Chinese Bishops' delegation initiates a growth in revealing the Renewed Identity of VF and its relationship with its partners.

# A PILGRIMAGE OF RENEWAL: THE DELEGATION OF VERBIEST FOUNDATION'S HISTORIC JOURNEY OF HOPE TO HONG KONG AND TAIWAN

Joseph Lim

In a time when institutions worldwide seek renewal, the Verbiest Foundation Leuven (VF) embarked on a journey that transcended mere administration. From September 16–22, 2025, its leaders traveled through Hong Kong and Taiwan – not simply as officials, but as pilgrims – weaving dialogue, reconciliation, and faith into a living story of continuity and trust.

## **Legacy and the Promise of Renewal**

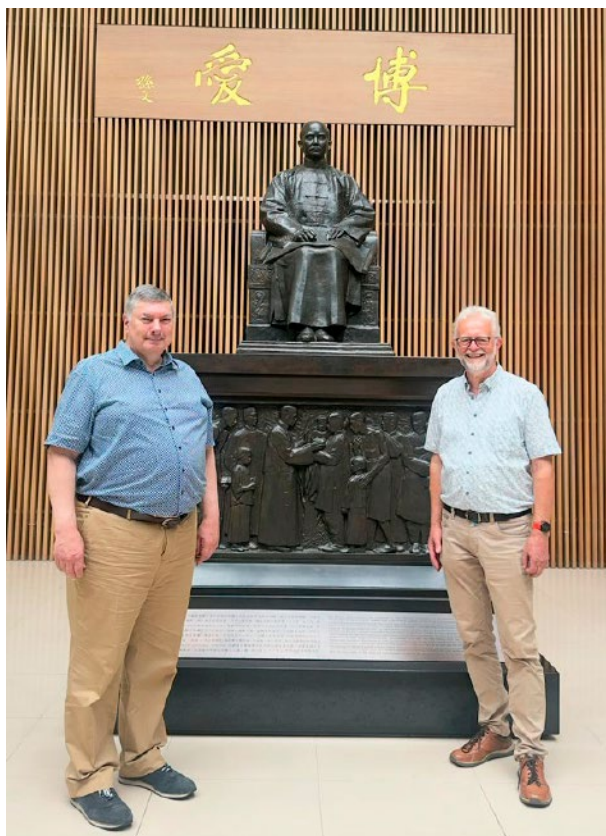
In the delicate dance between legacy and future, the Verbiest Foundation Leuven recently completed a pivotal seven-day journey to Hong Kong and Taiwan. Led by Chairman Karel Heyndrickx and Vice-Chairman Dominik Declercq, the visit was a heartfelt pilgrimage of renewal – defined by a personal commitment to dialogue, reconciliation, and the reaffirmation of trust with long-standing partners. More than a routine itinerary, the journey became a living testimony to VF's enduring mission and its confident stride into the next four decades of service.

*"Although Fr. Jeroom is now 93, he will stay with us – helping, guiding, and ensuring that we keep to the same direction he embraced from the very beginning." – Karel Heyndrickx*

## **A Mandate of Transparency and Steadfast Commitment**

At the core of this seven-day endeavour was a spirit of humility and transparency. A crucial, non-negotiable part of the agenda was to sit down with friends and partners in both regions to offer explanations and clarifications regarding the challenges the Foundation faced over the past year and the necessary restructuring of the Board. This was not about defending the past, but about candidly sharing the truth and ensuring our partners felt respected and fully informed.

More importantly, the Chairman and Vice-Chairman arrived with a renewed, unwavering promise to the community. They affirmed a firm resolve to uphold the 42-year vision and mission of the Foundation, carrying forward the original spirit and ideals of our founder, Fr. Jeroom. This new leadership is dedicated to continuing the legacy on an unbroken, enduring path. Their message was one of continuity, affirmation, and steadfast commitment, a pledge to seek the collective support and cooperation of every friend, every partner, a courageous step into the next forty years of service.



Chairman Karel Heyndrickx (right) and Vice-Chairman Dominik Declercq (left)

## **New Leadership for a Shared Future**

The renewal of VF's mission rests upon a team whose strengths are both complementary and visionary. Karel Heyndrickx, drawing on four decades at KBC, Belgium's largest bank, brings strategic clarity and global management experience. Dominik Declercq, a scholar and Sinologist with a doctorate and over 40 years in China, offers profound cultural and academic depth – ensuring that VF's research initiatives remain authentic and relevant.

Together, they embody the Foundation's dual vocation: excellence in governance and depth in scholarship. Accompanying them was Joseph Lim, VF's regional representative and consultant, whose presence helped strengthen local engagement and continuity in Asia.

## **Affirming Partnership at the Verbiest Cultural Exchange Association Taiwan (VA)**

A cornerstone of the regional visit was the time spent in Tai-





Meeting with Taipei colleagues: (from the left) Chen Cui-wen, Clara, Dominik, Karel, and Stella.

wan with the Verbiest Institute Taipei, which is officially registered in 2017 as the Verbiest Cultural Exchange Association Taiwan" (VA). Established at the same time with VF since 1982, this center is a vital part of our network, and we have proudly sponsored its work since the beginning. The meetings with VA were a profound moment of confirmation in mutual understanding and trust. The leadership engaged in honest and candid communication, sitting down with partners to clarify operational and financial matters with utmost directness. These weren't just bureaucratic meetings; they were a mutual handshake across a table of friendship, successfully setting a solid historical foundation for our future collaboration in the region.

### Building Trust Through Dialogue and Cultural Exchange

Throughout the journey, the delegation lived out a quiet conviction: the future is not built on bureaucracy, but on human connection. Each meeting, conversation, and shared meal was conceived as an act of reconciliation – a step beyond past challenges toward renewed cooperation. Chairman Karel un-

derscored VF's identity as a network of collaboration, integrating research, publication, and education across Belgium and Asia.

*"The journey reminded us that reconciliation is not a word – it is a way of walking together."*

### Strategic and Cultural Connections

In Hong Kong, the leadership conducted key strategic reviews, working with legal counsel to anchor VF's presence and ensure sustainable growth. Meetings with Fr. Peter Choy of the Holy Spirit Seminary College and Fr. Patrick Taveirne reflected shared enthusiasm for future cooperation in academic and pastoral formation.

In Taiwan, dialogue with the VA confirmed mutual trust and continuity. Cultural appreciation was intentionally woven into the visit — notably during a reflective visit to the National Palace Museum Taipei, where exhibitions such as Inkstones, through the Eyes of an Aficionado and The Splendor of Dream of the Red Chamber – served not merely as leisure, but as gesture of cultural dialogues. In this informal setting, genuine rapport and human warmth flourished, strengthening ties with Taipei colleagues and enriching the official mission with a spirit of friendship and shared heritage.

### A Welcoming Embrace of Community and Faith

The journey was deeply spiritual. At Holy Rosary Church, the delegation joined the community for Mass, warmly welcomed by Fr. Frans De Ridder, who underlined their mission



Visit to the National Palace Museum Taipei, accompanied by colleagues of Taipei Office



(Upper left) Pictured with Sister Maria Claeys of ICM (seated, right), Karel and Dominik, alongside Ms. Wu Zhen-wen (front left), a longstanding friend of the CICM mission in Taiwan.

(Upper right) Karel and Dominik are pictured with Fr. Frans De Ridder (center), who serves as the parish priest at the parish, Holy Rosary Church.



to reconnect with the local Church. The atmosphere was fraternal and reverent – a sign of VF’s ongoing communion with the wider ecclesial family.

During a meeting with Taiwan Verbiest Cultural Exchange Association (VA) Members, Chairman Karel reaffirmed the Board’s determination to continue along the path envisioned by Fr. Jeroom – a vision rooted in service, education, and dialogue.

### ***Nurturing Talent: The Core Mission of Hope***

At the very center of VF’s vocation lies the nurturing of people — especially those called to serve the Church in China and the Catholic Chinese Community worldwide. The visit to the Fu Jen Faculty of Theology of St. Robert Bellarmine reaffirmed VF’s long-standing commitment to its scholarship program, which supports priests and religious sisters in their theological studies.

Meetings with Academia Catholica and Fu Jen Catholic University (FJAC) focused on revitalizing collaborations and encouraging new research rooted in VF’s archives — renewing the intellectual and spiritual vigor that has long defined VF’s mission.

Throughout the week, the delegation was received with warmth and friendship by Belgian CICM Fathers, as well as Sr. Maria Claeys, ICM, and numerous long-time partners — each encounter echoing the same words of blessing and encouragement.

### ***The Vision Ahead***

The seven-day journey, though demanding, became a well-spring of renewed energy and shared confidence. It affirmed that VF’s future is anchored in a reconfigured, dynamic team united by a single spirit of service and hope.

With two capable and open-hearted leaders, the Verbiest Foundation has unmistakably turned a new page—affirming the mission accomplished in the past, reconciling with it, and moving forward with renewed purpose and faith in what is yet to come.

The blend of Karel’s organizational precision and Dominik’s scholarly depth, reinforced by commitment to partnership and cultural appreciation, promises a future of stability, integrity, and vibrant growth for the Verbiest Foundation Leuven.



*Visit to Fu Jen Faculty of Theology, meeting the rector Fr. Thomas Cui and the secretary Ms. Pan, reaffirmed VF’s long-standing commitment to its scholarship program, which supports priests and religious sisters in their theological studies at the theologate.*



*VF delegation: (from the right) Karel Heyndrickx, Dominik Declercq and Joseph Lim (the board representative for Asia matters)*



# THE FIRST SISTERS' ONGOING FORMATION SESSION SUCCESSFULLY CONCLUDED

Matthew Gong, Rector Chinese College Leuven

## ***A Chronicle of the Seventh Summer Pastoral Exchange by the Verbiest Foundation***

From August 3 to September 3, 2025, the Verbiest Foundation (VF) successfully held its first “Sisters’ Ongoing Formation Program” at the Chinese College in Leuven, Belgium. (Formation sessions for Chinese priests have been started by VF ten years ago.) This five-week program brought together 22 sisters from 14 different religious congregations in China. It also marked an important milestone as the VF fully resumed its pastoral exchanges with the Church in China after the pandemic of COVID-19.

### ***From an Unfulfilled Plan to a Joyful Restart***

As early as 2020, the VF had planned to organize a special formation program for sisters taking a sabbatical year. Yet, the sudden outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic forced the cancellation of this initiative. After the pandemic, the VF reorganized its resources and carefully listened to the pastoral needs of Chinese religious congregations and dioceses. Finally, in the summer of 2025, this long-cherished plan came true.

The program offered a diverse curriculum, covering key areas such as *communication skills in catechesis*, *biblical studies*, *RCIA*, and *Catholic social ethics*. In addition, the schedule included a one-week pilgrimage to France and a series of cultural and ecclesial visits on weekends.

### ***Professional Lecturers and Rich Curriculum***

Daily classes quickly became the highlight of the sisters’ schedule.

The first week was led by Mr. Joseph Lim from Malaysia, who holds master’s degrees in pastoral theology and applied ethics from KU Leuven and is a long-term lecturer collaborating with the VF. Using Jesuit Fr. André Fossion’s work as his primary text, he guided the sisters to explore how communication and catechesis intertwine. He also drew on Cardinal Jozef De Kesel’s book *Faith and Religion in a Secular Society* to help participants reflect on how the Church can foster a “culture of human encounter” in an increasingly secularized context.

In the second week, Fr. Bonaventura Lin (o.f.m.), associate professor at Fu Jen Catholic University in Taipei and a specialist in New Testament exegesis, offered a course entitled *Introduction to New Testament Narratives*. He led the sisters to rediscover the four Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles, providing insights into their structures and theological emphases. “Let the Gospel become your prayer, not just a text,” he reminded them.



The third week was facilitated by Sr. Gaby Yang of the VF, who introduced the methodology of guiding RCIA. Drawing on *Our Journey Together*, she emphasized that accompanying catechumens is more than simply teaching content – it is walking alongside them, fostering dialogue, and helping them integrate faith into daily life.

The final week, I gave a course on *Catholic Social Ethics*. Since this subject is rarely included in the sisters’ regular formation. This course provided an overview of its history, principles, and practical concerns – family, environment, and work – helping the sisters see the close link between parish ministry and social engagement: faith belongs not only inside the church walls, but must also inspire values and actions in society.

### ***Pilgrimage and Cultural Encounters***

The program extended beyond the classroom into lived experience. The one-week pilgrimage to France was especially memorable:

- In Lisieux, the sisters contemplated the spiritual legacy of *St. Little Thérèse of the Child Jesus*.
- In Lourdes, they celebrated Mass and prayed in the grotto of the Marian apparitions, walked the Way of the Cross, and joined the breathtaking candlelight Rosary procession. Their singing of Marian hymns in Chinese added a unique resonance to the valley.
- In Paris, they visited the Lazarist Church and the Paris Foreign Mission Society (MEP), venerating the relics of missionaries martyred in China, and rediscovered the zeal of the universal Church’s missionary spirit.
- The weekends were equally enriching. From the theological tradition of KU Leuven and the witness of St. Damien of Molokai, to the grandeur of Cologne Cathedral, the beauty





of Bruges – “the Venice of the North” –, and even the secular modernity of Amsterdam, the sisters encountered both history and contemporary culture. The most unforgettable experience was walking over 20 kilometers to the Shrine of Our Lady of the Sweet Water (Zoet Water) to celebrate the Assumption Mass and join the Marian procession. Though physically exhausting, their hearts overflowed with joy.

### Testimonies and Sharing

A defining feature of the program was the sisters’ own sharing. Many recounted their vocation stories, their congregational charisms, and their pastoral experiences. Some bore witness to miracles they had personally experienced. These testimonies deepened mutual understanding and rekindled faith among all.

During the pilgrimage in France, several lay companions also shared their journeys of faith, which deeply moved the sisters. They realized that the power of witness transcends states of life – religious and lay alike can inspire one another. As one sister put it: “This has been more than study – it has been a renewal of the soul.”

### Joy and Hope

At the closing ceremony on August 27, the participants voiced a common voice:

“Though four weeks of study passed quickly, the content we learned was very rich and will be extremely helpful for our parish ministry. We will bring what we have received here in Belgium back to our communities in China. We sincerely hope that such programs will continue and that we may participate again in the future.”

Fr. Jerom Herndrickx remarked in his closing address: “This is the most joyful and hopeful group of sisters I have ever encountered.”

On September 4, the Sisters’ Training Program came to a successful close, and the participants returned to their respective communities – carrying with them new strength, vision, and hope.





For the VF, this is not an end but a new beginning. Faithful to the spirit of its founder, Fr. Théophile Verbist of the CICM, the VF remains committed to its guiding mission of “China First”. It will continue serving the Church in China, fostering joy and hope, and opening new horizons for pastoral exchange.

## Conclusion

This ongoing formation program was not merely an academic course, but truly a journey of faith. It enabled Chinese sisters to broaden their horizons in the European ecclesial and cultural context, and to return to their communities with renewed strength and hope.

The collaboration between the Verbiest Foundation and the Church in China continues. This first sisters’ ongoing formation program will undoubtedly become a solid starting point for deeper communion and future exchanges.

In the sisters’ eyes, we saw joy in their smiles, we felt hope.

Perhaps this is exactly what the VF wished to leave behind: that in every encounter, hearts may be gently illuminated by God’s presence.



# NAVIGATING THE CHURCH IN A SECULAR AGE: A REPORT OF THE SISTERS’ FORMATION PROGRAM AT THE CHINESE COLLEGE LEUVEN

*Joseph Lim taught a course based on a book of Fr. André Fossion SJ of Lumen Vitae (Namur) on Communicating the Christian Message Today and on another book by Cardinal Jozef De Kesel on “Religion & Faith in a Secularized Society”. Verbiest Foundation promotes both books to be used as manuals for catechesis in Major Seminaries.*

*A cross-cultural theological dialogue, a deep investment in the future of faith*

Joseph Lim

## Prelude: Converging Paths, A Shared Purpose

In the late summer of Leuven, Belgium, the ancient town rests in tranquility, yet the winds of wisdom swirl ceaselessly. This year, the “Formation Program in Pastoral Theology for Sisters,” meticulously organized by the Verbiest Foundation and hosted by the Chinese College Leuven in August 2025, welcomed a special group of pilgrims—twenty-two sisters from Mainland China, representing fourteen different religious congregations. Like fourteen spiritual streams originating from the vast land of China, they converged upon this European bastion of academia and faith for a month of profound learning and shared life.

This was not merely a quest for knowledge, but a journey of the soul. Leaving behind their familiar pastoral duties, they traveled across oceans with a clear aim: to rekindle the flame of evangelization through systematic study of pastoral theology, and to find a clear identity and direction for the future of the Church in China amidst the global tide of contemporary secularization.



*“Catechesis in the Field of Communication” and “Faith and Religion in a Secular Society” formed the core curriculum of the program.*



## I: Catechesis – The Art of Transforming Information into Encounter

"Catechesis is never merely the transmission of knowledge; it is a dialogue of love between God and humanity." With these measured and warm words at the outset of the course, lecturer Joseph Lim set a profound tone for the lessons to come.

### Returning to the Source: Interpreting Sacred Teaching through Communication Theory

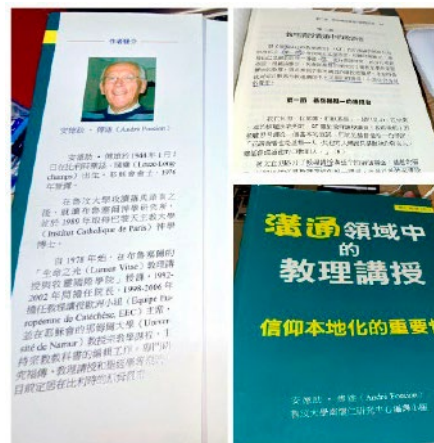
The first course was "Catechesis in the field of Communication". The core of the course lay in guiding participants through a deep study of Pope St. John Paul II's 1979 apostolic exhortation, *Catechesi Tradendae* (On Catechesis in Our Time). Lecturer Lim, with a masterful touch, used linguist Roman Jakobson's communication theory as a key to unlock the document's modern significance. He elucidated that communication in catechesis finds its root in the mystery of God's self-communication—His willingness to fully reveal Himself to humanity. Thus, the essence of this act far surpasses "information transfer"; it is fundamentally about "relationship building" and "the witness of life".

The classroom buzzed with rich pastoral experiences shared by the twenty-two sisters from diverse congregations. A sister from a rural area shared candidly how her eagerness to impart doctrine had once led her to overlook the emotional needs of her community. It was only when she learned to prioritize "relationship" in her communication that catechesis truly became a "dialogue of love". A sister serving in a university community added that when engaging with intellectual young adults, she needed to perform a "transformation of codes"—translating profound theological concepts into a language resonant with the contemporary psyche. These frontline experiences, echoing the age-old papal teaching, brought the theory vividly to life.

### Historical Context and the Prospect of Inculturation

Tracing the evolution of catechesis from the periods before and after the Second Vatican Council to the rise of its three main contemporary schools, the participants saw a consistent mission throughout history: to make the Gospel take root in every cultural soil.

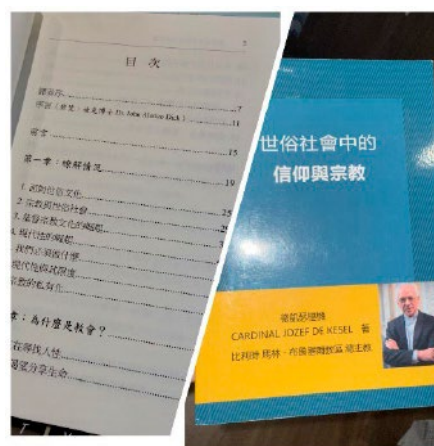
"Our goal is not to replicate Western models, but to find a language of inculturation belonging to the Church in China," reflected a young sister from North China, voicing a shared conviction. During the month of intensive exchange, the distinct charisms of the fourteen congregations sparked off one another: How to integrate folk art into children's catechesis? How to achieve cultural adaptation in ethnic minority regions? These concrete explorations were a vivid embodiment of the Verbiest Foundation's commitment to fostering cultural dialogue and inculturated evangelization.



"Catechesis in the Field of communication"



In group discussions, the participants delved into the concept that catechesis extends beyond mere "information transmission" to encompass "relationship building" and "bearing witness to life".



"Faith and Religion in a Secular Society"

## II: Faith's Place and Mission in a Secular Society

If the first course was an "internal cultivation," the second, "Faith and Religion in a Secular Society," served as a "diagnosis of the context" and a "vision for the future". Using the works of Belgian Cardinal Jozef De Kesel as a foundation, lecturer Lim guided the participants in a profound analysis of our times.

### A Pivotal Era: From the Hopes of Vatican II to the Reality of Secularization

The course began by confronting a monumental question of



our age: “Anyone who compares the state of the Church and faith decades ago with the present reality will recognize just how fundamentally things have changed.” Lecturer Lim noted that this shift was not abrupt; its roots run deep in the evolution of Western culture and are largely irreversible. He cited Cardinal De Kesel’s observation: the immense wave of hope and impetus for renewal that marked the close of Vatican II has, within highly secularized Western societies, persisted—but now tempered, and even tinged with questioning.

“What does the future hold? What does the Church’s task and mission mean in such a rapidly changing society?” This challenge is not confined to Western Europe; it is a question all local churches must face in a globalized world. Lecturer Lim emphasized that Cardinal De Kesel’s work does not offer simplistic solutions but strives for a “correct assessment of the situation,” thus helping the Church avoid both illusion and futile paths.

### **Humble Presence: From “Conquest” to “Being a Sacrament”**

Cardinal De Kesel proposes a crucial distinction: the Church’s mission is not to “conquer the world,” to make it “Christian,” but to work for the “evangelization of society”. This requires the Church to relinquish its past mindset of being a dominant religion and learn to adopt a posture of *humility, encountering others and being present in the world* amid religious and cultural plurality.

Lecturer Lim used this insight to guide reflections about the Church in China. A sister from a coastal city shared that amidst China’s rapid socio-economic development and its own wave of secularization, they face challenges like those in the West. A sister serving inland noted that the Church in Asia has never held a majority position, making “*humble presence*” a familiar wisdom. Through dialogue, a consensus emerged among the twenty-two representatives: the present moment for the Eastern churches, in a way, prefigures the future of the universal Church.



Through dialogue, they explored what it means to engage with others in a spirit of humility, to foster authentic encounter amid religious and cultural diversity, and to cultivate a meaningful presence in the world.

The most enlightening part of the course was the redefinition of the Church’s essence. Reclaiming the spirit of Vatican II, Cardinal De Kesel defines the Church as the “sacrament of the world”—a sign of God’s love for the world. This means the Church needs not, and cannot, return to the old dream of a “Christendom”. Instead, it must tangibly manifest God’s love in secular society through service, care, and dialogue. “Forcing conversion is wrong,” Professor Lin reiterated, echoing the text. “On the contrary, we must respect other religious traditions and philosophies. It is often precisely in such dialogue that the proclamation of the Gospel becomes possible and takes root.”

### **III: Communio – A Sacred Space of Mutual Illumination**

The week-long course was not merely an intellectual exercise but a communion of life. Lecturer Lim emphasized that as proclaimers of the Word, fueled by deep knowledge, we must also listen with humility, creating a safe and warm “sacred space” for the listeners. The proclaimer is not just a teacher, but a companion, attentively nurturing each participant’s unique charism and pastoral concerns.

The sisters’ sharing at the course’s conclusion was heartfelt and moving. One sister shared, “I’ve come to understand that evangelization is not about “what I should do,” but “who I am”—a person loved by Christ, desiring to bear witness to Him”. Her words resonated deeply with all twenty-two hearts.

In the evenings, the distinct prayer traditions of the different congregations—from the simplicity of the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary to the depth of the Augustinians—interwove in the Leuven night, forming a beautiful symphony of the spirit. This image of communion was itself the most vivid interpretation of the course content: the Church’s mission in the world is realized precisely through such a beautiful witness of diversity in unity.



As Lecturer Joseph Lim emphasized, “Catechesis is never simply about conveying knowledge—it is fundamentally a dialogue of love between God and humanity.”



### ***Finale: Returning to the World's Soil with a Renewed Mission***

The month-long program was an updating of knowledge and a cleansing of the spirit. With foresight and perseverance, the Verbiest Foundation built a bridge connecting East and West, past and present, for these twenty-two Eastern sisters from fourteen congregations.

The participants now prepare to return to their missions, carrying rekindled fervour and a clearer sense of purpose. They no longer fear the waves of secularization, for they have learned that the Church's true strength lies not in dominating the world, but in *being a sacrament to the world* through humility, fidelity, and creativity. As the course revealed, the future of the Church lies not in a return to the past, but in courageously embracing the present, living out the ineffable love and joy within a pluralistic and secular society. These twenty-two sisters are precisely the seeds of this hope. Like streams nourished by the living waters of Leuven, they will

return to the vast soil of China, each in her own place, quietly and steadfastly nurturing an oasis for the future of evangelization.



*In a photograph taken at the Chinese College Leuven, the participants stand alongside Joseph Lim—a testament to their shared journey of learning and reflection. Soon, they will return to their respective ministries, carrying forth a rekindled fire and a clarified sense of mission.*

## **OUR JOURNEY TOGETHER: CATECHESIS FOR ADULT CATECHUMENS IN THE CHURCH, CHINA**

*Sister Gaby Yang shares with us about her teaching on the catechumenate according to the manual "Our Journey Together".*

Gaby Yang

### ***Jesus himself came up and walked by their side. (Luke 24:15)***

Since Pope Francis announced the celebration of the Jubilee in 2025, the dioceses of the Church in China have promptly responded to the Holy Father's call by opening Jubilee pilgrimage churches and warmly welcoming pilgrims with great enthusiasm. During the Jubilee Year, parishes and communities are instructed to place the Jubilee emblem in a prominent location and to recite the "Jubilee Prayer" before and after Mass. Christians are especially encouraged to practice works of charity, and many parishes are organizing pilgrimages both within China and abroad. Together they cross the Holy Door, becoming leaven for spiritual renewal and beacons of hope.

On the occasion of the Jubilee, the Verbiest Foundation invited 22 sisters in August 2025 to participate in the first Summer Pastoral Exchange program in Leuven. Among them, some have professed vows for 10, 15, or 20 years. Most of the sisters are engaged in catechetical instruction in parishes, while a few serve in Church clinics.

With the improvement of living standards, people in China have ample clothing and food. However, delicious cuisine

and frenzied shopping cannot fill the void in people's spiritual lives. In recent years, an increasing number of young, middle-aged, and even elderly people have begun to contemplate the ultimate meaning of life. As a result, they come to the church seeking answers. This phenomenon reflects the reality that in contemporary society, an abundance of material in life cannot fully satisfy people's needs for spiritual fulfillment. After their material needs are met, many turn to exploring the meaning of life, faith, and spiritual dimensions. As



*St Damien chapel*

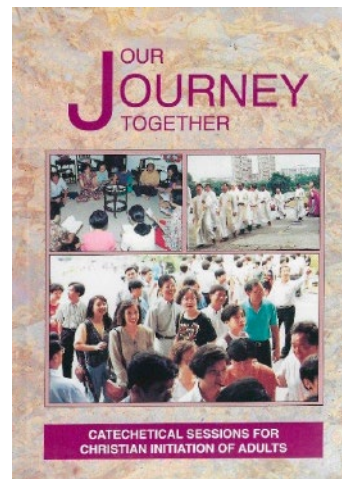
a result, the number of catechumens in each diocese is continuously increasing. According to a preliminary report (Issue No. 1, 2021), there were 48,556 baptisms in 2021. The Rite of Christian Initiation (RCIA)<sup>1</sup> facilitators in major city churches are searching for ways to catechize that suit modern people.

In order to assist the sisters in carrying out evangelization more effectively, I will promptly introduce to them a set of adult catechumenate courses and methods. The book “Our Journey Together” is an efficient way to help them in their catechetical work. The manual was translated into Chinese and published by the Taiwan Pastoral Center (TPC) with the support of Verbiest Foundation. This training is designed to help the sisters quickly understand these methods so that they can apply what they have learned upon returning to their parishes in China.

“Our Journey Together” is a systematic catechetical manual for adult initiation into the Church, as well as a guide for establishing new evangelization communities. It serves as a contemporary key for adult catechumens to come to know God, focusing on integrating personal life experiences, active participation, interaction, and practice. The manual helps catechumens gain a deeper understanding of the faith and live out the spirit of Christ in their daily lives.

The core belief of this book emphasizes the concept of “community”. The Church is a communion of believers, and becoming a believer means entering the body of Christ—the Church. One must be intimately connected with Christ, the head, and the other members of the body. For this reason, the book is titled “Our Journey Together”. The entire process of catechumenate takes place within the community. Consequently, the believers who emerge from this process are nurtured in the embrace and cradle of the Church.

This book originates from South Africa and, with the consent of Bishop Oswald Hirmer, the Chinese version was published with the support of the Verbiest Foundation in Taipei in 1996. It was republished in 2016 with the support of the Verbiest



Foundation Leuven in Belgium. This book, known for its practical approach, was reissued in 2018. It has become an essential resource for Chinese catechists to lead and accompany catechumens, serving as an effective and versatile tool for spreading the Gospel.

The methodology in this book is the Lumko (a Pastoral Institute in South Africa) approach.

Every lesson follows the three-step approach of practical theology: SEE (reflection on life), JUDGE (listen to the Word of God), and ACT (acting in faith).

The facilitator, using a catalytic teaching approach, guides catechumens to first observe the realities of their own lives. Then, through listening to the Word of God, the facilitator connects the course themes with carefully crafted questions, encouraging catechumens to reflect on their experiences.

The facilitator leads the seekers through a catalytic teaching approach, first by focusing on the realities of their daily lives. Then, by listening to the Word of God, the facilitator connects the course themes with thought-provoking questions, guiding the seekers to reflect on and revisit their own experiences. Step by step, this process helps them learn to see things through the lens of Christ and continually deepen their conversion. Throughout the catechumenate, catechumens gradually come to know God and build a relationship with Him within a free, open, interactive, and communicative community. This approach effectively avoids creating a perception of God as an aloof and unapproachable deity, and steering clear of one-sided indoctrination.

Through the 15-hour course, the sisters came to a deep realization: although they have been engaged in catechetical teaching for many years, they now gained a renewed understanding of it. They learned how to guide people to know God through dialogue, communication, and sharing; how to help adults encounter the Lord in a joyful and relaxed atmosphere; and how to concretely live out their faith in daily life.



*The facilitator leads the catechumens through dialogue, communication, and sharing*

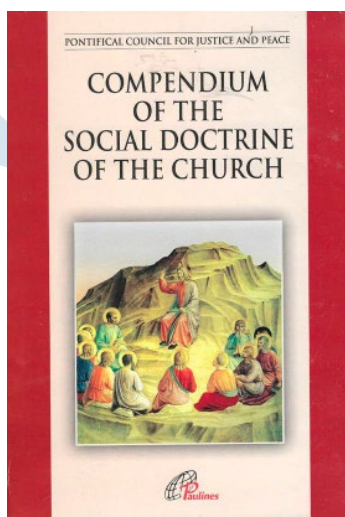
<sup>1</sup> The Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults (RCIA) is a formal program of catechetical instruction, ascetical practice (prayer and spirituality), and liturgies whereby adults—called catechumens—are formally admitted into the Church and receive the Sacraments of Initiation—Baptism, Confirmation, and Holy Eucharist.



# CATHOLIC SOCIAL DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH: THE PATH OF EVANGELIZATION AND ITS REAL CHALLENGES

Verbiest Foundation feels that next to its courses on catechesis a course on Social Teaching of the Church is an essential part of our program to form catechists today in practical theology and catechesis. Fr. Matthew Gong shares here below how he introduces the Social Teaching of the Church to religious sisters, or seminarians and priests from China.

Matthew Gong



Since Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, "the Church's special way of caring for social matters is through the social teaching of the Roman Pontiffs". (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (SRS 1)). The Social Doctrine of the Church is not an abstract sociological theory or political ideology; rather, it is a faith-based guide to action rooted in the Gospel, grounded in Church tradition, and centered on the dignity of the human

person. As *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* points out, "The Church's social concern is directed toward authentic human and social development; it respects and promotes the integral development of the human person".

Therefore, social teaching concerns not only social justice, peace, and the common good, but is also closely linked to evangelization. It allows the Gospel to go beyond preaching and liturgy to become a transformative force in society, enabling the Church to fulfill its mission as the "social conscience" of the modern world. Pope John Paul II made this clear: "Without the service of charity and the promotion of justice, there can be no true evangelization." (SRS 41). This statement expresses the very heart of social teaching: faith that is not embodied in service to humanity cannot truly be called "Good News".

Pope John XXIII once emphasized that Catholic social teaching should be a required part of the formation programs in seminaries, parishes, and lay training. (*Mater et Magistra*, 223). Unfortunately, in the formation system of the Church in China, education in social teaching remains underdeveloped. Responding to this need, the Verbiest Foundation Leuven organized a course of "Social Doctrine of the Church" for 22 sisters participating in this year's summer session. According to the sisters' reflections, the course not only deepened their understanding of the Church's social mission but also provided valuable insight and support for their future pastoral and evangelizing work. Yet, within China's complex social reality, applying the principles of social teaching in pastoral practice

remains a significant challenge.

## ***The Relationship Between Social Teaching and Evangelization***

Social teaching and evangelization are inseparable. Evangelization is not merely transmitting the truths of faith to individuals—it is also about infusing Christ's love into social structures, renewing every dimension of human life in the light of the Gospel. Social teaching is thus the social dimension of evangelization, the concrete embodiment of "proclaiming the Gospel through action". Pope John Paul II affirmed that without social service and the promotion of justice, there can be no true evangelization (SRS 41). Social teaching, therefore, is not an optional supplement to faith but an essential part of Christian witness.

The meaning of evangelization extends beyond the salvation of souls—it also concerns human dignity, social justice, peace, and ecology. Social teaching puts the commandment to "love God and love your neighbor" into practice within the realms of economics, politics, culture, and social life, allowing the Gospel to transform every aspect of human existence. Faith's concern, therefore, must encompass issues such as family, labor, politics, and the environment, so that the Gospel may bear fruit within the realities of daily life.

In today's China, the Church may not be able to evangelize widely through direct proclamation, but social teaching offers a viable path for "witness-based evangelization"—through social concern, service to the poor, and engagement in public welfare and education. The Church, by its concrete acts of service, interprets Christ's love in deeds rather than words, often touching hearts more deeply than verbal preaching ever could. Service to society and care for the vulnerable are themselves extensions and witnesses of evangelization.

Social teaching, emphasizing human dignity, solidarity, and the common good, resonates profoundly with traditional Chinese values such as benevolence (仁爱), harmony (和谐), and the ideal of the Great Unity (大同). If the Church begins from these shared moral foundations—using social teaching as a bridge to engage in cultural and ethical dialogue rather than confrontation—faith will become more intelligible and acceptable to society. In this way, the Gospel can enter China's cultural context gently and rationally, becoming a living force for social renewal and the promotion of the common good.

## **Reflections on the Course of the Social Doctrine of the Church**

Mature faith involves a transformation from “personal faith” to “social faith”. Faith is not only an inner relationship between the individual and God but should also be manifested in social life. Christians are called to view social structures, labor, inequality, and ecological crises through the lens of faith and to act with love and justice inspired by the Gospel. Confronted with injustice, poverty, and environmental degradation, we cannot remain passive observers; we must respond actively, letting faith become authentic through action.

At the same time, social teaching leads faith from practice to reflection. It not only calls for action but also demands critical thought—integrating theology and the social sciences to help believers “discern the signs of the times”. In the light of the Gospel, they are to examine economic, political, and cultural realities, preventing faith from being detached from social reality. This integration makes faith more rational, credible, and publicly meaningful. Faith does not flee from the world—it is the light that illumines it.

Ultimately, this maturation of faith urges the Church to move “from within the Church to within society”. As *Gaudium et Spes* teaches: “The Church cannot be separated from the human community.” (GS 1). In today’s Chinese context, this statement is particularly profound. The Church’s mission is not limited to the sacraments but extends to being society’s moral conscience—witnessing to justice and harmony, so that human society may more fully reflect God’s plan of salvation.

### **Opportunities for Social Teaching in China**

The principles of social teaching deeply resonate with Chinese cultural values. Its emphasis on the common good, solidarity, and harmony corresponds to the Confucian virtues of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom. This cultural convergence offers fertile ground for contextualizing social teaching within the Chinese milieu. If the Church can engage in public affairs with the attitude of “building a harmonious society together,” it can bear witness to faith through cooperation and service, avoiding confrontation.

At the same time, modern China is undergoing rapid economic and moral transformation. The widening wealth gap, ecological crises, and aging population pose serious social challenges. The themes emphasized by social teaching—human dignity, labor justice, environmental stewardship, and the preferential option for the poor—speak directly to these pressing issues. If presented appropriately, these principles could serve as vital moral resources for social ethics and the pursuit of the common good.

Indeed, the Church in China already has rich practical experience in education, healthcare, charity, and care for the marginalized. These initiatives embody the spirit of social teaching and provide a concrete bridge for dialogue with so-

ciety, participation in national development, and witnessing to Christ’s love.

### **Challenges for Social Teaching in China**

Despite these opportunities, promoting social teaching in China faces several challenges.

First, the policy environment places restrictions on religious engagement in social affairs. The Church must act prudently within the legal framework, expressing the spirit of social teaching through academic, cultural, and charitable means. This requires ongoing wisdom and discernment.

Second, social misunderstanding persists. Some may view social teaching as political involvement or Western ideology. In reality, social teaching transcends all political systems and ideologies; its core is faith-based ethics centered on human dignity and universal humanitarian concern. When presenting it, the Church must emphasize this transcendence and universality, avoiding ideological misinterpretations.

Third, internal understanding of social teaching within the Church remains limited. Many faithful confine their faith to prayer and liturgy, neglecting its social dimension. Therefore, promoting social teaching must begin within the Church—through systematic education in parishes and seminaries—to awaken social consciousness and a sense of Gospel mission, forming believers who live out justice and love in the world.

### **Vision and Mission: A Culture of Love and the Witness of Faith**

The ultimate goal of Catholic social teaching is to build a “culture of love”. This love is not an abstract emotion but concrete care, service, and self-giving in real life.

The promotion of social teaching is not merely an academic endeavor but a spiritual vocation. It invites us to step beyond church walls into society—to live the Gospel in our families, workplaces, and communities, becoming the “light and salt of the world”.

Within the Chinese context, social teaching can serve as a bridge between faith and society, allowing the Gospel to enter culture through action and reach hearts through service. Pope Francis reminds us: “Faith without works of charity is dead.”

The development of social teaching in China is a path filled with challenges but also rich in hope. May the Church in China continue to witness God’s love with humility and wisdom through its social engagement; may social teaching become a bridge between faith and society, contributing the light and salt of the Gospel to China’s pursuit of justice, peace, and harmony.





15 August; Feast of the Assumption, Pilgrimage to Our Lady of Steenberg in Oud-Heverlee, Belgium (on foot)

## REFLECTIONS ON THE TRANSFORMATION OF LIFE AT LEUVEN CHINESE COLLEGE 2025

Sister Niu

### **Introduction: Life is enriched by “movement”**

“Life lies in movement”. Life becomes a stagnant backwater without movement. For a time, I stepped out of my familiar routine, setting aside the busy demands of hospital work to participate in a month-long study exchange organized by Leuven Verbiest Foundation in Belgium. Although it was only a short-term program, it opened new perspectives in my life and brought about a profound inner transformation.

When I received the Superior’s notice assigning me to pursue studies, my first reaction was: With so many tasks at the hospital, how could I possibly leave? I immediately turned inward to examine the unease and anxiety within me. As I quieted my heart before the Lord and journeyed into my inner self, I realized my deep longing to study—because I need to recharge, unlock my potential, and enhance my professional competence. More importantly, I yearn to study because I need to challenge my own attachments, my inability to surrender completely, and my habitual tendency to keep everything under my own control. Thus, I readily accepted the superior’s assignment and came to participate in the program.

### **1. Gratitude and Surprise: A Release from Within**

First, I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to my Superior for giving me this invaluable opportunity. It allowed me to go abroad, appreciate foreign landscapes, experience different cultures, and rediscover the wonders and beauty of nature. Through this, I gained a deeper appreciation of the infinite mercy and glory of God.

Secondly, I am also grateful that I dared to let go of being busy with tasks at the hospital: duties, meetings, patients, reports,

and worldly wisdom, etc. When I truly stepped away, I realized “leaving” did not mean loss. Instead, it allowed me to rediscover a different way of living: releasing pressure, relaxing my mind, and seizing the day. One month of study and experience in Leuven poured new colours into my life, making me find a long-lost vitality.

### **2. From Anxiety to Surrender: A Shift in Faith Perspective**

As a nursing sister, daily life is often filled with high levels of tension. But in Leuven, I was reminded once again: we are only vessels cooperating in God’s hands, and our work is part of His plan of salvation. We need only to strive diligently and surrender the results to God’s will. This shift in perspective freed me from being trapped by “results” and allowed me to focus more on experiencing God’s guidance in every “process,” thereby attaining a greater freedom.

### **3. The Power of a Role Model: The Inspiration of Companions**

In Leuven, I had the privilege of spending time with several vivacious fellow travellers:

- Father Jeroom Heyndrickx: Though advanced in years, he remains passionate and energetic about serving the Kingdom of God in a foreign land. His steadfast dedication and fervour moved me deeply, rekindling the original passion for my own vocation.
- Father Gong: With fatherly care and gentleness, he showed me the merciful face of God. His joyful and attentive way of caring for each of us sisters touched me profoundly. He truly lives up to his name!





*Sharing in the class*

- Sister Yang: Loving, patient, genuine, and humble, she accompanied us each day like a joyful angel. Her teaching was not only down-to-earth, but she also embodied the joy of the Gospel through her daily life.

These three friends embody the unity, harmony, communion, and radiance that have touched everyone who encounters them. They make people feel that faith is not a theory, but a living hope, love, and joy.

#### 4. The Impact and Personal Development from the Course

Sister Gaby taught “Our Journey together,” the classes were full of dynamic energy, and captivating. Moving words made everybody participate actively and interact. Well-chosen examples made it easy to understand and relate them to daily life. This course rekindled my passion for catechesis and inspired a strong desire to return to my parish and share the beauty of faith with the community.

Father Gong taught “Catholic Social Teaching of the Church.” He transformed abstract and seemingly dry content into lively and understandable lessons through his humour and logical clarity. He helped clarify a previously vague point for me: Church and society, faith and life, are not separate but an interconnected whole. God is not only present in the Church but also reveals Himself in every corner of society and nature.

These days, I have begun actively seeking out the encyclicals issued by Popes throughout history and engaging in deep study and reflection on them. I benefited greatly from his insights.



*Fr. Lin is teaching the Bible*

Father Lin’s “Introduction to the Bible” instruction deepened my understanding of Scripture. The Bible is not a distant text but a guide for faith and life. Its essence lies in “loving God and loving people,” and its mystery unfolds through continual reading, meditation, and putting it into practice. The answers to biblical challenges are found not only from others, but through humble, persistent reading and enlightenment.

#### 5. A Pilgrimage of Heart and Soul

We were also blessed to make pilgrimages to several holy sites: Banneux, Lisieux, and Lourdes, as well as Notre-Dame de Paris. Setting foot on the sacred land where the Virgin Mary appeared and participating in the Eucharistic celebration allowed me to truly experience the holiness and reverence of these places. Joining the ranks of pilgrims in praise and pilgrimage felt like heaven on earth.

Especially in Lisieux, I received a clear inspiration: I established a small “Thérèse Memorial Hall” in our hospital after returning to China. I will edit and laminate the photos I took in Lisieux, mount them as display boards, and simultaneously restore the statue of St. Thérèse in our hospital to express our devotion to her. Our hospital is named “Thérèse Hospital,” a name personally given by our former bishop. He hoped we would, like St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus, scatter showers of roses to the world—serving others through small deeds, healing the sick, and spreading God’s merciful love. The bishop also gifted the hospital a statue of St. Thérèse in recent years, for various reasons; no special devotion to her had been maintained. Now, upon returning, we have decided to revive this devotion on the occasion of her feast day.

Currently, every sister is diligently reading the book “Story of a Soul” and actively participating in setting up the memorial hall. We hope that this is not only an exhibition space, but a corner for spirituality, where people can pause from their busyness, engage in contemplation, and follow the Little Way of St. Thérèse.



*Lisieux*



# JOSEPH VAN HECKEN, FAMOUS CICM MISSIOLOGIST

*At the request of Chinese missiologists, Verbiest Foundation translates in English his rich documentation on CICM Mission History in N. China.*

*He wrote 24 volumes with documentation on CICM Mission History in China.*

*Jerome Heyndrickx cicm (Scheut)*

Born in Aartselaar in 1905, Joseph Van Hecken was missionary among the Mongols in Ningxia Diocese in N. China and became one of the CICM self-made scholars in Mongolian Studies and the main CICM researcher on the history of CICM in China. His articles were internationally highly appreciated, especially when Vatican II stressed the importance of Missiology and Mission History. On April 3, 1966, when Van Hecken was on furlough in Belgium, Fr. Omer Degryze, CICM Superior General, appointed him in the name of the General Government to work in close cooperation with Fr. Valère Rondelez, the CICM General Archivist in Scheut to collect all possible documents needed to write the history of CICM in China. Joseph Jennes, member of the General Council and a missiologist, personally visited Van Hecken to stress the historic importance of this assignment. With hindsight today that proved indeed to be an important appointment in CICM history and in Van Hecken's life as well.

Having written all through his life many articles and books on CICM history in China, Van Hecken had the best background knowledge on the history of CICM needed for that appointment. Becoming a missiologist had been part of his CICM vocation since he studied theology. At the end of the 1920s three young "missiologists in spe" studied together in the CICM theologate in Leuven: Joseph Van Hecken, Valère Rondelez and Martien van Oss. All three of them, while still in their theology studies, wanted to contribute to the study of CICM China mission history. In line with the destination assigned to them by the religious superiors, each of them engaged in his own project. Rondelez was destined for the CICM Mission in Xiwanzi, he therefore started his research on the history of Xiwanzi. He would later become the main expert on Xiwanzi history. Martien van Oss, was destined for Rehe (Jehol). Already during his theology studies, he wrote a remarkable 50-page manuscript on the history of CICM in East Mongolia (Jehol). Joseph Van Hecken, destined to work in, Ningxia started during his theology studies to research the history of CICM among the Mongols and on CICM history in S-W Mongolia (Suiyuan and Ningxia). The initiatives of these three motivated "missiologists in spe" can be seen as the beginning of a breakthrough towards academic research on the



*Fr. Joseph Van Hecken cicm*

history of CICM in China to which each of them contributed significantly.

In 1931, Valère Rondelez went to Xiwanzi and published in 1937 the Chinese version of his history of "The Catholic Village Xiwanzi"<sup>1</sup>. He published several articles on CICM mission history; most important was the book he published in 1960 – also at the request of Superior General Degryze – for the celebration of the centenary of Scheut: "Scheut zo begon het". Till now his name remains connected with the history of Xiwanzi and as the second CICM historian, after Joseph Rutten.

Martien van Oss also left for China in 1931, studied Chinese in Beijing and continued at the same time his own project collecting more data on the CICM Mission in East Mongolia. He even intensified that when in 1937 he was called back to Sparrendaal (the Netherlands) to teach Mission History. From then on, he published a remarkable number of articles on mission history<sup>2</sup> which made him into an internationally well-known missiologist.

General Superior Omer Degryze knew well in 1966 that he appointed an experienced CICM missiologist and known historian for that historic project. Joseph Van Hecken was already nearing retirement age; although he suffered from heart failure, he felt healthy enough to undertake this unexpected challenging appointment. It offered him the opportunity to write during the final 20 years of his life his Opus Magnum: a series of 24 volumes of documentation on the CICM China Mission. This made him into CICM's most prominent missiologist on China and offered the Church of China a mine of information on its history in Northern China.

Soon after his appointment Joseph Van Hecken settled at the CICM study house in Leuven and started his research, working closely together with his old partner Valère Rondelez, the CICM archivist in Scheut, who continued at that time his research on the history of CICM in Xiwanzi. His other partner of Leuven, Martien van Oss, worked in Sparrendaal collecting data on CICM in East Mongolia. This made Van Hecken decide to leave the research on the history of Xiwanzi to Rondelez<sup>3</sup>. The research by Martien van Oss CICM and by Karel De Jae-

<sup>1</sup> Which would later be translated into French and Dutch. A new updated version of the Chinese text was published in China recently by Fr. Zhang Baolu of Xiwanzi.

<sup>2</sup> Mostly in "Annalen van de Missiën van Scheut", Sparrendaal (Netherlands) but also in the world-famous "La Nouvelle Revue de sciences missionnaires", Schöneck, Beckenried, Switzerland; a.o. two long articles with a complete overview on evangelization by Catholic missionaries among the Mongols.

<sup>3</sup> Many years later CICM archivist Albert Raskin discovered that Rondelez had not really done much more research on Xiwanzi. He therefore started himself to collect more data on Xiwanzi. In the 1980s after he retired, he convinced Verbiest Foundation Leuven to initiate its own Research Project on the history of CICM in Xiwanzi in which he cooperated. It resulted in the Xiwanzi archive of VF in Leuven.

gher CICM on East Mongolia – Rehe (Jehol) and Chifeng was already available. Van Hecken therefore decided to focus his own research on S-W Mongolia (Suiyuan), Ordos and Gansu-Xinjiang. He immediately started to organize the data on Eastern Mongolia which were available. That's how so soon after his appointment, Van Hecken could already start to stencil his documentation on the history of CICM in Eastern Mongolia.

In 1972, barely six years after he was appointed by Omer Degryze to start his research, Van Hecken mimeographed his first volume on East Mongolia (Rehe [Jehol] and Chifeng). It would become a series of 9 volumes. That was followed by 6 volumes on Ningxia and 5 volumes on Suiyuan. Finally he wrote 4 volumes on the Mongol Mission of Poro Balgason in the Ordos region. Only the volumes on East Mongolia and those on Ningxia were mimeographed and made available in several copies (we do not know how many). During the final years of his life Van Hecken's health needed special care and he retired in Schilde where, most fortunately, he was able to finalize the 24 volumes before he passed away on August 31, 1988<sup>4</sup>. The Opus Magnum of Van Hecken consists finally of 24 volumes, in total 10.000 mimeograph pages on the history of CICM in N. China. The 5 volumes on Suiyuan and 4 on Ordos were not duplicated. Only a few copies of it, typed with carbon paper, are available. The VF archive has one copy of each.

Very soon the rich Van Hecken documentation allowed other CICM historians to make ample use of it. Already in 1995, Daniël Verhelst CICM and Nestor Pycke CICM, making good use of Van Hecken's documentation, published a report on the missionary activities of Scheut in China and worldwide from 1872 to 1987 in their book "CICM Missionaries Past and Present" published by Leuven University Press in 1995 in the Verbistiana Series<sup>5</sup>.

In 1983, CICM established Verbiest Foundation (VF) in Leuven which made research on CICM history in China into one of its priority goals. That's why it invited CICM that same year to appoint Patrick Taveirne as member of the Foundation to follow courses in sinology in Leiden. This coincided with the time when Van Hecken mimeographed his 24 volumes in which Patrick Taveirne found all the data he needed for the papers on CICM history in China that he wrote during the time of his studies. After he obtained his doctorate (2002), Verbiest Foundation published his doctoral dissertation on "Han-Mongol encounters. A History of Scheut in Ordos"; the Chinese translation of it followed two years later. In 2009, Nestor Pycke's book "Theophile Verbiest's Adventures" was published by the Foundation in Dutch, French, English and Chinese. The above shows that the "Van Hecken volumes" contributed abundantly to much research and publications on history of CICM in China, thanks to CICM which during those years still administered VF and oriented the Foundation's research priorities. Unfortunately, as of 2004, CICM pulled out from VF and stopped sponsoring VF research. Fortunately, VF found the fi-



nances to continue its activities autonomously, but it lacked the administrative structures to continue them all. It took VF several years to recover from this setback, until some CICM superiors were ready to link up again for cooperation.

#### **At the request of missiologists in China, Verbiest Foundation now makes these historical data available in English for research.**

Nevertheless, research on the history of CICM in China remained a priority on the agenda of VF. Precisely at that time more Chinese historians from in and outside the Church learned about the "24 volumes of Van Hecken". They wanted to learn about their content for their own research, but since these volumes are written in Dutch and French, they are out of reach of most Chinese researchers. Translating the volumes in English was long a topic of discussion in VF but such a huge project was considered far beyond our abilities for obvious reasons. In 2012, CICM celebrated the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its foundation. VF found that something special should be done on that occasion. That's when VF decided to initiate the project of translating the Van Hecken Documentation on China. A daring step to serve research on the history of the Church in N. China. Opening such a mine of information on CICM in China for research was considered a missionary contribution of VF to the Local Church of China. Three VF members, then in charge of Research & Publications – J. Heyndrickx, Dirk Van Overmeire and Pieter Ackerman – wrote a letter to CICM confreres, explaining the uniqueness of the Opus Magnum of Van Hecken and the responsibility of CICM to make the content available to Chinese and other researchers by translating it in English. It would help the local Chinese Church to write its own history which is a crucial task for each Local Church. VF called on CICM confreres to volunteer to participate in it.

Positive response of CICM volunteers willing to cooperate came promptly from: Willy Hertecant, Paul Foulon, Luc Van den Wijngaert, Frans De Ridder and Brother Bavo Van Dingenen fc; also from ICM sisters Maria Claeys, Liesbeth Hufkens, Christiane Bouciqué. They generously engaged in translation work during the years 2013-2022. Their texts were carefully kept at the VF Research Office, while VF, lacking personnel, had to stop the project temporarily and could not use their translation immediately.

The VF direction of Research & Publications (R&P) has now re-activated the Van Hecken Translation Project and structured it administratively under the supervision of Dr. Dominik Declercq, VF Vice-Charmain who supervises VF research and publications. Under the guidance of the R&P Direction, Joseph Lim (林俊雄) and Frank Vroman, two experts in translation,

<sup>4</sup> Also the history of CICM in Gansu and Xinjiang is only partly reported in the 24 volumes. Historians will find the data on that in the CICM archives in Kadoc.

<sup>5</sup> The two authors also engaged in a historical research project of CICM on Founder Verbiest and his spirituality which produced a rich information on that topic in the 8-volume Verbistiana Series published between 1986 and 2012 by Daniël Verhelst, Hyacinth Daniëls and Nestor Pycke in Leuven University Press.

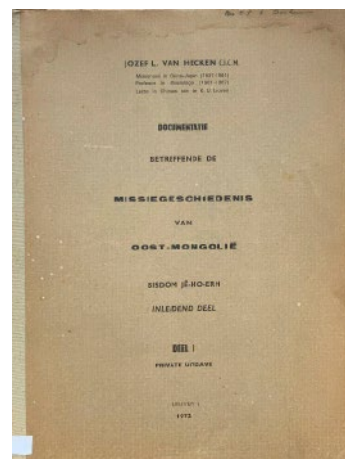


prepare the texts. The above-mentioned CICM and ICM translators who had generously offered their cooperation now finally see the results of their translated texts being put to good use. Unforeseen circumstances caused this long delay.

Publication starts with the 9 volumes on CICM in East Mongolia (Rehe [Jehol] and Chifeng). VF is presently preparing volume Nr 1 for publication. In this volume Van Hecken amply reveals the sources he used for his whole project (correspondence of confreres a.o., documents, reports, articles etc.) and his bibliography. In a second chapter he introduces the region of Rehe and Chifeng: the geography, fauna & flora and the population (from ancient times [3000 BC], Mongols, Manchus, Khitan). The next chapter offers ample information on political history (the administrative structures of Inner Mongolia; various historical conflicts). Then follows an important informative chapter on religion and on the conversion of the Mongols to Lamaism. Finally follows a historically important chapter on the colonization of Inner Mongolia by the Chinese. All in all, 220 mimeographed pages of basic academically or-

ganized and well-presented information which any historian wants to read before engaging in further scientific historic research.

The VF Research & Publication Section is still deciding on how the translated volumes will be made accessible to scholars. Decision on this is expected within months. Verbiest Koerier wants to inform the scholars hereby that translation of the Opus Magnum of Van Hecken has started. Hopefully the first volume will be accessible in 2027 or 2028. VF is aware that this work-intensive and financially costly project will be on its agenda for many years to come. But that's also true for other Research and Publication Projects. It's precisely for this kind of contribution to research that the Sino-Mongol Institute at KU Leuven was established.



## FROM THE PHOTO ARCHIVE OF THE VERBIEST FOUNDATION

*"In November, we commemorated two CICM missionaries in China..."*



**Joseph Chang cism** was the only CICM confrere who remained in China when Mao Zedong came to power in 1949. For 30 years CICM did not know whether he was still alive. Confreres prayed for him daily in the evening prayer. In 1979, the Verbiest Foundation received good news from China. After 7 years in prison and 20 years in a labor camp, Joseph had finally been released. Balthasar Zhang was the only CICM confrere who was able to meet him after he was free. Joseph died on November 25, 1991. Piet Devos, then vice-provincial presided at a memorial Eucharist in Scheut in the presence of several confreres and Chinese friends. We admire Joseph as an exceptional witness of faith.

**Antoon Renson cism** was a missionary in Ningxia. In 1951, Toon was imprisoned in Ding Bian together with Remi Van Hyfte cism. He fell ill and died in prison on October 23, 1952. At the request of Remi Van Hyfte, Toon was buried in his former mission in Beinijingzi. In 2001, Jeroom Heyndrickx cism found his grave and prayed there with two local Chinese priests. The policeman who accompanied him took the photo (which was to be shown to Father Antoon's family). Until today local Christians visit his tomb to pray for him. They also take home with them some earth as a relic.





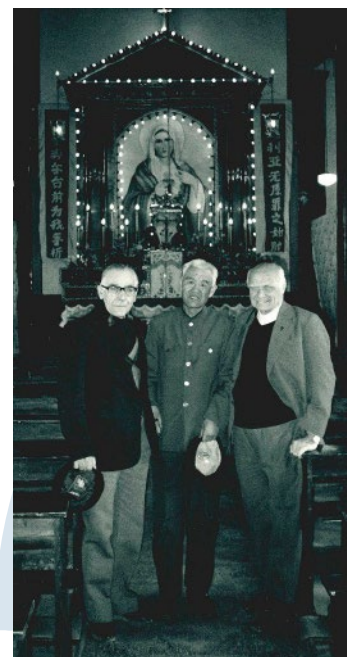
## ***"Historical steps taken by CICM and the Verbiest Foundation towards dialogue with China..."***



As early as the 1960s and 1970s, Mgr. Carlo van Melckebeke cism pleaded with Pope John XXIII and Pope Paul VI that: "despite the conflict with China, the Church of China itself is not in schism, also 'the official priests' are not in schism". A daring historic initiative!



In 1988, Verbiest Foundation organized its first pilgrimage to China. Former missionaries to China (Bert Geusens, Frans Peters) and young CICM Fathers (Wens Padilla, Harrie Stultiens, Jeroom Heyndrickx) traveled to Inner Mongolia, together with a delegation of Christians from Belgium (Geert Delbeke, Rik De Gendt, Carine Dujardin, Josef Felix and others) for a fraternal meeting with the Church in Inner Mongolia, which had emerged wounded by the Cultural Revolution. This was the beginning of CICM promoting dialogue and unity with the Church in China.



## **VF CULTURAL EXCHANGE PROGRAM**



On October 27, the children of the Leuven Chinese School visited Ferdinand Verbiest Institute Leuven. Sr. Gaby Yang and Mss. Jing Van den Berg welcomed children of the Chinese School in Leuven and introduced them to some aspects of Chinese culture.



On July 15, at the Augustian Fathers' parish in Heverlee VF Vice chairman Dominik Declercq used a Powerpoint Presentation to introduce a group of retired friends to the programs of Verbiest Foundation and the work of the CICM missionaries in China.



Chinese character "囍" in paper-cut, what means "double happiness"

On October 30, a Chinese group of non-Christian visited the Verbiest Institute and the Celestial Globe in Leuven.





# NEW PUBLICATION: FATHER THEOPHILE VERBIST FOUNDER OF CICM (SCHEUT)

*Jerome Heyndrickx cicm (Scheut)*

The English version of this book is hereby published as No. 47 of the series Leuven Chinese Studies. It is an updated version of the original. The original text of this book was written by Jerome Heyndrickx cicm at the request of the CICM General Government in preparation to the CICM Chapter of 2023. It was not meant to be a new biography of CICM Founder Theophile Verbist. It intended to offer to the chapter participants as well as to all cicm confreres a short introduction on Founder Verbist stressing mainly his youth, how he discovered his missionary vocation, how that vocation grew as well as how he handled so well his missionary dream which, in total obedience to Church superiors, developed from a simple missionary dream of himself and his friends, diocesan priests, into founding Scheut (CICM), the first local missionary congregation in the Low Countries (Belgium and the Netherlands). It all culminated in his determination to go to China personally and experience there the hardships of missionary life.

The book tells not only the story of the hardships Verbist met to establish CICM as a congregation, but it tells as well how he also founded the China Mission of CICM by being present personally when CICM arrived in China. They were unexpectedly confronted with unforeseen problems, challenges, illness and even death. His own ultimate sacrifice, his death only 27 months after his arrival in China was the peak of this dramatic start of the Scheut (CICM) Mission in China. Founder Theophile Verbist became in fact the martyr of his own Option for China, a key message of this book.

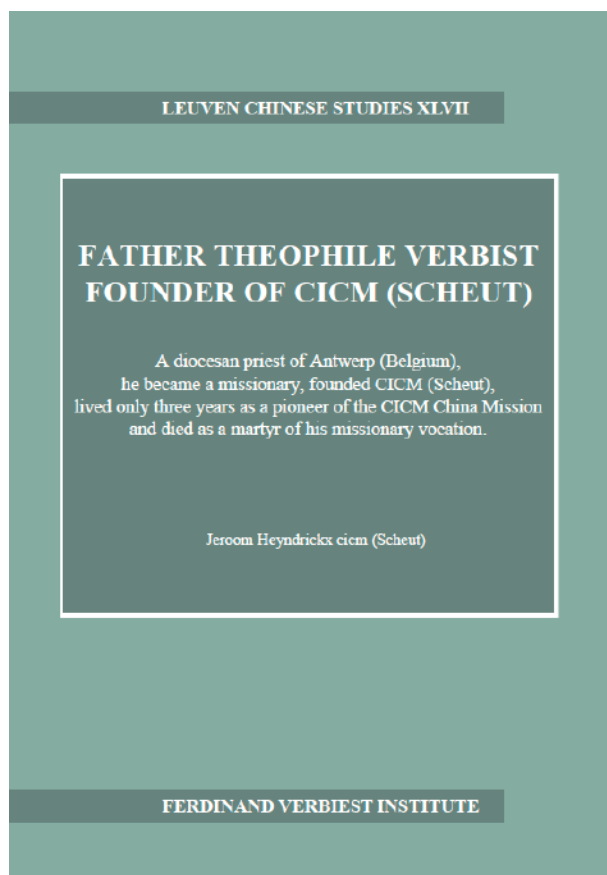
And there is more. This book tells not only the story of Theophile Verbist. It tells a whole lot about the history of the Church in Belgium. Without diminishing in any way the merit of Founder Verbist, it is evident that Scheut (CICM) would never have been founded without the initiative and full support of Cardinal Sterckx and all the other bishops of Belgium at that time. Only by their full support from the beginning was Verbist able to establish Scheut. In the words of Fr. Joseph Rutten, former CICM Superior General, the Belgian bishops must be seen as the co-founders of Scheut.

*Translations of the Verbist Book (in Dutch, French and Chinese) are being prepared and will be published in 2026.*



#### **About the author/editor:**

Jerome Heyndrickx cicm edited this book using texts of CICM historians. He wrote himself a significant part of it. He was born in Haasdonk (Belgium) on December 26, 1931. In 1951, he entered CICM (Scheut) and was ordained to the priesthood in 1956. As of 1957, he was active in Taiwan. After learning Chinese during 2 years, he was 5 years active in Taichung Diocese,



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136 pages

in the Holy Spirit Minor Seminary, in the Student Association and as assistant at the cathedral parish. He later founded the Taiwan Pastoral Center (TPC) in Taipei and taught Pastoral Theology in TPC and at Fu Jen University Theologate. In 1967, he was appointed Provincial of the CICM Chinese Province. From 1974 to 1981 he was Vice-General Superior of CICM in Rome. In 1982, he founded Verbiest Foundation (VF) to promote dialogue with China following the policy promoted by the popes. For that purpose, he visited China many times to develop exchange with the Church and with academic institutions as well as to teach Pastoral Theology in Major Seminaries. He was appointed by Pope Benedict XVI as member of the Pontifical Commission for Matters of the Church in China.

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# IN MEMORIAM

## Fr. Angelo Lazzarotto

*Hereunder we take up a part of the memorial, written by Fr. G. Criveller on the website of AsiaNews (PIME), to commemorate him:*



*Dries Van Coillie and Angelo Lazzarotto during the unveiling of the Globe at the Atrechtcollege, Leuven in 1989.*

### Death of Fr. Lazzarotto, patient weaver of relations with China

*Gianni Criveller*

The PIME missionary died just before his 100th birthday. He was a pioneer in establishing contact with Catholics in China after the Cultural Revolution and founder of the Holy Spirit Study Centre in Hong Kong, for decades the most documented study centre on the Catholic Church in China. Like Matteo Ricci, he followed the path of friendship and dialogue to share the Gospel of peace with the Chinese people.

(...)

Father Lazzarotto was born in Falzè di Piave, in the province of Treviso and the diocese of Vittorio Veneto. "I made my decision to become a missionary when I was attending secondary school in Conegliano Veneto", he told us. "I was an enthusiastic member of Catholic Action, which introduced me to the tragic events of the civil war in Spain and its many martyrs. I also remember our religion teacher's courageous condemnation of Mussolini's racial laws".

In June 1940, he entered the PIME seminary in Treviso, followed by three years of high school at the PIME seminary in Genoa. There he met two missionaries who had been to China and who had a profound influence on him: Father Attilio Garè and the then Superior General, Bishop Lorenzo M. Balconi. "The superior was an austere man, who bore the marks of the violence he had suffered in China. We had a heroic ideal of the missions at the time, and so we welcomed the news of the martyrdom of our missionaries in that country in 1941 and 1942".

He returned to Treviso as a teacher, and on 22 December 1947, at the age of only 22, he was ordained a priest. He was sent to Rome to study missiology and there he discovered the Focolare movement, a source of spiritual inspiration that was fundamental for his life and which he introduced, with great success, into Hong Kong, where he arrived in 1956.

In Hong Kong, he was appointed director of the Catholic Centre, the driving force of Catholicism in that metropolis, where

he became friends with Don Francis Hsu, a great intellectual committed to the inculturation of the Catholic faith in the Chinese world, who in 1967 was elected the first Chinese bishop of Hong Kong. Meanwhile, in 1965, Lazzarotto joined the General Council of PIME.

Father Lazzarotto was a pioneer in establishing contact with Catholics in China after the Cultural Revolution. Together with prominent figures such as the Milanese politician Vittorino Colombo and the intellectual Don Franco Demarchi of the University of Trento, he helped re-establish a dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Chinese regime.

Not only that: he carried out various important services in missionary training facilities at the Italian Episcopal Conference and in the Vatican, before returning to Hong Kong in 1980, where he founded, together with Father John Tong (who later became a bishop and cardinal) and two American Maryknoll missionaries, the Holy Spirit Study Centre, for decades the most documented study centre on the Catholic Church in China.

Father Lazzarotto was one of the members of what was jokingly called the "gang of four", that is, those missionary-sinologists who, at the end of the seventies, began the first, very difficult contacts with what remained of the Catholic Church after the dark years of communist persecution. They included the Belgian Jerom Heyndrickx of the CICM (Scheut) missionaries (still alive) and two others who are no longer with us: the Frenchman Jean Charbonnier of the Foreign Missions of Paris and the Polish Divine Word missionary Roman Malek.

(...)

In November 2015, the Catholic University of Milan awarded him the Matteo Ricci Prize, a figure who inspired Father Angelo during the long years he travelled the path of friendship and dialogue to share the Gospel of peace with the Chinese people.



# Ferdinand Verbiest Foundation

## Mission Statement

Ferdinand Verbiest Foundation (VF) is legally established in Leuven. 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, 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.
- 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 KU Leuven (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:

Ferdinand Verbiest Foundation,  
Vlamingenstraat 1, 3000 Leuven

IBAN: **BE76 7350 1834 3795**

(KBC Bank NV, Mgr Ladeuzeplein 19, 3000 Leuven, Belgium)

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We invite you to explore our new website: <https://verbiestfoundationleuven.com/>,

but please note that it's still under construction!

courier  
懷仁之驛



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