

## **Cardinal Danneels leads Pilgrimage of Belgian Church Leaders to China – April 2008**

The recent China visit of Cardinal Godfried Danneels and his delegation was a pilgrimage. The visiting bishops and missionaries were warmly welcomed by Christians in the Chinese country side. Together they went to pray on the tombs of missionaries. On the final day of the visit the delegation was formally welcomed in the North Cathedral of Beijing where bishops and priests were invited to hand out communion to the Christians including a number of underground Christians with whom they met after Mass. The whole visit was a unique experience and was in fact a meaningful step on the pilgrimage towards unity so explicitly promoted by Pope Benedict XVI.

In 2005 Cardinal Danneels made his first China visit as guest of the Chinese government. But he had to cut short his visit due to the demise of Pope John Paul II. Chinese authorities asked when the cardinal would come back to complete his visit. The program for this second visit was discussed in early 2008 and differed significantly from the first. The cardinal would this time come to China not only as leader of the Church of Belgium but also as chairman of the F. Verbiest Foundation which cooperates with the Church in China since 25 years. The Foundation sponsors projects of academic research and missionary cooperation through the Verbiest Institute at Leuven University. Board members of the Foundation would travel along together with four Belgian bishops; in total a delegation of eleven. The delegation wished to discuss with Chinese bishops how their program of pastoral cooperation with the Chinese Church can further be expanded. They also wished to meet personally with Chinese Christians in remote Catholic villages in the country side.

It was not appropriate that the cardinal would complete this kind of China visit while being the official guest of the government. During the preparation of the visit Chinese authorities understood and accepted this. It was agreed that the cardinal would give a lecture at the Academy of Social Sciences on "Dialogue between science and ethics". Besides that he would pay a visit to friends of the Chinese government whom he met before and also visit famous Chinese cultural sites. For the rest the program of the delegation would consist entirely of pastoral visits to Christians in the city and especially in the country side. The fact that permission was given to visit the old central mission of CICM in the former Jehol Diocese – the "Pine Tree Village" (Songshuzhuizi) in W. Liaoning – was an indication of a growing openness.

During the first days of the visit Cardinal Danneels gave lectures at the National Major Seminary in Beijing and in Shenyang. While in Beijing the whole delegation met with ten young Chinese bishops and eight priests to discuss evangelization in a secularizing society in China and in Europe. They continued discussions of November-December 2007 during the formation session for Chinese bishops held in Belgium. The document which was discussed there – "Successores Apostolorum" (Successors of the Apostles) – was found to be extremely helpful for the Chinese bishops. They

expressed the hope that more studies of such documents should be scheduled in the future.

The delegation also made a courtesy visit to the "State Administration for Religious Affairs". The bishops learned how Chinese bishops during the past decades have, through dialogue, tried to obtain more freedom of religion in China. Dialogue yields positive results. Of course, from an interview that was published recently in Nanfang Weekly and also from the discussion during this visit the bishops learned that many important problems still urgently await a solution. But there is progress; and if one evaluates this over a period of the recent twenty years the progress is considerable. However the discussion on these topics must be done on the diplomatic level which was not the purpose of this China visit.

### **An emotional welcome by Christians in the Chinese country side**

This China visit reached its peak in the country side in the former missions of the CICM missionaries. Never had a cardinal with such a large delegation of bishops and missionaries travelled as far outside the cities in order to meet the very traditional communities of fervent Catholic farmers. To get there they had included in their travel schedule some tiring bus trips of 300 and 200 km as f.e. from Shenyang (former Moukden, Liaoning Province) to the provincial town of Chaoyang and the nearby old Catholic Pine Tree Village (Songshuzhuizi, West Liaoning) and from there to Chengde (N. Hebei Province) and back to Beijing. This effort, however, was worth it because the large majority of Chinese Catholics live in the country side. That's where one can feel the heart beat of the Chinese Church. The welcome of these Christians made this visit into a unique experience.

Many people in Belgium remember the time of the fifties when missionaries – CICM, Samists, Franciscans, icm sisters – were expelled from China, some after spending years in prison. During those years few Christian communities in China have suffered as much as the Catholics of the Pine Tree Village, which was then the central mission of the former Jehol Diocese. In 1947 the whole mission – including the church, bishops-house and seminary – was destroyed. CICM missionaries were expelled. The Cultural Revolution (1965-75) left deep traumas in Chinese Catholics of Jehol. Who would have thought that, after all this, a cardinal and bishops from Belgium with the provincials of CICM and OFM would in 2008 be so warmly welcomed by the same Catholics whom the missionaries had left so many years ago!

### **Chinese Catholics gave a clear signal: we are one in the same faith, the same Church**

It was all the more moving for Cardinal Danneels, the bishops and missionaries to be so warmly welcomed in that village by 1.500 Catholics. At the entrance of the village each visitor received a bouquet of flowers. They walked through the streets among rows of Catholics clapping their hands, singing enthusiastically "welcome to our friends from Belgium!." The noise of hundreds of firecrackers brought the visitors in the atmosphere of a typical Chinese feast as if they were dreaming. Older Christians

cried as they shook hands with the bishops. Some knelt down asking for a blessing. These were the same Chinese farmers whom the cism missionaries had known years ago; except that their material well-being has significantly been improved. The bishops received the same welcome in the community of Chengde city and in the nearby Tiger Valley Village (Lanpinxian, N. Hebei) where in 1868 the founder of CICM, Fr. Theophile Verbist (Antwerp, B.) died of Typhus and where in 1900 Fr. Jozef Segers (St Niklaas, B.) was buried alive by the Boxers in 1900.

In each village welcome addresses were spoken by Chinese bishops and priests who openly and clearly expressed thanks for the work done by cism missionaries from Belgium and Holland bringing the faith to their home town, building schools, clinics etc. Catholics applauded loudly several times. "Thanks to the cism missionaries we had here the best schools, the best medical care. Our villages were developed villages" said one old priest. The speeches also explicitly praised the smooth cooperation which has grown during the recent twenty years between the local Chinese Church with the Church of Belgium through cism missionaries and Verbiest Foundation of which Cardinal Danneels is now the chairman.

There were some moving moments as f.e. when the visitors stopped and prayed in front of the marble statue of Theophile Verbist which Catholics of the Tiger Valley had erected there in 2006. Cardinal Danneels and CICM Provincial Willy Oost laid flowers and the whole delegation reflected in silence. In the name of CICM the provincial handed to the local pastor the chalice of one old CICM China-missionary, symbolizing thereby that the task of evangelizing had been transferred in the hands of the local community. Fr. Li Shoushan, administrator of Chengde Diocese received a book containing a short curriculum vitae of each of the 679 cism missionaries who ever worked in dioceses of N. China. Then, guided by the Christians, the visitors went to pray on the cemetery of the cism missionaries who died and were buried there. Cardinal Danneels and Willy Oost blessed the tombs. The bishops and priests put the flower bouquets which they received upon entering the village on the tombs. They prayed in silence before each tomb while the Christians said aloud the prayers for the deceased.

In each village Cardinal Danneels thanked the Christians in the name of the delegation. He stressed our unity in one and the same faith in the Lord Jesus and in one Church guided by Pope Benedict XVI. He referred to the sacrifices made by the local Christians and the missionaries in the past. Together they laid the foundations of the local Chinese Church of today with its own Chinese bishops, priests and lay ministers. He vowed that the Church of Belgium wishes to continue to develop the cooperation and exchange which has already grown over the past twenty years.

### **A warm welcome and encounter at the North Cathedral in Beijing**

The visitors then went to Xi'an to meet the bishop and the Sister Congregation and to visit the famous cultural sites. Cardinal Danneels and part of the delegation then returned to Belgium. Those who remained visited Shanghai, the unbelievable busy port and mega-city with thousands of high rises. They walked amidst the masses of Chinese in the narrow alleys of old Shanghai. Bishop Aloysius Jin (92), an old friend of the Church in Belgium, invited the visitors for a dinner and conversation. They visited the Catholic printing press and Guang Qi Publications which over the past 25 years published 400 Catholic books. Then followed a pilgrimage to Our Lady of Sheshan where they privately celebrated the Eucharist and visited the Major Seminary with its 90 seminarians.

On Sunday April 13 the visitors attended the Eucharist in the North Cathedral of Beijing. They were openly introduced by the priests and warmly welcomed and applauded by the Christians. During the Eucharist they were invited to hand out communion and before giving the final blessing each visitor spoke to the faithful who listened in silence. Then followed a short meeting with the 205 neophytes recently baptized at Easter and an encounter with the Christians. The presence among them of some underground faithful was for the visitors a happy surprise, a true enrichment and completion of the visit. The delegation then completed its program by a visit to the Old Observatory where F. Verbiest (Pittem B.) was director, to the Temple of Heaven, the Imperial Palace and finally the Great wall.

During this China visit the delegation of Belgian bishops and missionaries has during 15 days walked in the midst of Chinese culture. It learned much about the eventful history and the present dynamic growth of the Chinese Catholic Church. After all the dramatic events that took place in the Church of China during the recent past, the warm welcome which the visitors now received was understood as a formal sign from the side of the Chinese Christians that the link with the universal Church and the Pope is evident and clear. In spite of the serious problems which must still be clarified on the diplomatic level, this has been a confirmation of the hope that was expressed so clearly by Pope Benedict XVI in his pastoral letter to the Chinese Christians: the awakening of a new future for the Church in China, for its internal unity and the unity with the universal Church.

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**For more pictures cfr Web :**

[http://www.kuleuven.ac.be/verbiest/Archives/20080424\\_Cardinal\\_Danneels\\_photos\\_English.html](http://www.kuleuven.ac.be/verbiest/Archives/20080424_Cardinal_Danneels_photos_English.html)

**Website of Verbiest Institute :**

<http://www.kuleuven.be/verbiest/>