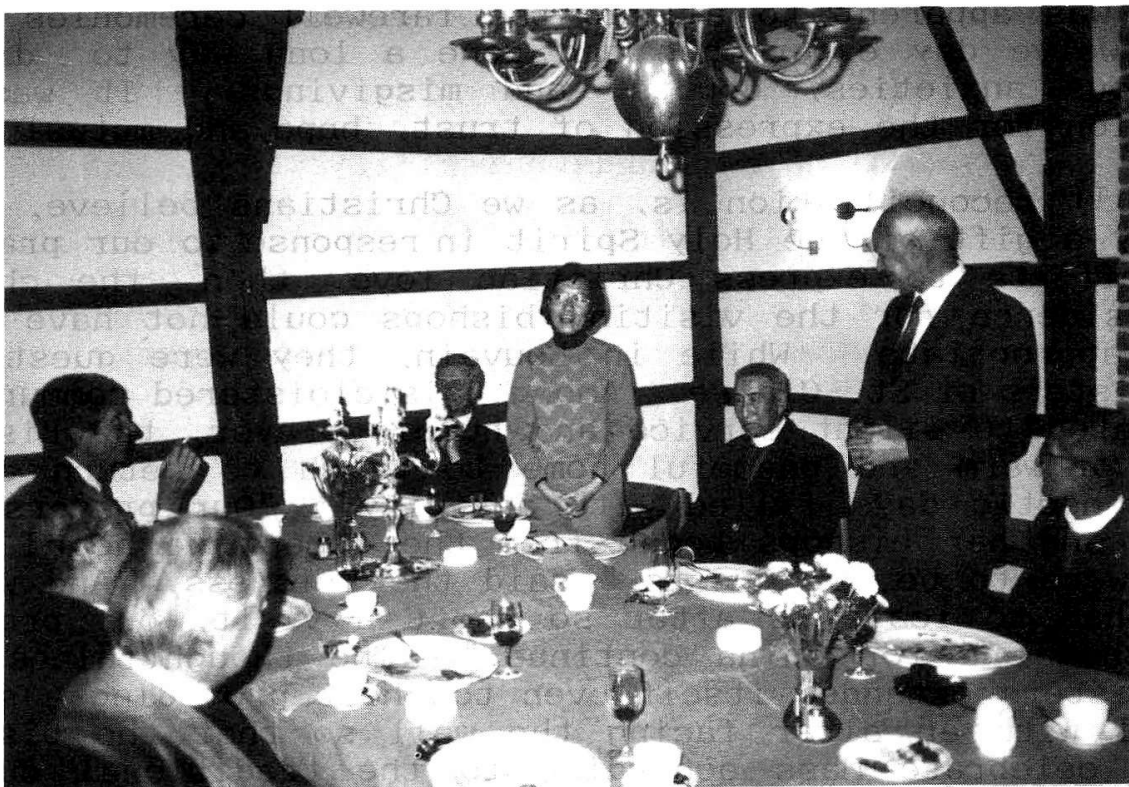


# CHINESE BISHOPS AT LOUVAIN



*R-L: Bp. Tu, Prof. Lambrecht, Bp. Wang, Sr. Goretti Lau*

by Goretti Lau  
translated by Lucy Yau

All Saints 1985 will be a day long remembered by both Louvain University and the Chinese Catholic Church, for November 1st marked the arrival of a delegation of Chinese bishops that finally put an end to thirty years of estrangement. While the primary aim of the visit was the promotion of a cultural exchange between China and one of Christendom's most prestigious centres of learning, hopes ran high that it would also pave the way for a further dialogue between the Chinese and Western churches. Even though questions concerning ecclesiology were not a formal part of the agenda, ground was being broken and a foundation laid for further dialogue and interaction in the future. It was only natural that the atmosphere surrounding the arrival of the distinguished guests would not be without

a certain nervous tension on both sides, but, on the morning of the 13th, as the visitors prepared to leave on a morning flight to London - the first leg of their journey home - it was apparent to all at the farewell ceremonies that the twelve day experience had gone a long way to dispel previous anxieties, doubts, and misgivings. It was an occasion for the expression of trust, hope, and mutual joy.

If reconciliation is, as we Christians believe, primarily a gift of the Holy Spirit in response to our prayers and efforts to express Christian love, then the choice of residence for the visiting bishops could not have been more appropriate. While in Louvain, they were guests of the Sisters of St. Claire. Among this cloistered community, dedicated to silent service and humble prayer, the Bishops found a warm and peaceful home to which to return after long, hectic days filled with activity. "Our prayers for China and her bishops began from the moment we heard that they were to be our guests," said the Prioress, "And while they had to leave us after so short a visit, our prayers for them and for China continue." The thoughtfulness of the Sisters extended itself even to their providing a small chapel with an altar facing the wall so that the bishops might celebrate Mass according to the traditional custom still prevailing in China. The language barrier presented no obstacle here where communication took place on another, richer and more satisfying level. On the day of their departure, the bishops expressed their desire not only to return to Louvain but, if it were at all possible, to live once again among the Sisters of St. Claire. This experience which the bishops had with the Sisters of St. Claire convinced me that the true value of their visit was to be sought not only in the intellectual stimulation and excitement of discovering new things that a major university can provide, but also in encountering a new face of Christ, the Risen Lord, in whom there is to be found no hatred, resentment, or aggression, but only acceptance, reconciliation and love.

Of the delegation of six, four were from Beijing: Fu Tieshan who is the Bishop of Beijing, the Rector of the National Seminary Bishop Tu Shihua, Mr. Liu Bainian, who is the Assistant General Secretary of the National Office of the Chinese Patriotic Association, and Mr. Cui

Yongjiu, who served as the group's translator. The remaining two members of the delegation were from Inner Mongolia: Bishop Wang Xueming, and Father Gao.

One of the highlights of the visit took place on November 5th when the group visited the Theology Faculty. After a tour of the library where they were shown, among other things, bibles and manuscripts dating back to the 15th century, they had an opportunity to spend time in



*L-R: Prof. Lambrecht, Bp. Tu, Prof. Delobel*

discussion with Dr. J. Lambrecht, the Dean of Theology, Dr. Delobel, Chairman of the English Department, and other professors. There they learned more about Louvain, its past history and present situation. The visitors were able to give up-to-date information on the reopening of theological schools in China and some of the problems they face. Bishop Tu mentioned that theological formation is only in its initial stages, and there is a shortage of qualified personnel as well as educational materials. Their hosts expressed the hope that Chinese seminarians and clergymen might come to study at Louvain, and the Univer-

sity offered two scholarships, one in philosophy and one in theology to Chinese candidates. The Faculty also presented the visitors with a complete set of theology books as a memento of their visit.

After the meeting, all adjourned to the Faculty Club for dinner. The building itself was constructed during the Middle Ages, and is an admirable example of Medieval architecture. It was not difficult in such surroundings to think of the vital role Christianity has played in the development of Western culture, as well as the potential it has to influence today's civilizations both in the East and West by reaffirming the presence of God and spiritual destiny of man in a world of ever growing atheism and secularization.

Both the Dean of Theology and the Bishop of Beijing spoke formally at the conclusion of the dinner. The relationship of the Vatican and the Chinese Church remains a touchy issue and one that admits of no simple solutions. The accumulated problems of decades cannot be solved overnight, and certainly not through the course of one meal. But good will abounds, and we can only continue to hope that patience, understanding and love will find a way. Conversion of heart demands a continual conversion to gospel values. Without a sincere return to the gospel, changes in relationship will remain superficial and ephemeral. For the emergence of a new and lasting relationship between the Chinese Church and the Vatican, may prayers be offered from every quarter of the universal Church. This supper together ended on a note of joyful hope.

The twelve day visit was crowded with activities that brought the visitors into contact with all kinds of people. They met intellectuals, students, factory workers, farmers, people from ordinary local parishes as well as Christians involved in both religious and social works. They visited parishes, colleges, pastoral centres, publishing houses, formation institutes where novices of several religious congregations share a common formation program, liturgical art centres, and schools specializing in the study of China, its history and culture. Their hosts, the Ferdinand Verbiest Foundation, made all the detailed arrangements

so that their guests might have a full and rich experience. The final day was spent in the historic and beautiful city of Bruges.

The visit of the Chinese bishops to Louvain underlined an important development in the on-going mission of the Church. If in years past the notion of mission was understood primarily in terms of going abroad to fields afar in order to evangelize, the contemporary Church is becoming more and more aware of its basic missionary nature. Working for the realization of the Kingdom of God, incarnating Christ in all peoples and in all cultures is the Church's universal mission, active at all times and in all places. The early missionaries, men such as Matteo Ricci and Ferdinand Verbiest, brought the gospel and also western learning to China. This era of missionary activity in China is now past. But does that mean the extinction of missionary activity in relationship to China? Not if one conceives the universal mission of the Church. A missionary is a bridge-builder, evangelization takes place wherever there is true, sincere dialogue. As China and the Chinese Church gradually emerge from their thirty-years of self-imposed isolation, they will encounter Christ fully alive in themselves and within His universal community. Missionary activity in this sense is not so much a "bringing to" but a "bringing out" of the unfathomable riches of His love, His self-emptying service and the fullness of life which He offers all those who receive Him. For China as for us, a new missionary age has dawned.