

China and Vatican in Scientific Venture

The Vatican Astronomical Observatory at Castelgandolfo near Rome is to give a double-astrograph telescope to the University of Hefei in the Chinese Province of Anhui. An agreement to this effect was signed recently by Father George Coyne, S.J. representing the Vatican Observatory, and Professor Fan Lizhi of the University of Hefei. The transfer is part of a ten year research programme sponsored by an international consortium of universities, which was established to undertake research in areas that individual research centres would find impossible to carry on alone. Involving scientists from leading American, European and Chinese universities as well as Vatican astronomers, the consortium envisages not only the exchange of scientific information but of scientists as well. Father Coyne plans to visit China in September to personally arrange for the transfer of the telescope.

At a recent press conference, Father Coyne explained that while the double-astrograph telescope is "not very modern, it is still considered as one of the best of its kind, and the transfer of this massive piece of equipment to Anhui will allow it to be put to its best possible use." Father Coyne explained that the skies above Castelgandolfo had become so polluted in recent years that it seriously interfered with effective observation of the stars. And the Chinese Observatory to which the telescope will be sent is the best possible observation point for the kind of research that is planned.

Father Sabino Maffeo, a spokesman for the Vatican Observatory, said that the research group, which is called the International Centre for Relativistic Astrophysics, was established on June 17th in Rome, and that all members of the consortium will share in the data to be collected. He also pointed out that it was contacts with the Chinese astronomers working for the past three years at the Vatican

Observatory that inspired the move. Some stars can only be observed from Chinese latitudes, Father Maffeo explained, and that while the telescope is not on the sophisticated level of astronomical instruments found only in a limited number of universities like Stanford and the University of Washington, it's effective analysis is assured by membership in a consortium where individual universities all contribute to a common pool of research data.

The announcement of the agreement between the Vatican Observatory and Hefei University drew attention to the on-going cooperation between Chinese and Jesuit astronomers, a relationship that was not completely severed even by the Cultural Revolution when China closed all doors to the outside world. Because of the privileged place astronomy has always had in Chinese society, contacts with western research astronomers have continued from Imperial times. The fact that for the next ten years, Chinese and Jesuit astronomers will work together as colleagues can only serve to remind observers of the work of the Jesuits during the Ming and Ching dynasties, who were welcomed at the Imperial Court and worked side by side with their Chinese colleagues even after all foreign missionaries were banned from Chinese soil. It is to be hoped that this new venture will contribute not only to the continuing development of astrological science on an international level, but may also contribute to a better mutual understanding between the People's Republic of China and the Holy See, and serve to help to consolidate efforts by Chinese Catholics to express their deep commitment to the scientific advancement of their own country.



One of three stamps issued by the postal services of the Vatican city to commemorate the fourth centenary of the reform of the calendar by Pope Gregory XIII.