

# ***“It Is Good For Us To Be Here” — The Founding and the Restoration of the Theresian Sisters of Biancun***

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## **1. Founding and reviving the Theresian Sisters of Biancun**

### ***1.1 The beginning of the Theresians: Bp. Zhang Bide [1893-1961]***

The Theresian Sisters of Biancun [in Hebei] were founded in 1932 by Bp. Zhang Bide, the first Bishop of the Diocese of Zhaoxian. He expressed his idea about this in a letter to the Pope [Pius XI]:

No congregation of Sisters exists in this mission area. It is extremely hard to find fitting evangelizers, or anyone among the Christians to promote the worship of God and the doing of good works. At this time, God has raised up numerous congregations. I have decided to name this congregation the Theresian Sisters. They will imitate that holy woman [Therese of Lisieux, 1873-1897] and become apostles filled with spiritual fire.

1. They will spread the Kingdom of Christ to the non-Catholics living in darkness, and promote a life of love for God among Christians;
2. They will run a Catholic school, and teach in it;
3. They will manage some spiritual works of mercy: an orphanage, a hospital and a Holy Childhood Home.

So before Liberation, the Theresians ran a school for postulants, an orphanage and a small hospital in Biancun. This was a special time in history, World War II exploded not long after the Theresians were founded. After this war, the War of Liberation

started. The Diocese did not enjoy a normal existence, and the Sisters began to flee for their lives. Since the congregation was newly established, it lacked a firm foothold. There were over 20 Sisters in temporary vows. After the baptism of two wars and the Cultural Revolution, the congregation was restarted in 1988. At that time, there were only 5 old Sisters in their 80s. They knew nothing about the former Constitution of their order. All they remembered was that the bishop led them in Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. So our generation of Sisters did not inherit any of the traditions of the congregation.

### ***1.2 The Theresians revive – Bp. Wang Chonglin [1921-2010]***

During the 1980s, the Church followed in the wake of the nation's policy of reform and opening up. When Bp. Wang Chonglin assumed his pastoral office in 1983, the diocese was a wasteland. There was an urgent need to build up the faith-life of the Catholics, but there were only 13 old priests. Diocesan hardware and software were both in ruins. Catholics knew nothing about the Church, and children needed instruction in the faith. At that time, some young women of the parish began running a catechism class for the children, and assisting in the missionary and pastoral work of the diocese. They expressed to the bishop their willingness to live a life of sacrifice. Not long afterwards, they found some abandoned children living among a cluster of Catholic houses. The Catholics took turns caring for them. When the bishop saw the needs of the church, including the works of mercy and the works of evangelization, which really needed the help of Sisters for the church to become complete and normal, he realized that it was important to restart a seminary and a convent. Thus in 1985 he called some young women together and inquired about their intentions. They expressed their desire to become Sisters. Yet the bishop was not a member of a religious order. He had never been responsible for Sisters, and did not understand how to undertake their formation.

In the beginning, the bishop contacted an old Sister from a religious congregation in Xian. She came twice a year, and shared something of the spirit and rules of her congregation with the young women. Because of the long distance, this situation was not convenient to provide proper training. A younger cousin and a niece of the bishop had never been married. They had long hoped to become Sisters, yet due to a generation of disruption, they only grew older. The bishop often sent these two women to help train the younger women by studying and praying together with them. They constantly helped the bishop to receive visitors and to care for the Catholics. In 1987, the bishop went on a pilgrimage to Banshi Mountain in Shanxi. He prayed to Our Lady, and asked her to personally watch over this young flock of Sisters. He then entrusted the future Theresian Sisters to the Blessed Mother, calling them "Our Blessed Mother's small white flowers." The bishop had a special experience on Banshi Mountain. He received guidance and affirmation from the Blessed Mother. After his return, he was resolved to revive the Theresians, and to reestablish their convent in his diocese.

The bishop wanted to found or revive a congregation, but he did not have a religious constitution. However, he did find a book of rules for the Theresian Women. He gave this to Ms. Zhang Jiaqin to see if it had any value as a reference text. We referred to this booklet often in writing a draft of a set of rules for our congregation. This served as a trial set of rules for us up until 1996, when a Canossian Sister from Hong Kong guided us to write a formal religious constitution.

## **2. The Works of Mercy of the Theresians: Care for Orphaned and Handicapped Children**

### ***2.1 The Home of Dawn Orphanage***

In the autumn of 1988, the bishop called us together to make a retreat. He let us select our own leaders. Zhang Jiaqin was then chosen as our "Family Head." After this selection, and with the

support of the bishop, our congregation formally came into being. The bishop bought us a three-room house. We surrounded it with several smaller rooms, which we built ourselves. Thus the Theresian Sisters were reestablished, and our community life began. We quickly had 20 Sisters, whom our convent simply could not house. So we split into 3 small groups. One group went to another big parish, where they set up a clinic. They lived a common life under the name of the clinic. Others of us went to Kongxiaoying (This was our first small convent) to study and work. At that time, work meant using our own limited means to print theological textbooks for the seminarians, prayer books for the laity, catechisms, and hymnals for use at Mass. In Kongxiaoying we also opened a clinic. We studied and looked after the sick. At night, we preached the Gospel in the homes of Catholics.

Thanks be to God, in that same year the church in Biancun acquired a little property: only a six-room, broken-down old building. The bishop gathered the orphans from all the parishes of the diocese in Biancun, in several rooms of another old dilapidated residence. In this way some of our Sisters began to care for the orphans of Biancun. After a year, we came to the realization that our three places were too scattered. There was no way for the orphans to receive a unified training. At that time, Biancun negotiated the return of several Catholic properties. In this way, the majority of the Sisters became concentrated in Biancun. We were still not recognized as a congregation, so the orphanage became our cover. Government officials did not interfere with us, since we were caring for orphans. They frequently asked us how much income do we receive from caring for these children? We replied that if we were in it for the money, we would not have come here. Thus the orphanage became our convent, novitiate, and house of formation. The children trained us, formed us, and protected us.

Now that I think about it, it's really funny. We were then a group of young women, 17 or 18 years old. Without any training, we started to feed, teach, and to provide guidance, physical therapy and care to the children. We had nothing. We were materially poor



and had no money. Yet we never felt that we lacked anything. Ha, ha, ha. We were as naïve as could be! That we were able to feed the children was already pretty good. I remember we had no heating system back then, just a fire under the floor of a room every day. Winter was too cold. We had no way to dry the diapers, so we hung them over the cooking wok. We used to say that, with diapers over the wok, the food that was cooked might have the taste of urine!

Thus our bishop used to say: the orphanage and the convent are twins. The orphanage is a protective umbrella for the convent, and the Sisters give life to the children. Both rely on each other to live. This was truly a marvelous arrangement of God. There was no way then to openly run a convent; the orphanage became the convent.

## ***2.2 The Liming (Dawn) Home for Rehabilitation***

For more than 20 years, Liming Home has received and saved over 500 abandoned children. Thanks be to God who watched over us on the way. Together with the orphans, we groped our way forward. After much practice, study and work, we developed a spirit of bearing suffering patiently. Seeing all the disabled children who had been abandoned, we could provide them with a warm living environment. Yet we could not satisfy the children's emotional needs, especially the need of growing children for a family. Occasionally some parents came secretly to our door to abandon their own flesh and blood. They were in so much pain and desperation that they then went off a short distance to weep bitterly....so great was the emotional strain. In the course of sheltering and helping the children, we deeply experienced the feeling that we are not the saviors of the world. We could not save every abandoned child.

Based on their more than 20 years of social service experience, the Sisters also took several brief study programs and specialized training courses. In 2006, we registered an open type of social service project, the Liming Home for Rehabilitation, with the

authorities. It specializes in providing physical therapy to disabled children. Working with children and their parents, we help the children improve their abilities. At the same time, it supplies professional and psychological guidance to the parents, to show parents how to care for disabled children. We desire that the parents will receive the concern of society, that the child will continue to live with the mother, and that the family can create a space in which the child can live and develop. During the past four years, the Home for Rehabilitation has treated over 400 children. Sisters who provide physical therapy in the community, visit children in their homes, giving guidance and support. We specially target families with difficulties, combining church and social resources to provide temporary help and care.

Society recognizes the Home for Rehabilitation as a social service organization. After four years of exploration and study, the standard of the Sisters' professional services rose quickly, and the organization's managerial style also qualified as meeting society standards. We have built a complete organization for service to disabled children, with a rather good system for managing our financial assets. We have become a model worth studying among such non-governmental organizations in the north of China. In 2007, we became involved with a sister organization run by Protestants in Nanning. More than 20 Christian-based orphanages and physical therapy organizations for disabled children from across the country came together and created a platform to study from each other and exchange information. Starting from only caring for our own service organization, the Sisters have gradually turned toward sharing our experience with similar groups.

Service to orphaned and disabled children has already become an important constituent of the mission of the Theresian Sisters. When we serve the weak, God's grace becomes real in their lives. This fulfills the yearning of Christ at the Last Supper that we love one another. We seek continual professional improvement, in order to better share our love with our weaker brothers and sisters, and to share our experience with even more people.

### **3. The pastoral work of the Theresian Sisters**

Pastoral work in a parish is also one of our important tasks. Both of our bishops, the founder and the restorer of our community, desired that we assist in the pastoral work of the diocese. In the early 1990s, the Sisters did much basic educational work to build up the faith of the laity. By the late 1990s, we did more leadership training for the Catholics. After 2000, the standard of the Catholics' faith knowledge kept getting higher. Many parishes established groups to carry out works of charity, of evangelization, and of doctrinal instruction to children. Catholics gradually began to assume greater responsibility for these activities. In the wake of social developments, we have discovered even deeper needs. People have a spiritual vacuum, and are seeking a deeper meaning to life. For the sake of the needs of society, the Sisters began to study different special subjects. To increase their professional service, a number of Sisters studied spiritual direction, social work, and psychological counseling. Some even went overseas to study spiritual psychology. Currently several Sisters have attained professional registration as social workers and psychological counselors. For parish work in the future, we are aiming to strengthen the spirituality of the laity.

### **4. The internal maturity of the congregation — formation in line with local needs**

Thank God for granting us a wise bishop, one who gave us ample room to develop. We thank God especially for the bishop's confidence in the Sisters. The bishop never directly put his hand into the internal matters of the congregation. He allowed the Sisters to be independent in administration and in finances. The bishop believed the congregation was God's, and the Holy Spirit would personally lead it.

The Theresians were an all-new Sisters' congregation from the day of their restoration. We had to feel our way along every road until after the convening of the First General Chapter of the revived

congregation in 1994. At that time, we started drafting a Constitution, and opened a novitiate and postulancy, assigning directors for each program. After 20 years of trial and error, we now have a complete system of formation. Every class now has a special director of formation. It's hard to find an ideal spiritual director inside China. We can only utilize the resources within our congregation. We search within the larger group to select fitting spiritual counselors for Sisters in temporary and final vows.

In our experience of formation, in addition to requesting priests and Sisters from abroad to give talks about religious life, the three vows, life in community, etc., we have given special emphasis to formation within the community. Community life unites our own needs to the carrying out of self-formation. An annual week for a spiritual retreat, a day for offering up our lives, a community life day for every small group, a monthly reflection, and group sharing, all these exercises increase the atmosphere of collective unity. The practical needs of individuals are dealt with through internal sharing. To achieve a good community life, it is helpful to nourish the Sisters' sense of belonging and sense of participation. What helps us even more is to absorb the spiritual guidance coming from the Universal Church.

The Theresian Sisters currently have 92 Sisters, 6 novices, 6 postulants, and 20 aspirants. Every year of formation has its especially assigned director, who accompanies the students. In many places across China, vocations are decreasing. Some congregations do not have a fitting formator. So they come to us for supervisory formation, and to share in our traditions. They are looking for a more ideal environment for formation.

In 2008 the Theresian Sisters convoked their Fifth General Chapter, which had historical significance. After prayer and discussion among the Sisters, the charism and direction of the congregation were clearly defined for the first time, and the core values clarified.

- (1) Core value: Love To The End  
The Sisters of the congregation, responding to the hope of Christ to love until the end, serve humbly and build up life.
- (2) Spiritual road: the Way of St. Therese of Lisieux  
The Theresian Sisters imitate our patroness, St. Therese of Lisieux, doing ordinary things with an extraordinary heart, putting the living power of love into every activity, expressing faith in the Heavenly Father with a sincere heart, and handing everything over to the Heavenly Father in love.
- (3) For the Theresian Sisters, Christ at the Last Supper is the best model for a life of sacrifice.  
Apostolic work: All Theresian Sisters, by their vows, become true apostles. This includes devoting themselves to every kind of evangelical work, serving those within the community, the sick, the frail elderly, and showing devotion to those who have died in the Lord. Just as Jesus Christ silently sacrificed himself and handed over everything, using his own entire life to nourish souls, they become women apostles filled with the Holy Spirit.
- (4) Directions for the Congregation – Embrace Christ, Unite in Love, Witness to the Love of God, Evangelize China.  
Enlightened by “the desire of Christ at the Last Supper,” the Theresians emphasize sharing, and always remember to share the graces we have received with those who are in need. We do our utmost to share with the people through works of mercy, evangelization, and leadership training.

After the 2008 General Chapter, the congregation established committees for Evangelization, Charitable Works and Formation. These created more opportunities for the Sisters to participate, and brought our collective wisdom into play to seek the development of the congregation. There will be a General Chapter every five years. Between Chapters, we will have an Evaluation Assembly to look back at how we have been progressing in the direction indicated by

the General Chapter and at the same time to prepare some important themes for the next General Chapter. In November 2010 we will convoke the Evaluation Assembly. In July 2010, more than 70 Sisters took part in the preparatory meeting for the Assembly, and 35 representatives were selected for it.

### **“It is good for us to be here” [Transfiguration, Mt. 17:4]**

During the 22 years since the restoration of the Theresians Sisters, we thank God for accompanying us and caring for us. The dear old bishop has also accompanied us for these 22 years. In 2008, when we had our first change of Superior, the bishop witnessed our reforms and maturity. With that elder person present, we feel that God is with us. We can lean on the bishop in all things. The previous Superior and the older generation of Sisters also gave everything they had, reaching into every corner of every convent to help. We also thank all the Sisters who have searched together.

The congregation has grown from an infant to a young adult. After our assembly in 2008, our basic goals were clear and distinct. Yet after stumbling ahead for two years, a review meeting is coming soon, and the Sisters will be given every opportunity to participate. Looking at our development today, we cannot help but feel satisfied.

The preparatory meeting for our review meeting opened quite well. Of course we could not separate ourselves from the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The meeting proceeded in order every day, with neither confusion nor chaos. We truly experienced how arduous the course of the congregation's development has been. It was an exploration through turbulence, a history of crossing a river by feeling for stepping-stones. The taste was sour, sweet, bitter and spicy. Real flavors are beautiful, and tasty enough! Finally, at the conclusion, we deeply felt that the Lord was among us. Everyone's sharing was extremely harmonious, an extremely inspirational poem of praise. In the summary before the assembly ended, I recorded every sentence of every Sister. Now, in an effort to share

them with everyone I present them in an organized fashion. I use what we shared to offer our thanks and praise to God:

The spirit of the Lord hovers above the waters, unceasingly renewing and creating. We have seen collective wisdom in the growth to maturity of the Sisters. In the course of our long journey, we have the ability to look at the actual situation without panicking, and to accept it. We could also find ways to improve that situation. God is marvelous in a thousand ways, so let God be God and let us be ourselves. All is in God's hands; fear is useless. It has been so beautiful and such a blessing for the Sisters to live together. Here we have found the place where we belong. We could not bear not to participate in this community opportunity. During these several days we have experienced God's presence with us at every moment. Let us wake up in the Holy Spirit and be mature in Christ. We have honesty, openness, gratitude, acceptance, peace and joy among us. Having stripped off the spirit of the world, we have been given confidence and hope. Enjoying peace, we are prepared for any future danger, and so we can avert the danger. In our youth, we were all restless about what should be done. Everyone was talking and working. Congregation, it was as if God was watching us and laughing! Congregation, I love you. You have the freshness of wind in springtime; you rise like the morning sun. We are they who have the power to cooperate with the Holy Spirit, women apostles filled with spiritual fire, Sisters who are true, and not mistaken. We can enjoy the turbulence of the group and also enjoy everyone's unity of mind and strength. Wisdom lies in the community system. With maturity, we have taken a great step into mystery. It is our business to break through our shadows and darkness. We have the power to stand up in darkness and seek the light. When sharing, we reflect among ourselves and speak to ourselves. In the light of the Holy Spirit, and in chaos, we find ourselves, and we also find God.