

IN MEMORY OF THE
REV. CARLO M. J. VAN MELCKEBEKE, CICM
THE FIRST APOSTOLIC VISITOR
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FOR OVERSEAS CHINESE CHRISTIANS

by Paul Li I Te

translated by Patrick Sun

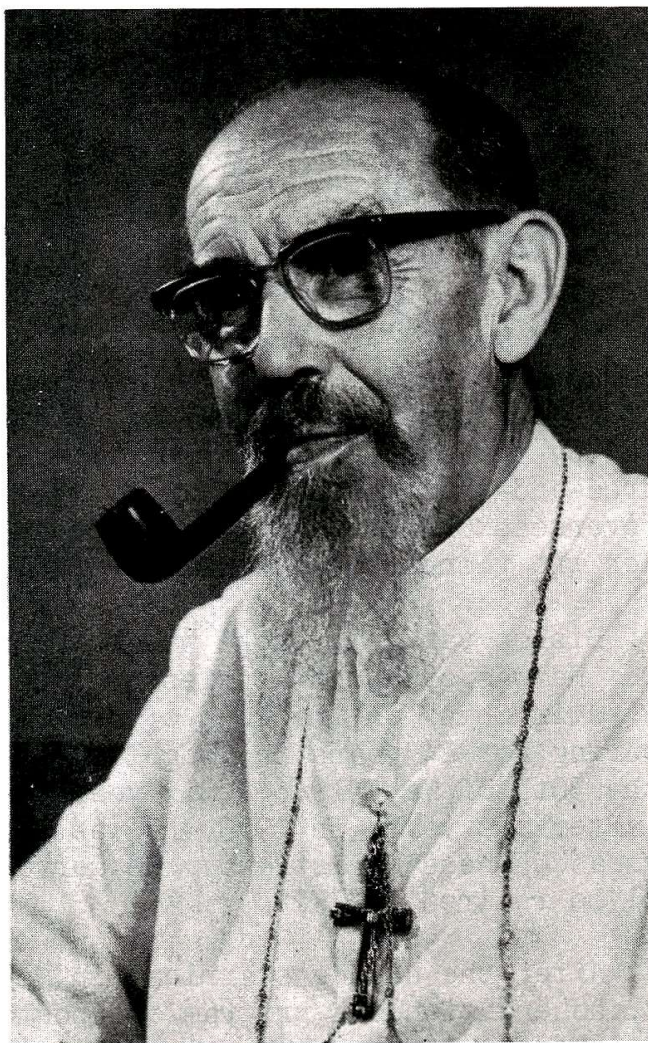
Four years ago, on the 24th of August, 1980, the Most Rev. Carlo M.J. van Melckebeke, CICM, former Bishop of Ningxia and first Apostolic Visitor for overseas Chinese Christians, died in Singapore. He is sadly missed by the overseas Chinese Catholic Communities scattered over one-hundred-and-thirty dioceses in fifty-five countries throughout the world. The overseas Chinese clergy is especially grieved at the loss of this leader who pioneered apostolic work among overseas Chinese Christians.

Bishop van Melckebeke was born in Belgium on the 19th of June, 1898. He was ordained a priest on the 24th of September in 1922, and arrived in China on the 20th of September of the following year. After labouring for 24 years in Mongolia, he was consecrated Bishop of Ningxia on the 30th of May, 1946. Six years later, he was expelled from China, but after one year, in 1953, he was appointed Apostolic Visitor for the overseas Chinese Christians. He served Chinese Christians in this capacity until he retired in 1977.

After the Bishop's arrival in Hong Kong from China in October of 1952, he envisioned a program of apostolic work among overseas Chinese and wished to devote the rest of his life to it. He drew up a programme and presented his proposal at an audience with Pope Pius XII in Rome, stressing the importance of this apostolate to Chinese living abroad in foreign cultures. He felt it to be part of his duty as a pastor to help the thousands of exiled Chinese who were in dire need of pastoral care. His plan met with the Pope's approval and was entrusted to the Sacred

Congregation for the Propagation of Faith for implementation. On May 5th, 1955, the Holy See officially announced his appointment as Apostolic Visitor for Overseas Chinese Christians, a jurisdiction that included Chinese residing in all parts of the world except China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau. Bishop van Melckebeke was to meet and plan with diocesan officials and pastors of local churches wherever overseas Chinese resided. Another of his important responsibilities was to seek out Chinese priests and recommend them to local dioceses for work among the overseas Chinese.

Bishop van Melckebeke arrived in Singapore in the autumn of 1953 to establish the Singapore Catholic Central Bureau(天主教南洋教務促進社) which became the centre for his apostolic work. The centre officially opened its doors on January 1st, 1955. The office of the Apostolic Visitor was situated at 24, Nassim Road. Here, I had accepted the Bishop's invitation to work for the Catholic Chinese Press and operate a religious instruction correspondence course. Working in close contact with Bishop Melckebeke gave me the opportunity to know him very well. I found him to be an amiable, approachable, holy, and learned pastor. He had the charm of a humble, warm, courteous, and saintly scholar. He was not only interested in the work but also his co-workers. When difficulties arose among us and relationships became strained, he would often admonish us with these words: "People working together, for however holy a purpose, always encounter problems. The best and only solution to these problems is charity. The clergy and their staff must have the spirit of charity in their work, for without charity, apostolic life will collapse.



+ Carl van Melckebeke

Bishop Melckebeke worked diligently. A work day for him was seldom less than ten hours. It is a tribute to his zeal and dedication that he personally took care of all correspondence. He was kept busy corresponding with pastors scattered over one-hundred-and-thirty dioceses in fifty-five countries, discussing with them plans and programs for the pastoral care of overseas Chinese. He took on many other personal responsibilities, and he considered no matter too small to engage his attention. His life-style was simple, and he could be found during his leisure time putting around his garden, usually wearing a Chinese cheongsam. He planned carefully and had a good sense of order in his work; his concern for accurate data was reflected in his statistical studies of every aspect of overseas Chinese community life. He also had a sound knowledge of modern journalism. The many articles he contributed to Catholic journals in Rome, reporting on work among the overseas Chinese and other related topics, were taken up and reprinted by Catholic periodicals throughout the world.

Initially, work in the overseas Chinese apostolate was very difficult. Bishop Melckebeke, on his visits to church leaders in many countries, discovered in his discussions with them that the overseas Chinese churches lacked priestly personnel and their schools were short of funds. The bishop redoubled his efforts to search out Chinese priests who would be willing to serve in the overseas apostolate. He also applied to the Sacred Congregation for financial aid to help Chinese Catholic primary and secondary schools in over one hundred and thirty dioceses throughout the world. This tireless concern not only contributed to raising the standards of Chinese Catholic schools, but also to an increase in the number of conversions among Chinese students in Chinese schools throughout the world. Father Paul P. Pang, O.F.M. (彭保祿) the third Apostolic Visitor for Overseas Chinese, in his recent visit to Singapore, disclosed that the overseas Chinese Catholic population had tripled, to over six hundred thousand, since Bishop Melckebeke began his work.

A special concern of Bishop Melckebeke was the training and formation of seminarians who were unable to return to Mainland China after the liberation. He discussed with church leaders their continuing education and placement after ordination. As a result, through the Bishop's efforts, many of these men are now serving in the church at large.

Bishop Melckebeke was an avid lover of Chinese art and culture. Not only did he frequently attend Chinese painting and calligraphy exhibitions,

but he was also a collector of major works by well-known artists, which he donated to major museums in Western Europe in order to foster a similar love for Chinese culture in the West. He kept in constant contact with scholars and leaders in overseas Chinese communities, and was a close friend of Doctor Zhang Zhulin (莊竹林), the President of Nanyang University (南洋大學). It was the Bishop who also recommended Father Feng Dianjun, O.F.M. (馮殿俊) to the department of Sociology in Nanyang University, and urged the Diocese to appoint a priest to student work there.

Bishop Melckebeke was kind and gentle, and had a special concern for his Chinese clerical confreres. He went out of his way to welcome bishops and priests passing through Singapore from Western Europe, often meeting them himself at the airport, and he treated them not as guests but as intimate family members. The Bishop was always a friend in need, not only to troubled priests but to struggling students as well, seeking scholarships for those whose further education was threatened by lack of personal resources.

Is it any wonder that the memory of Bishop Melckebeke lives on among overseas Chinese Christians? Not only is he a model and an inspiration for all those who continue his work in this specialised apostolate, but also the warmth of this kind, gentle apostle lingers in the hearts of those to whom he dedicated his life.

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