

CICM AND THE CHINESE CHURCH TODAY



by Michel Decraene

The historical relationship of the Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary with the Chinese church is clearly evident to anyone who visits our centre house at Schuet near Brussels. At the entrance there is a stone tablet inscribed in Latin "Seminarium pro Sinis" (a seminary for China) which expresses the purpose for which Theophile Verbist founded our congregation...to send missionaries to work "Praesertim in Sinis" (mainly in China). Verbist himself went to China in 1865 and died there two years later. His body lies at rest in a Chinese coffin in the crypt of our chapel where visitors will come to pay their respect to his memory.

Our long relationship with China is memorialized in a more personal way along one of the corridors of our centre house where hang the photo-portraits of over 3000 CICM missionaries who left their own land to serve in local churches of various countries throughout the world. It is our family album, with pictures of all who have gone before us and those alive today. At the present time, there are about 1500 CICM members of various nationalities living and working in 18 different countries. Our gallery not only attracts visitors from Belgium but also many from abroad, including our friends from Taiwan and Hong Kong.

When in November of 1985, three Chinese bishops from mainland China paid us a visit, it was in the photo-gallery that we shared a most meaningful moment. As we passed in review before the pictures of those 19th century missionary pioneers to Northern China, we could not help but feel their historical links with these Chinese bishops who today are reorganizing the Chinese church into a truly Chinese catholic local church in their now socialistic nation. Indeed, it is a new turning point in Chinese church history.

654 CICM missionaries had followed Verbist to mainland China. They went to such places as Zhangjiakou, Gansou, Inner Mongolia, Ningxiz, Xinjiang, Datong, and Beijing, establishing centre houses in Taijin and Shanghai. During the 50's after leaving the China mainland, 29 veteran China missionaries continued their work in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore, where they were joined by 49 younger members. All in all, 703 CICM's have served the Chinese people in an uninterrupted history of 123 years. We feel privileged to have participated in a crucial period of Chinese church history and have always valued our long and close relationship. Since the time of Jesus the history of his church has been a mingling of joy, suffering and sadness, and so for us were these 123 years. But then, did not Jesus tell us in advance that it would always be so?

Our founder died of typhus in northern China. 160 more CICM members after him were to die of the same disease, most of them within two years of their arrival. A total of 250 of our men are buried there, 9 of them killed during the Boxer Rebellion, along with their Chinese priest colleagues and many lay people. During the Japanese occupation a large group were placed in concentration camps, where 11 died. Those released were soon to become part of the missionary exodus in the early 1950's.

While our members' history in China had many hardships, it also brought them much joy as they worked and lived with the Chinese bishops, priests and catholics of the North. Their joint efforts produced much fruit.

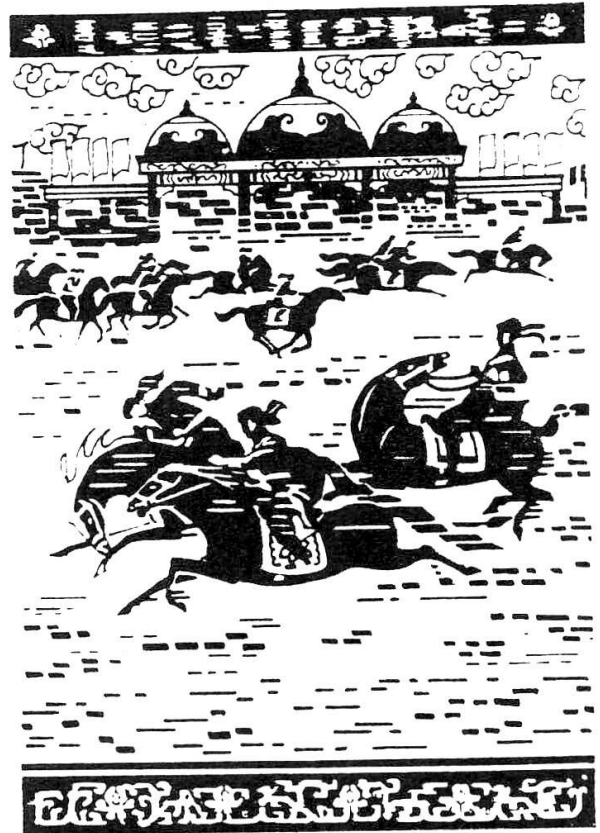
When our founder and his confreres arrived in Xiwandzi in 1865, there were only 6 priests and 8,000 catholics there. When our congregation left in the early 1950's, there were 4 Chinese bishops, 233 Chinese priests and 235,000 catholics. All this was due to the intensive cooperation in the work of evangelization by Chinese priests, religious and lay people with the CICM missionaries. Along with efforts at direct evangelization and the organization of parishes and a seminary

for the training of future church leaders, many schools, hospitals and dispensaries were established, agricultural projects were initiated to help the farmers, and our Verbist Academy for the study of Chinese culture was founded in Beijing.

TIMES HAVE CHANGED

While we are justifiably proud of our history, we are also the first to acknowledge that it has been far from perfect. But then what human history can make a claim to perfection? Colonialism has left its mark on every aspect of the history of those times. It was traditional missionary practice to hold onto authority and it was very slow, often too slow, to share this authority and the responsibility for the direction of the work with the local people.

Times change and relationships change with them. Countries today, former colonial powers along with them, are searching for relationships based not on the past but on present realities. They are looking for East-West, North-South cooperation and seek it not through arrogance but dialogue. The church itself has changed along with the times. The post-Vatican II church is a church that strives to collaborate with all nations in their efforts to establish justice and peace throughout the world. In this struggle, direction is in the hands of the local church. Missionaries go only when and where invited and do the tasks the local church requests of them. Both the church and the world have grown very much in recent decades.



A TRULY CHINESE CATHOLIC LOCAL CHURCH

The "Fu Quan Da Hui" (福傳大會) held in Taipei February, 1988 illustrates how the Taiwan Chinese catholic local church, which relied

so heavily on the help of its foreign missionaries only 25 years ago, now has a group of young lay people who, together with their own priests and religious, take responsibility for the church into their own hands under the direction of their own bishops.

Our CICM fathers in Taiwan and Hong Kong are presently in the process of turning over to the local church a great deal of the work which they began. This is as it should be. Local Churches are helped to grow by close cooperation with Christians from other local churches. Our role as missionaries is then one of service within a larger Christian family.

The ways of the Lord are wonderful and unlike those of men. Only fifteen years ago many of us feared that the church on mainland China had almost disappeared as a result of the hardships of the Cultural Revolution. To our surprise and happiness we see there today a dynamic church community reopening places of worship, seminaries and novitiates. Bishops, priests and lay people are reorganizing the church on the mainland into a truly Chinese catholic local Church.

True, they still are not yet able to express fully and concretely their union with the universal church through the Holy Father. However, in conversations with their bishops, our members know and are convinced that unity in faith is present as well as the willingness to search for ways to express it more fully even if this seems to be a long and slow process. Unity is often obtained only through much suffering. "That they all may be one" remains the most meaningful prayer of the whole church and this is especially true of the Chinese church. Socio-economic and political environments are so different in mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, yet in each of these places the Chinese church is clearly maturing into its identity as a local Chinese catholic church. For CICM it has been a grace to be able to be part of all this in the past and we wish to remain faithful to this history into the future.

BUILDING A NEW RELATIONSHIP

What should our relationship with the Chinese church be today and during the coming years? This is part of our constant reflection and concern. In line with general church policies, we adapt ourselves to the developments in each local church and remain open to the wishes and invitations that come from those churches.

Long ago our CICM General Chapter stated that CICM does not

consider itself to have any ecclesiastical jurisdiction over territories where it used to work in Northern China. In Taiwan and Hong Kong, however, we continue to respond to the invitations that come to us from local bishops. That is our rule where we are invited we remain actively involved in the Chinese apostolate, presently that includes Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore.

But while CICM is not involved in any active missionary work or planning in mainland China, we do not consider our relationship with the church to be terminated. A new phase in this relationship begins now. We must define the character of this relationship within the evolving pattern of the contemporary world. As the world is searching for East-West and North-South cooperation through dialogue, we in the post-Vatican II church should be ready and willing to join in this global cooperative effort for world progress, justice and peace.

Our relationship with the mainland Chinese church will be new insofar as the church there has become a local Chinese catholic church and the universal church no longer thinks in terms of "missionary churches" and "sending churches" but only of local churches.

But it will be new also insofar as we are called to respond to the signs of the times. Our times call all peoples to the development of dialogue between cultures, peoples, religions. Past centuries may have been marked by strife and contention but the present challenge is for dialogue and understanding. Local churches from all over the world must become actively involved in this. Our new relationships should be able to transcend past misunderstandings among people and cultures.

When the Chinese bishops visited our centre in Schuet, Father Provincial gave to each of them a chalice that was used in the 19th century by our pioneer fathers in China. By this gesture CICM wanted to symbolise its belief in our intimate union in the one faith and the one Church. We also expressed our desire to maintain the old friendship and our readiness to continue to respond jointly to the needs of the world and also of today's China. Our new relationship must begin with the development of a regular and open communication with each other. Communication leads to better understanding and unity. Our understanding of our new relationship will grow in the measure that we are ready to communicate deeply in faith and also as people of this century with one another, eradicating any kind of prejudice that recent or past history may have put there. That is a very Christian challenge.