

## **DIRECTOR'S REPORT –Fr Eamonn O'Brien ssc**

I hope that the following items will give a flavour of the range of activities engaged in by Cultural Exchange with China. We primarily strive to build bridges between the Catholic Church of Britain and that of China, but also seek to promote understanding, co-operation and mutually beneficial friendships between the people of Britain and China, based on respect for one another and in an ecumenical, interfaith and global context.

### **1. Formation/ Education**

CEC has facilitated full time studies for four students from Mainland China during the academic year 2004-2005. One priest studied Pastoral Theology and has returned to China, the second has continued into his second year at Philosophy in Heythrop College of the University of London. Two others, a priest and a lay person (woman!) studied at St. Anselm's in Margate. The priest has returned to China and the laywoman continues in her second year of training to be a spiritual director.

We had three students for short-term language studies during the summer of 2005. One of them is an author of many books in China. We also had a Postgraduate student, of no professed faith, who spent five months here researching Coleridge as part of her doctoral studies, with a view to addressing some of the pressing issues facing China today about her identity and future direction. She is one of the many academics in China today, who devote considerable time to the study of religion, a phenomenon that has developed especially in the last twenty years.

During their time here, the students are important ambassadors of understanding about the Church of China and in particular the growth in spirituality, which has been experienced by their Church over the past 50 years. In one to one contacts at college, and often in public forums they are very willing to share their experience from which we have much to learn.

### **2. Academic Institute Links – Catholic and secular.**

In October of 2004, during our exposure visit to China, CEC members began a process of academic dialogues with three institutes: The Institute for Culture and Christianity in Beijing, The Catholic Seminary in Shanghai and Fudan University, also in Shanghai.

Our links with these institutes have developed. We assisted in the publication of the first Journal of Catholic Theology in China since 1950. Presently we are in the process of preparing for a visit to Britain by an academic delegation from China consisting of Catholic and secular scholars when we will explore the contribution of the Churches in our countries to the development of truth and justice in society. We are also assisting an Institute in China to explore the contribution of Catholicism to Chinese society through a series of yearly

symposia.

### 3. Theological Literature

One of the problems in China is a severe lack of resources: books, periodicals, tapes, etc., especially keen in houses of Christian formation. Currently there is a real desire for engagement with theological literature from the west. So we supply a steady flow of theological books to seminary libraries and individual scholars. Some of the material is translated – including very up to date material on ecological theology and genetic engineering as it effects the poor and creation itself. There was a great welcome for the Compendium of Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church and some sections were translated in secular universities as a contribution to the search for a morality to guide China in the post-communist era.

### 4. Teachers in China

We have four teachers working in third level institutes in China and have selected six new candidates recently, including a young couple just graduated with physics degrees, who feel very strongly that there is more to life than just simply accumulating as the current culture in our society promotes so strongly. All of the candidates are very attracted by the novel prospect of witnessing to their faith in China simply through their actions and lifestyle.

The single message that comes through from all the teachers that have been in China is how renewed and stimulated they have been through contact with Chinese youth.

### 5. Exposure Trip to China

Last year we did not have an exposure visit to China. Discussions are under way with the Catholic Chaplains of universities throughout Britain, with a view to building bridges with the many Chinese university students who are studying in our countries – some say up to 90,000. Young people in China today are turning to religion in a new way, to Catholicism, Protestantism and the great religions of China, as they seek to find anchors in their lives and fill the vacuum arising from the demise of the communist ideology.

### 6. Public Awareness in the UK

Three conferences were held, co-sponsored by their respective dioceses. One was in Westminster, one in Glasgow and the other in Arundel and Brighton. Participants learned about both Catholic and Protestant Churches in China, heard two returned teachers speaking about their experience in China and got some sense of the developing giant China is in modern world affairs.

The conferences provide an opportunity in the pre conference publicity to get in touch with every parish, Religious and Missionaries, Catholic organizations and individuals – all of

whom are being alerted to the state of the Church in China, and its efforts at evangelization in the face of the many challenges arising from within the Churches and from society.

#### 7. Working with Other Churches

Speakers affiliated to Friends of The Church in China (FCC) speak at our conferences and we availed of visiting Protestant scholars. Our links with the China Desk of Churches together in Britain and Ireland is a most valuable network for us.

#### 8. Social Programs in China

We have supported Training in Social awareness for Sisters, groups in China, many of whom are doing sterling work in rural areas where there is a great deal of poverty and now an increasing incidence of HIV/AIDS. Support has also been given to poorer areas for education of children at primary level.

#### 9. Support for Catholic Network in UK interested in China

Our AGM report, press cuttings and in-depth articles are sent to a network of people and in this way we try to contribute to ongoing education on the situation of the Churches, and Religion in China as well Chinese Society itself.

### Conclusion

Facts and figures and words cannot capture the spirit that is felt by visiting people at various levels in the Catholic Church of China. As a Church, like the Protestant Church and all the great Religions in China it has risen from the ashes. Only two Christian Churches were open at one point in the '60s. The Catholic Community did not assemble; their Churches were used as barns and storehouses.

Today there is a real sense of achievement by people I meet, of having been purified through suffering, of a willingness to face the challenges within the Catholic Church – reconciliation between its two strands - and the challenges from society – an increasing divide between the rich and the poor, a society that is going through a unique period of rapid development with an 'empty soul'.

My meetings with a very wide range of people in China gives me grounds to believe that as they face immense challenges that the Spirit, which has enabled the Chinese Church to get through all those years of oppression and rise again will empower the People of God in China today to respond faithfully to their situation. Have a read of the article on Bishop Zhang which is enclosed and you will get a sense of what I have experienced – an indomitable human spirit and the presence of the power of God.

