

Beifang Jinde, Catholic Social Service Centre

By Roderick O'Brien

The importance of the Beifang Jinde cannot be easily over-estimated since it is the first government approved social service centre in China under Catholic Church auspices in some thirty years. The author, an Australian, and an English teacher in China, was so impressed with the work being done with so few resources, that he gave most of his spare time during his two years in Shijiazhuang, helping the staff with their English, and doing necessary translation work for the new centre, and Faith Press. He gives the following account of the work being done.

This week I visited Hualin Village, in Zhanhuang County, in Hebei Province. The village is located about one and one-half hours' drive from Shijiazhuang City, the capital of Hebei Province. As you go from the city, the road gradually rises and the village is at the foot of the bare, snow-covered Five Horses Hill. Although part of the Shijiazhuang City area, it is a poor village.

Hebei Province is home to about a quarter of China's Catholics, and about 400 live in Hualin Village. On a rise on the outskirts of the village is a rather large area of land (5 or 6 mu) and this land serves as the site for a Catholic church, and a water tower. Both are new, and simply built of utilitarian red brick. The water tower stands starkly, almost in front of the church, and perhaps the church is the more beautiful. Both are attractive in their own way, for both serve the needs of the Catholic community in that area: the church as the meeting point for worship of our God, and the water tower to give service to the villagers—Catholic and non-Catholic alike—at the foot of the hill.

Moreover, both the church building and the water tower represent something of the universal nature and mutual support among our Catholic community: both were funded from outside mainland China. The water tower was funded by a grant from the French organization CCFD. The grant, the construction, and the administration through local Catholics were arranged by Beifang Jinde Catholic Social Service Centre.

What is Beifang Jinde?

An introduction prepared by the staff of Beifang Jinde offers the following information:

Beifang Jinde Catholic Social Service Centre was established in May 1997, and it was approved by the government in August 1998. Beifang Jinde develops its works in the spirit of "witnessing *Faith* and practising charity". First, we publish the news of urgent cases in *Faith* newspaper, seeking local help. Then in some cases we contact foreign charitable institutions in order to work together on some projects.

Beifang Jinde has three important works

1. Helping in healing the injured and rescuing the dying, including urgent rescue work and humanitarian relief in response to calamities.
2. Social development assistance to those with medical and health problems, insufficient education, etc. This includes Project Hope, and programs to assist the poor to become prosperous.
3. Some kinds of pastoral care, including church building, evangelical training, further education of priests, pastoral reflection, retreats, seminars, etc.¹

***Faith* Newspaper, Fr Zhang, and Beifang Jinde**

In order to understand the present situation of Beifang Jinde, it is necessary to go know about the *Faith* newspaper, published by the *Faith* Press, which has served the Catholics of Hebei Province since 1991. This periodical has now been published for over 100 issues, and has been increasing in frequency from a monthly to a fortnightly paper. The circulation is over 54,000, and the subscribers now come from all over China.²

The work of Beifang Jinde began, in a sense, informally through the newspaper. Stories of suffering were published informally, beginning in about 1993, and the Catholics of China began to donate money to help those in need. At that time, there was no organization, but gradually, this work has taken on a regular form. *Faith* newspaper still remains the vehicle for communicating about needs and achievements, and Beifang Jinde is still in some ways an extension of the *Faith* Press, and dependent on the Press for personnel and premises.

The Editor of the *Faith* newspaper is Fr John Baptist Zhang Shijiang, a priest of the Diocese of Xingtai in Hebei Province. Fr Zhang is among the first group of young priests trained when seminaries reopened after the Cultural Revolution. He has been ordained for ten years. His studies abroad (in the Philippines) gave him an insight into the value of social works as an expression of *Faith*. The development of *Beifang Jinde* has been due to his initiatives, and his international contacts have shaped the way in which *Beifang Jinde* has taken on an international dimension.

Two “Wings” of *Beifang Jinde*

Beifang Jinde flies on two wings: one is the internal wing, the other, international.

The internal wing is managed through *Faith* newspaper. In each issue emergency needs are put before the readers. Now two or more cases are included in each issue, and readers are invited to choose which case to support by their donations. In order to ensure that the cases are genuine, most of the applicants get signatures from their parish priest or their bishop. The number of cases keeps growing, because the reports in *Faith* newspaper generate further applications. Fr Zhang is happy to tell you that China's Catholics—most of whom are poor, in rural areas—have donated many thousands of *renminbi* for this purpose. Support comes from Bishops, from clergy, and from lay people. But their donations are relatively small, and cannot meet all the needs. Local donations are certainly insufficient for larger projects.

The larger projects fly on the international wing. Again, we can look at the background of Fr Zhang: as a young priest, he studied in the Philippines, at the East Asian Pastoral Institute. While there, he improved his English, and was able to communicate about the situation of Catholics in China. In China, he is often visited by foreigners seeking to understand the situation of the Church, and through these contacts he is able to know of organizations which are willing to help with funding. Fr Zhang also is sometimes able to travel abroad for his work, and is alert to opportunities to make contacts with funding organizations, or to respond to their initiatives.

The larger projects have not been very large: examples include building primary schools and churches, sinking wells and putting up water towers, and building bridges. These have been within the capacity of a small organization such as *Beifang Jinde*,

and the funding agencies have been willing to co-operate rather informally. Donors include the Spanish organization ANESVAD, the French CCFD, the Irish Government (through its Embassy in Beijing), and Hong Kong Caritas. Hong Kong donors were especially generous at the time of the earthquakes in northern China in 1998. Because Beifang Jinde is small, decisions can be quickly made and implemented.

In one instance, Beifang Jinde has made a contribution to an emergency outside the mainland: after the recent earthquake in Taiwan, Beifang Jinde contributed US\$5,000 towards the relief work. This timely donation was well received in Taiwan, and evoked a good response. While the publicity was helpful, Fr Zhang does not expect that Beifang Jinde will become regularly involved in activities outside the mainland.

The Spirit of Beifang Jinde

"Beifang" simply means "northern." "Jinde" comes from the personal name of the late Bishop Hou Jinde of Xingtai diocese. Bishop Hou's personal charity was very influential in Fr Zhang's development. But Fr Zhang also speaks of a wide variety of influences: he especially mentions Mother Teresa of Calcutta. (Her picture can be seen around many Catholic churches in China, and *Faith* Press has published many stories about her.) Fr Zhang also cites his experience of graduate study in the Philippines, where his research into compassion and forgiveness had a practical influence in his life.

Of the many dimensions of the spirit of Beifang Jinde, I will mention only one here: the importance of witness. Catholics in China form only a tiny percentage of the population. They are mostly located in rural areas, and are without much influence. Moreover, they have suffered greatly during recent decades, and are still viewed with suspicion by a government which is on the one hand, officially atheistic, and on the other hand, wary of any organization beyond its control. The work of Beifang Jinde, for example, in building schools, serves as a witness to the local community of the commitment of Catholics to the development of the whole population, without distinction.

The Structure and Organization of Beifang Jinde

Beifang Jinde has grown from its informal beginnings, and is now a structured organization, approved by the Chinese government authorities in August 1998. There is an elaborate constitution, which puts leading power in the Board of Directors³. The Board does meet, but since it consists of elderly bishops with many responsibilities, the board members do not take an active part in the work of Beifang Jinde. Nevertheless, their encouragement is important. Fr Zhang feels that the rules of Beifang Jinde need to be revised in the light of two years' experience.

Now Beifang Jinde has a staff of four full-time workers, of whom the senior is Mr Ren Dahai, the Vice-General Secretary. Fathers Zhang Shijiang and Zhang Wenxi work on an unpaid, part-time basis. The growing structures mean that the staff need clear duty statements and division of responsibility, and this process has already begun. My own feeling is that training is also needed: until now the administration of projects has been small and *ad hoc*, but if Beifang Jinde intends to undertake a wider range of projects, training is as important as experience. Fr Zhang hopes to send one of the staff to the USA for training, and another to the UK.

Government and Church

One change in China over the last few years has been the growing willingness of the Chinese government to accept non-government organizations. My impression is that the government's change of policies is dictated by economics, and not by a sense of widening the circles of responsibility and power. Nevertheless, for whatever motivation, non-government organizations are finding a niche in China. The government, unaccustomed to these organizations, tries to keep strict control of them through its traditional structures for supervising mass organizations. Beifang Jinde serves as an example of a non-government organization, now permitted by the government to take part in charitable and social works. Yet it is not only a non-government organization, it is specifically a Catholic organization. We could not have imagined this some years ago. Of course, such a development is only possible for those Catholics who are openly "above ground."

At another level, Beifang Jinde has to co-operate with local governments, and indeed finds that it makes good sense to do so. All projects need at least the approval, and sometimes the active support

of local government. Schools are an example—Fr Zhang sees building schools as one of the most important works of Beifang Jinde, as education is the key to the future development of China's poor. Schools cannot be operated by the Church, and they are schools for the whole community. Building a school means handing it over to the local government.

Some international donors look to the local community to provide some input to a project: this ensures that it will be valued by the community, and is really needed. In some cases, it has been the local government which has provided part of the funding, or some other input.

Beifang Jinde usually undertakes its projects in areas where it can rely on local Catholics. It is often local Catholics who put forward a project. The interest of the parish priest or bishop can be important, particularly in persuading international donors. During the construction of a project, local Catholics—who have to live with the results—can help with informal supervision. Then the ongoing management and maintenance of a small project, such as a water well, can be put into the hands of a committee of local Catholics. But the cooperation of local government is needed at every stage, and indeed that cooperation is an important part of the witness value of the projects: they are a witness to an active faith.

Finances

A key area for any social service organization is finance. As previously mentioned, Beifang Jinde has two sources of finance: local donations, and project donations from abroad. Fr Zhang is alive to the importance of transparency and financial reporting, although this is still in the development stage. Recently, Beifang Jinde has completed its first external audit, conducted by a provincial accounting firm. Financial transparency is also important in maintaining good relationships with government.

Beifang Jinde still has to operate in rather informal ways. For example, China's creaking banking system makes it difficult to receive donations from abroad. Moreover, local governments and church personnel may not be used to strict standards of accountability and documentation. Project budgets and reports are sometimes informal, but donors who are accustomed to working with China are willing to accept some level of informality.

Although Beifang Jinde has no premises (it operates out of rooms borrowed from *Faith* newspaper), it does now have a wages bill. Moreover, projects are now being undertaken beyond the original boundaries of Hebei province—as far away as Guiyang in China's southwest. All of this leads to administrative costs. Recently, after taking advice from organizations abroad, Beifang Jinde has begun to levy an administrative charge of about 5% on projects.

International contacts

One of the aims which Fr Zhang has for the future is to deepen and expand the range of international contacts. At present these are rather informal, and often depend on personal connection between Fr Zhang and Catholics abroad. These personal connections are very important for building up trust, but Beifang Jinde needs to be able to go beyond one person. Fr Zhang has hopes that these connections can develop into formal partnerships.

Moreover, Beifang Jinde needs to understand the particular nature of the international donors. For example, some donors, although Catholic organizations, are unwilling to fund specifically Catholic activities, such as training programs for clergy, or building of churches. Other donors have their own charter, and focus on development, or women, or agriculture. At the same time as Beifang Jinde needs to learn about international donors, the donors need to know more about Beifang Jinde, and its aims, its achievements, and of course its limitations.

Training programs

A new work undertaken by Beifang Jinde and *Faith* Press has been training programs for clergy. In October 1999, more than thirty young priests from Hebei province gathered to discuss the issues that face them. In January 2000, 14 priests who have been ordained for more than ten years - the senior group of young clergy—gathered to share their experiences and encourage one another. In chatting informally with these young priests, I observed that these experiences were very valuable for them, particularly as many of them feel very isolated.

Completed projects

Is Beifang Jinde successful? One measure of success is the projects which it has undertaken over the past few years. More than

20 larger projects have been completed, and 3 are still under way at the time of writing. These projects include fourteen schools, 6 water works, and 4 churches.

During 1999, 41 cases of emergency help were assisted through local collections via *Faith* newspaper. The contributions also helped make 38 small grants to churches for activities such as minor repairs, totaling 60,000, rmb.

Leaving Hualin Village

As I left Hualin Village, the afternoon sun was melting the snow. The dry fields—there is little rain - depend on this snow for moisture. A good snowfall means a good harvest. At the same time, the snows melting on the hills nearby provide the underground water needed for living, for stock, and for irrigation. The pump and water tower at the Catholic church are a witness to the practical concern of people in China and abroad for China's poorest: the peasants. Beifang Jinde is the catalyst for that help.

Endnotes

¹ Information supplied to the author by Fr John B Zhang of Beifang Jinde, which may be read at the organization's website www.chinacath.org.cn

² The *Faith* editorial office has also published more than 100 titles of books for the use of Catholics in China.

³ The regulations may be read at the website.