



Verbiest Update

Information on the activities of
Verbiest Institute KULeuven, Verbiest Institute Taipei
And Chinese College Leuven
sent by e-mail, occasionally by **Verbiest Foundation** to its friends
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Catholic faithful in China, Taiwan, Hong Kong look at their shepherds for guidance on the agreement of the Holy See

As the Holy See signed its agreement with Beijing last September, Pope Francis said in his letter to the Catholic faithful in China that he understands their disappointment. Indeed since last September Chinese faithful look up to their shepherds for guidance. But surprisingly some shepherds themselves expressed in strong words their own personal disappointment and disagreement. Some even spoke of *betrayal* of the Church in China by the Holy See. A shepherd who criticizes the decision of the Pope in such language may seriously upset the conscience of the faithful. Instead of being a minister of unity he would even cause division. I heard echoes of this while I was recently in China in Taiwan as well as in Hong Kong. Some concerned faithful suffer and are lost because of statements made by shepherds. The media eagerly publish this kind of critical headlines causing more confusion and uncertainty.

Nowadays all Chinese Catholic faithful urgently seek clarification and enlightenment. Chinese bishops understand this very well. Some of them offer their faithful new signals of hope. One bishop invites his clergy for a 3-day meeting to share and exchange background information on the new hope but also on the challenge created by the agreement for the future. Another bishop (or several bishops?) consider to offer guidance to the faithful through a pastoral letter. Elsewhere, faithful met already to listen to different views of the clergy on the agreement of Rome with Beijing. They engaged in frank brotherly exchange seeking understanding and unity. The three local Churches of China, Taiwan and Hong Kong are like the three Magi at Christmas searching the sky to find the Star of Bethlehem that may shed new light and guide them towards peace and unity around the new-born Jesus. The star of Bethlehem brings signs of hope among the confused community of Catholic Chinese faithful.

Catholics have reasons to celebrate the faithfulness of the Catholic Church in China

In fact Chinese Catholic faithful had expected too much of the agreement between the Holy See and Beijing. As soon as they heard that the Pope planned to “sign an agreement with Beijing” they dreamed that this would be “the” document that would finally clarify the 60-year old confusion caused by the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CCPA) which aims at establishing an “independent Chinese Catholic Church in China”. That dream of the faithful was not realistic because the agreement is very limited. It is only “provisional” (to be evaluated after two years...) and very limited in its content. It does not even mention the CCPA which the Pope also must have hoped to clarify. It also does not mention diplomatic relations which must have been the hope of the

Chinese government. Both the Holy See and the Chinese government failed to obtain all what they wanted...Much more time is needed to tackle these problems...

We now realize that we Catholics have in the past focused our concern and prayers too much on the internal division of the Church in China without realizing that this division was only caused by politics – cooperating or not with the Communist government -- not by differences in faith. We failed to celebrate the fact that, in spite of this difference of opinion on a political issue, the Church in China – both the ‘official’ and ‘underground’ communities -- has always remained united in faith and in its will to remain united with the Pope and the Universal Church. In the course of the 1980’s and 90’s the Holy See has approved more than 30 illegal bishops who were nominated by the government without approval of the Pope. Rome knew very well that they were one with the Pope even though they functioned as “official bishop”. Chinese civil authorities observed this also and they let it happen. The Chinese government now draws its conclusion and agrees to recognize the Pope as head of the Church, which they never did before. They now allow the Pope to appoint bishops in China. Moreover, after the agreement and for the first time in 60 years all bishops in China are now united with Rome.

All this makes the agreement historical and good for the Church in China, even though it remains limited. The Church has reasons to celebrate and sing alleluia rather than to criticize the agreement. Yet, while we celebrate this event we will also take our worries seriously and that’s when Pope Francis comes in with his letter and his challenge. He kindly invites all Catholic faithful to follow him as he dialogues with China. Avoid all confrontation because dialogue is the only way to create hope. But we must also prepare to confront more hard challenges in the future before we will reach our final goal which is: to obtain legal citizenship for Catholic faith in the People’s Republic of China. It may take a long pilgrimage in faith – a Long March – before we reach that.

Our first concern now is the Bishops Conference. We hope that the Church in China will soon be guided by one Bishops Conference where all bishops are members, those of the ‘official’ as well as those of the ‘un-official’ communities. Will this happen smoothly? Can it happen soon? We do not know. It may take more patience and courage for the whole community of faithful to cross that first hurdle. We must prepare for that, mentally and spiritually.

But as we searched the skies this Christmas to find the star of Bethlehem one new light helps us to understand what some of us had perhaps not realized before, namely: it was a mistake to think that Communism in China never changes its policy on religion. Once upon a time, during the Cultural Revolution, an attempt was made to destroy, to totally eradicate religion. That failed and in 1982 “*Freedom of Religious Belief*” was reintroduced into the Constitution of China. In 1985 Zhao Fusan, during a speech at the Chinese People’s Political Consultation Congress even officially proclaimed that “*We should no more say that religion is opium for the people. That was a mistake!*”. What a change! In 1988 Li Peng even welcomed Billy Graham, the famous Protestant preacher to preach in China saying: “*religion has its own place in Chinese society*”. But the official *Document 19* clarified that in the understanding of the Communist Party *religion would disappear by itself*. But today, 30 years later that did not happen. It appears that religion is even spreading and expanding in China instead of disappearing. It is in this context that the government of China now, for the first time in history, signed this limited, yet very historical document which recognizes the Pope as head shepherd of the Church and allows him to appoint bishops. Indeed, a remarkable change! One may not deny this. Such a change creates new light!

The tunnel ahead of the Catholic Church in China may be dark and long but at least there is light at the end and with Pope Francis walking ahead there is hope. Imagine us walking in that dark tunnel, if we all walk together, what a difference what a progress that will be! Indeed, the agreement has created a new situation.

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Know and support the China Programs of Verbiest Foundation

- The **Ferdinand Verbiest Foundation** is named after the Belgian Jesuit missionary Ferdinand Verbiest who was a famous astronomer and teacher of Emperor Kangxi in the 18th century. The Foundation was established by CICM missionaries in 1982 at the **Leuven University (Belgium)**.
- Verbiest Foundation is chaired by **Cardinal Jozef De Kesel of Malines (Belgium)**. Members represent the missionary congregations: CICM, OFM, Brothers of Charity. The Foundation sponsors the activities of **Verbiest Institute at Louvain University (Belgium) and of the Verbiest Institute in Taipei** (Central Building, 8th floor). Since May 1, 2009 the Foundation also sponsors the **Chinese College Leuven**. Through these institutes it promotes academic research on the history of the Chinese Catholic Church and pastoral cooperation with the Church in China.
- The **priority concern** of Verbiest Foundation is: to develop a new relationship with the Church in China. **In line with the letter of Pope Benedict XVI it promotes reconciliation and unity inside the Catholic Church without prejudice for or against anyone of the two Church communities in China.**
- The **most efficient way** to help the Church in China is **to invest in the formation of Church personnel**. Therefore the Foundation offers support for **the formation of ministers** (priests, religious, lay catechists) for the Catholic Church in China. The foundation offers scholarships for the formation of priests, religious and also lay ministers. Priority goes to supporting **formation programs inside China**. We invite also priests and religious to come abroad for obtaining a more specialized **formation in the field of evangelization** in institutes in Europe, the USA or the Philippines. Scholars are expected to return to China and teach in Catholic seminaries and formation institutes. We are in direct contact with the dioceses or religious communities in China and we **see to it that the money of donations is well used.**
- The Foundation also responds positively to requests from China to support (small scale) **development projects** in dioceses of N-W China: **Gansu, Qinghai, Inner Mongolia, Ningxia.**
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