

# Fr. Théophile Verbist: His Life and Missionary Vision

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## Fr. Théophile Verbist: Founder of the CICM Congregation.

In this conference, I will briefly discuss the life, missionary vision, and spirituality of Father Théophile Verbist, Founder of the CICM Congregation.<sup>1</sup> On the occasion of his death, Pope Pius IX said the following: “Man falls when his hour comes, but God will not let his work perish !”<sup>2</sup>

### 1. Family background and priestly ministry (1824-1860)

#### The Verbist Family

Théophile Verbist was born in Antwerpen<sup>3</sup>, Belgium, into a large family of seven children. Guillaume, his father (1787-1854), a native of Antwerpen, got married to Catherine Van Honsem in 1813. She too belonged to a family from Antwerpen. A couple of years after the birth of Pierre, their first child, Catherine died.

In 1819, Guillaume married another Catherine, Catherine Troch (1797-1852), a native of Dendermonde, daughter of a surgeon. Six children were born of this marriage:

1. Guillaume (1821)
2. Athanase (1822)
- 3 and 4 – Théophile and Edmond twins (12 June, 1823)
5. René (1826)
6. Élisabeth (1832) – the only daughter

French was the mother tongue of the family Verbist; yet the children also knew Dutch.



The house where Théophile Verbist was born



<sup>1</sup> For the spelling of the names of the members of the CICM Congregation, I follow the spelling found in the *Elenchi*, the official membership lists.

<sup>2</sup> Valeer Rondelez, *Scheut zo begon het ...* Brussel, Scheut-Edities, 1960, p. 461.

<sup>3</sup> On Thursday, May 7th, 1931, a memorial plaque was unveiled at the house where Verbist was born. Translation from the Dutch text of the memorial plaque: “This is the house where Rev. Fr. Théophile Verbist, Founder of the Missionary Congregation of Scheut, 1823-1868, was born.” Rondelez, p. 11.



His Father



His Mother

The father, at first an office worker, became a sales representative. Later, he started his own business. About the year 1830, he became a banker. The family was well-off at that time. However, some years later, when Théophile and the other children were still studying, the business of the father collapsed.

When the twins Théophile and Edmond were seven years old, they went to the Jesuits' school in Antwerpen. Later, they studied at the minor seminary of Mechelen which had a six-year section for humanities and a two-year section for philosophy. After finishing the six years humanities, Edmond started to study law to be a lawyer. Théophile wanted to become a priest and finished two years of philosophy. In 1844, he went to the major seminary of Mechelen to study theology for three years.



Cardinal Englebert Sterckx

On September 18th, 1847, Théophile was ordained priest in Mechelen by Cardinal Sterckx. Meanwhile, his parents had left the country for London in 1842, but they returned to Belgium in 1845. They first stayed in Antwerpen, and moved then to Brussels, maybe because Edmond had settled there as a young lawyer.

## Verbist's Priestly Ministry

A few weeks after his ordination, he was appointed supervisor at the minor seminary of Mechelen. The function of supervisor in a secondary school called for a lot of patience, equanimity, and helpfulness. According to the accounts of several former students, Théophile met these expectations. They called him the 'good Mister Verbist.' Aloïs Van Segvelt was one of his colleagues.

In August 1853, he was appointed chaplain at the military school in Brussels, and at the same time, director and confessor of a community of the *Sœurs de Notre-Dame de Namur*. He moved from Mechelen to Brussels to stay in the house of his twin brother Edmond. After the death of their father in December 1854, the mother had died on June 30th, 1852, Edmond got married. Théophile had to leave the house. Fortunately, the sisters had a house for the chaplain. The sisters watched their chaplain praying on his prayer bench. He had half-an-hour meditation before the Eucharistic celebration, and after the celebration he had a prayer of thanksgiving lasting about twenty minutes. They believed that he was really a man of prayer.<sup>4</sup> He always encouraged the Sisters to live in union with God.<sup>5</sup>

Verbist enjoyed a certain prestige in the military circles. Most probably his physical appearance, he was 1.87 m. tall, contributed to the increase of his prestige. He stayed about ten years at the military school. However, it was especially his kindness that caught the attention.

## Verbist's Missionary Vocation

One day in 1859, Verbist paid a visit to a sick student of the military School, and so made contact with the student's family. They happened to talk about the Holy Childhood<sup>6</sup> for which the sisters of the sick student were sympathizers. Later that year, Verbist joined the Holy Childhood and was

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<sup>4</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 26. In October 1947, the Sisters donated the prayer bench to Scheut and it was placed in the private chapel of the Superior General. According to the Sisters, it was, while praying on this prayer bench, that our Founder conceived the plan to found a missionary congregation. Later, the prayer bench (prie-dieu) was placed in the crypt of Scheut, in Brussels.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>6</sup> In 1843, Charles de Forbin-Janson, Bishop of Nancy, France, established the *Association of the Holy Childhood (Association de la Sainte Enfance)*. Forbin-Janson sought a way to assist missionaries in China who had written for help. On the advice of Pauline Jaricot, who had founded the *Society for the Propagation of the Faith* some twenty years before, he established a children's charity to provide assistance to children in foreign lands. Popes and other ecclesiastical dignitaries approved the association and recommended it to the Catholic faithful.

registered as a member and sympathizer. His activities consisted in passing on a missionary spirit to the youth and in collecting gifts for the Christian education of abandoned children.

In 1860, while remaining chaplain at the military school and director of the sisters, Verbist was appointed national director of the Holy Childhood in Belgium. Later on, when referring to this period, he wrote that the concrete organization of the new Congregation had been blessed by God and that the realization of his missionary vocation “owes its first inspiration to the Holy Childhood.” The English translation of the original text of *letter 319*,<sup>7</sup> November 25th, 1866:

Associated for a few years, Ladies, with your pious works and richly rewarded by God in the organization of a Work which he blessed and which owes its first inspiration to the Holy Childhood...<sup>8</sup>

According to an oral tradition of the sisters, their chaplain conceived his plan for a missionary foundation whilst praying before the Blessed Sacrament in their chapel.

The signing of the Tianjin Treaty of 1858 opened the doors of China for missionaries. This news aroused great hopes among the missionaries in France and elsewhere. It also stimulated Verbist’s missionary vocation. He soon mentioned it to Aloïs Van Segvelt, Frans Vranckx, and Remi Verlinden. Together they got in touch with the Church authorities.

## **2. The Foundation of the CICM Congregation (1860-1865)**

Verbist’s original idea was to form a religious congregation of Belgian priests who would be united by vows of stability, obedience, and poverty. It would be placed under the authority of a bishop in China in order to work under his jurisdiction for the salvation of souls. This plan was submitted first to Cardinal Sterckx, archbishop of Mechelen. The cardinal declared that the implementation of the project was impossible and that he was not to count on his assistance to try to put it into practice. Verbist returned twice, but the cardinal did not change his mind.

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<sup>7</sup> This letter was addressed to the Holy Childhood (l’Œuvre de la Sainte-Enfance) in Brussels.

<sup>8</sup> Daniël Verhelst, Hyacint Daniëls, et Nestor Pycke, eds. *La Congrégation du Cœur Immaculé de Marie (Scheut) : Edition critique des sources. Tome II B : La correspondance de Théophile Verbist et ses Compagnons 1866-1869*. Leuven: Institut Ferdinand Verbiest, K.U. Leuven, 2007, p.1060. The original French text: Associé pendant quelques années, Mesdames, à vos pieux travaux et richement récompensé par Dieu dans l’organisation d’une Œuvre qu’il a bénié et qui doit son inspiration première à la Sainte-Enfance...

Through Mgr Michiel-Eustache Gonella, nuncio in Brussels, Verbist together with A. Van Segvelt, addressed an official petition to Cardinal Alessandro Barnabò (1801-1874),<sup>9</sup> Prefect of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith. On July 25th, 1861, the nuncio sent the petition to Cardinal Barnabò with a recommendation in Italian.<sup>10</sup> On August 10th, Cardinal Barnabò answered the petition. He approved the aim of the project, but he also introduced some changes. Verbist and Van Segvelt interpreted Barnabò's letter as an invitation to start a Belgian missionary congregation for the Far East.

The news of the foundation in progress spread very fast. Three candidates, all of them assistant parish priests, came to see Verbist: Frans Vranckx, Remi Verlinden, and Pierre De Maeyer. The latter withdrew later for health reasons. Now they started writing the *Statutes*.

In February 1862, Verbist met Cardinal Barnabò four times. The result of these conversations was the following:

- Placing a congregation under the authority of a bishop in China was not feasible.
- The new Belgian mission should have its own complete organization, in Belgium as well as in China, and it should have a territory in China with clearly stated borders, to which a vicariate will be confided.
- A novitiate was to be started in Belgium in order to ensure sufficient stability for the young priests who will prepare themselves for the missionary work as well as for the older missionaries who will spend the rest of their life there.



Chapel of Our Lady of Grace



Statue of Our Lady of Grace

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<sup>9</sup> Cardinal Sterckx, cardinal Barnabò, and Fr. Benjamin Bossue, sj, (1804-1882) have supported Verbist through thick and thin in realizing his dream: to found an exclusively missionary congregation.

<sup>10</sup> Daniël Verhelst, éd. *La Congrégation du Cœur Immaculé de Marie (Scheut) : Edition critique des sources. Tome I : Une naissance laborieuse (1861-1865)*. Leuven : Leuven University Press, 1986, Lettre 8, p. 35.

On April 26th, 1862, Jean-Charles Brabandt, the owner of the old chapel of Our Lady of Grace, situated on the Chaussée de Ninove in Anderlecht-Brussels in the place known as Scheut,<sup>11</sup> or Scheutveld, entrusted the chapel to the Congregation of the missionaries.<sup>12</sup>



The First House of Scheut

They had a chapel, but they had still to find a house near the chapel. A certain Miss Marie-Françoise Maes leased them a spacious house<sup>13</sup> under construction for a nine-year term, free of charge. The contract mentioned that the tenants had to finish the construction at their own expense. This house was to house the novitiate. In the meantime, resources had been gathered for the upkeep of the priests who were preparing themselves for missionary work.

On November 28th, 1862, Cardinal Engelbert Sterckx established canonically the Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. On the same day, he also appointed Théophile Verbist Superior General, and approved the *Statutes*.<sup>14</sup> On April 27th, 1863, the chapel was solemnly consecrated.

During a general meeting of Catholics in Belgium, held at Mechelen in August 1863, Verbist had the opportunity to address the 4,000 participants. After he had described the origin and development of the foundation of the Belgian Mission in China, he made an appeal to the Catholics' prayer and charity.

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<sup>11</sup> For the meaning of the toponym Scheut, see André De Bleeker, "Scheut: Shoot? Shot? Slope?" in *Chronica*, 88th Year, no. 7, November 2018, p. 296-297.

<sup>12</sup> When the contract between Jean-Charles Brabandt and the "Congregation of the missionaries" expired in August 1865, Verbist was able to buy the surrounding grounds.

<sup>13</sup> The house is located on the Chaussée de Ninove, at about 500 m from the chapel, about six minutes walking in the direction of Brussels.

<sup>14</sup> Rondelez, p. 112-115, wrote that Verbist was very sick. On December 1rst, Vranckx and others thought that he would die. His recovery lasted more than three months.

On November 14th, 1863, The Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith granted “the decree of praise”<sup>15</sup> to the new Congregation and so it passed from diocesan right to pontifical right. Very slowly more priests and seminarians joined the Congregation.

Cardinal Barnabò gave the green light for the departure of three members. It is not very clear whether or why Jules Berthemey, the French ambassador to Beijing refused to deliver passports to the Belgian missionaries. Maybe there was some miscommunication. During eight months a solution to the problem was sought.

The assignation of the vicariate of Mongolia is dated September 1st, 1864. On October 24th, 1864, the day following the retreat, Verbist, Van Segvelt, Vranckx, Verlinden and Bax took their first vows.<sup>16</sup> To the religious vows they added the oath of mission thus dedicating their life to the proclamation of the Gospel among the “infidels.” Cardinal Sterckx presided over the Eucharistic celebration.

In June 1865, Verbist went to Paris to inquire about the answer of the ambassador to Beijing. Finally, on June 21st, he sent a telegram to Aloïs Van Segvelt in Scheut: “Long live Saint Aloïs: the passports’ incident is solved.” It was a cry of triumph.

In a farewell letter, dated July 27th, 1865, to the Belgian bishops, Verbist wrote that the Congregation had twelve members. Four will leave for China: Verbist, Van Segvelt, Vranckx, and Hamer. Jaak Bax will be the Director of Novices, and Remi Verlinden will help him and take care of the second caravan.



Théophile Verbist



Aloïs Van Segvelt



Frans Vranckx



Ferdinand Hamer

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<sup>15</sup> This decree was the first degree of pontifical approval. Rome granted a temporary approval to the Congregation on September 26th, 1888, and the final approval on July 20th, 1900.

<sup>16</sup> The formula of the vows had been borrowed from the Jesuits, but slightly adapted.

On August 24th, the day before the departure, Verbist could settle the acquisition of the chapel of Scheut and the land around it. The owner donated the chapel to the Congregation. But they had to pay 29,000 francs for the land, about one hectare, payable in annual installments. On Friday, August 25th, was the day of departure. They travelled via Paris to Rome where they arrived on Sunday, September 3rd. They met Pope Pius IX in Castel Gandolfo. Ten days later they embarked for Marseille in Civitavecchia. After a trip that lasted more than a hundred days, they arrived safe and sound on December 6th<sup>17</sup> in Xiwanzi,<sup>18</sup> the central mission station of Inner Mongolia.

### **3. Théophile Verbist in China: 1865-1868**

The church of Xiwanzi



At the end of September 1866, all the Lazarists, three French and eleven Chinese, had left the vicariate of Inner Mongolia. In October the vicariate had four Scheutists and six diocesan priests.<sup>19</sup> There were also some catechists and Chinese women who dedicated their life to the apostolate among women, instructed the girls, took care of 400 orphans in five orphanages and also looked after old people. At the seminary of Xiwanzi the missionaries lived with the seminarians.

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<sup>17</sup> Valeer Rondelez and also Nestor Pycke in his book, *A Pioneer in Chinese Mongolia: Théophile Verbist's Adventure (1861-1868)*. Leuven: Ferdinand Verbiest Institute, K. U. Leuven, 2010, p. 58, mention this date. Frans Vranckx, in his letter of December 12, 1865, wrote: « ...nous étions déjà le 5 décembre, et il nous restait deux longues étapes à faire. » See Daniël Verhelst et Hyacint Daniëls, eds. *La Congrégation du Cœur Immaculé de Marie (Scheut) : Edition critique des sources. Tome II A : La correspondance de Théophile Verbist et ses Compagnons 1865-1866*. Leuven : Presses Universitaires de Louvain, 2003, p. 203.

<sup>18</sup> Xiwanzi means: bend of the west (tournant de l'ouest).

<sup>19</sup> They were: Pierre Lin Daoyuan, Matthieu Zhang, Barnabé Yao, Laurent Ho, Pierre Zhao and Ignace Zhao.

On November 27th, 1866, a second group of Scheutists (Remi Verlinden, Jan-August Thys, Martin Guisset, and Willem Meyer; Laurent Franzenbach (a lay helper, was with them) arrived in Xiwanzi.<sup>20</sup>

From the very beginning of the Congregation, the Founder stressed the need to be united in prayer and heart. In Letter 138, written to Scheut on April 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1866, we read:

...restons bien unis de cœur ; rencontrons-nous souvent dans le Cœur Immaculé de la Vierge Marie, notre Mère, notre Patronne. Appliquons la belle devise de notre Chère Patrie, que l'union vient de sauver une fois encore, à notre humble Congrégation. Oui, l'union de prières, l'union de volonté, l'union des cœurs, nous fera atteindre le but que nous nous sommes proposé en ce monde : travailler avec succès à la gloire de Dieu, au salut des âmes et à notre propre sanctification.<sup>21</sup>



Théophile Verbist's statue  
in Laohugou, Tiger Valley

On April 5th, 1867, Aloïs Van Segvelt died of exanthematic typhus<sup>22</sup> at his residence of Xiamiao'ergou, the Valley of the Inferior Pagoda.

The next victim is the Founder himself. He had decided to undertake a pastoral visit to all the mission stations of his vicariate, before going back to Europe.

He left Xiwanzi on February 3rd, 1868. Three weeks later, on February 23<sup>rd</sup>, a Sunday, he died of exanthematic typhus in Laohugou, the Tiger Valley, in the district of Jehol. Matthieu Zhang, the Chinese priest who was preaching a

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<sup>20</sup> Now there were 8 European missionaries, six Chinese priests, and two lay helpers (Paul Spingaerd and Laurent Franzenbach; these two never started their novitiate). There were never more missionaries in Mongolia. There were never more than eleven Lazarists. See Rondelez, p. 316.

<sup>21</sup> Daniël Verhelst et Hyacint Daniëls, éd. *La Congrégation du Cœur Immaculé de Marie (Scheut) Tome II A*, p. 507-508. My translation:

...let us remain united in heart; let us often meet in the Immaculate Heart of the Virgin Mary, our Mother, our Patroness. Let us apply the beautiful motto of our dear Fatherland, which union has just saved once again, to our humble Congregation. Yes, union of prayers, union of will, union of hearts, will enable us to achieve the goal we have set ourselves in this world: to work successfully for the glory of God, for the salvation of souls and for our own sanctification.

<sup>22</sup> In February 1931, Fr. Joseph Rutten, accompanied by the Hungarian doctor Stefan Gajdos, arrived in the Vicariate of Xiwanzi to vaccinate the missionaries against exanthematic typhus. The vaccine meant the end of the deadly outcome of the sickness but not of the illness itself, which will still plague the missionaries.

mission in a small village thirty miles away from Laohugou, administered him the sacrament of the sick. Théophile Verbist was forty-four years old. Most probably he was buried there on February 26th.<sup>23</sup>



The coffin of Théophile Verbist  
in the crypt of Scheut, Brussels

#### **4. His Missionary Vision**

When Verbist and his first companions started writing the *Statutes*, that should rule the members of the new Congregation, “they agreed unanimously to dedicate the Congregation to the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ, under the patronage of the Immaculate Heart of Mary.”<sup>24</sup> The dedication to the Lord Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word, from whom redemption proceeds, must be understood as a readiness to work for the salvation of peoples.

Théophile Verbist founded the Congregation as an instrument to convert the nations. The Founder and his companions could not be present everywhere. Hence, they focused on one country, China. Moreover, they would look after the many orphans in the country. Consequently, if the members of the Congregation want to remain faithful to the vision of their Founder, they will have to go in the first place to the peoples who are not yet Christian.

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<sup>23</sup> His mortal remains were exhumed on October 24th, 1930. The coffin, containing this mortal remains, arrived in Antwerpen on April 29th, 1931. The coffin was placed in the crypt at Scheut on March 30th, 1932.

<sup>24</sup> Pycke, p. 38.

The Founder realized that missionary entails sacrifice. On July 15<sup>th</sup>, 1867, he wrote to Jaak Bax in Scheut: “The life of a missionary is a life of sacrifice, so you have to suffer, but apart from the pains inherent in the apostolic life, everything progresses. Another couple of years and the momentum will be given. My opinion is always that we have a good and beautiful mission,<sup>25</sup> but you need a real vocation to work there, otherwise you are very unhappy.”<sup>26</sup>

Verbist also stressed that the aim of the Congregation is to send apostolic workers to the most ‘ungrateful’ parts of the mission field of the Lord: “I cannot lose sight of its purpose, that of supplying apostolic laborers to the most ungrateful parts of the Lord's field; however, I am too convinced that to achieve this goal, men of true vocation are needed, to allow myself to be led into the illusion and to admit candidates without serious tests and a quasi-certainty of vocation to the missions.”<sup>27</sup>

When already in China, the Founder, writing to his confreres in Scheut – letter 138 - mentions another aspect of the missionary work, namely the sanctification of the missionaries: “...the goal we have set ourselves in this world: to work successfully for the glory of God, for the salvation of souls and for our own sanctification.”<sup>28</sup>

Doing the will of God is a theme which comes back again and again in the letters of Théophile Verbist, and very in the expression “that his will may be done.”<sup>29</sup>

Verbist has not left us a treatise on prayer. He was rather a man of action who lived an ideal: the proclamation of the gospel in China in order to convert

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<sup>25</sup> In at least one more letter - letter 73 of January 14th, 1866 - addressed to Jaak Bax, did our Founder write that we have a good and beautiful mission. See Daniël Verhelst et Hyacint Daniëls, éd. *Tome II A*, p. 263.

<sup>26</sup> See letter 502, Daniël Verhelst, Hyacint Daniëls, et Nestor Pycke, éd. *Tome II B*, p. 1483-1484. My translation of: “La vie de missionnaire est une vie de sacrifice, il faut donc souffrir, mais hors les peines inhérentes à la vie apostolique, tout avance. Encore une couple d'années et l'élan sera donné. Mon opinion est toujours que nous avons une bonne et belle mission, mais il faut une vraie vocation pour y travailler, sans quoi on est bien malheureux.”

<sup>27</sup> See letter 552 of October 20th, 1867, *ibid.*, p. 1609. My translation of: “...je ne puis perdre de vue son but, celui de fournir des ouvriers apostoliques aux parties les plus ingrates du champ du Seigneur ; or, je suis trop convaincu qu'il faut pour atteindre ce but des hommes de vraie vocation, pour me laisser entraîner à l'illusion et d'admettre des candidats sans épreuves sérieuses et une quasi-certitude de vocation aux missions.”

<sup>28</sup> See Daniël Verhelst et Hyacint Daniëls, éd. *Tome II A*, p. 508. My translation of: “...le but que nous nous sommes proposé en ce monde : travailler avec succès à la gloire de Dieu, au salut des âmes et à notre propre sanctification.”

<sup>29</sup> At present the Congregation is known as the CICM Congregation. (CICM = **Christ is calling me!**)

the pagans. His prayer is the expression of his faith and trust in God who has called him to do mission. He invites the members to be united in prayer, to be one of heart. In this way they will reach their goal.<sup>30</sup>



Notwithstanding many difficulties and upheavals, the work of the missionaries in close cooperation with the many lay people has produced many fruits. May the Lord of the harvest continue to inspire all of us, together with the Christians of Inner Mongolia, to continue the beautiful work of evangelization. Théophile Verbist, be our intercessor with our Divine Master.



Théophile Verbist in China



The Cathedral of Xiwanzi

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General Archivist  
November 2023

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<sup>30</sup> Later the motto of the Congregation was created: Cor unum et anima una (one of heart and one of soul).