

Interview with Father Zhang Kexiang of the Catholic Social Service Centre, Shenyang, Liaoning

Why did you decide to become a priest?

I was born into a traditional Catholic family in a rural area where around 80% of the population were Catholic. My uncle is a priest and I also served as an altar boy as a child, so I had this background. When I was young, I often saw the elderly priest busy with his pastoral work, more than he could realistically handle, so I saw that there was a great need for priests. The seminary in Shenyang re-opened in 1983 so, after graduating from high school in 1985, I applied and was accepted by the seminary.

What did you do after ordination and before starting your social service work in 2003?

I was ordained priest in 1992 and later I went to study Christian Ethics and Moral Theology in America. I finished my studies there in 1997 and returned to China. Since then, I've been teaching at the seminary.

I discovered that there is a connection between Catholic social teachings and ethics. I saw this connection when I was in Thailand visiting HIV/AIDS projects – how theory and practice come together and faith is actually put into practice. At the same time, once I began social service work, I didn't give up my teaching – on the contrary, my teaching is enhanced and enriched by my work experience.

How did the Social Service Centre get started?

In 2003 I participated in a Young People for Development (YDP) meeting in Thailand. While there, I was assigned to visit a HIV/AIDS centre run by a Catholic priest. This was my first encounter with people living with HIV/AIDS. The priest in charge said that HIV/AIDS is a very serious problem in Thailand but that things have been getting better since the government and churches have gotten involved. In China, though, HIV/AIDS is a growing problem.

When I returned to China, I talked with my bishop about doing similar work with HIV/AIDS in our province. At first he was reluctant, it was said at the time that China didn't have a HIV/AIDS problem, that this was a "western" disease. Then, in 2004, I returned to Thailand together with six nuns, some of them doctors and nurses, as well as one lay person, and our group did a study tour of Catholic centres caring for HIV/AIDS patients, we stayed there for one month.

After we returned home from this study tour, we were convinced that this was something the church was called to be involved in. We had further discussions

with the bishop and eventually set up a social service project focussing on the issue of HIV/AIDS in March, 2004.

What happened in the beginning?

We started off with only two staff working in a very small space, and our first step was to raise awareness. We worked together with two communities of sisters, around 150 nuns in total, and we invited local government officials and people from the local Centre for Disease Control (CDC) to give talks to the sisters on HIV/AIDS. Then we moved on to talk about prevention and also about the connection between the Catholic faith and serving those most in need. In Jesus' time, he took care of the lepers and, in a way, those with HIV/AIDS in our society today are modern-day "lepers", often neglected by others and needing understanding and care. It is very important to get local people on board in this work, so we also give lectures in local parishes to lay people. Many simply don't think that this kind of work is something the church should be involved in.

It has to be remembered that the Catholic church in China only experienced the reforms of Vatican II in the 1980s, and before this it was all about one's own personal faith and nothing else. Now we teach responsibility for each other. But there are still some who struggle with this concept, many people remain trapped in old ways of thinking, they only want to focus on their own personal devotions. When we talk to people, we don't focus on HIV/AIDS itself, we point out the connecting between Jesus and the lepers and today. HIV/AIDS is a modern example of what lepers were in Jesus' time. We focus more on Christian responsibility than on the disease itself.

Sometimes, some of our nuns catch people after Sunday mass and begin to give talks on this topic. Some people, maybe half, begin to leave when they hear such talks, maybe they have other things to do and can't stay behind to listen. This is disappointing but we have to keep on trying.

As for priests, some join the training programmes but some don't get involved at all, they prefer to focus their efforts on evangelism and pastoral care, they are not that interested in social services.

Who do you work with on your HIV/AIDS projects?

In the beginning, the Centre for Disease Control would refer cases to us. Now, people in need get in touch with us directly, they hear by word-of-mouth from others living with HIV/AIDS who have benefitted directly from our services in some way. We work all over Liaoning province and our cooperation with local CDCs is very effective. Our work really only succeeds when each link in the chain, e.g. the church, local officials, society, plays its part.

In Shenyang we are very fortunate in that the church and the government enjoy a very good relationship with each other. There are many reasons for this. For example, Bishop Pius Jin Peixian is very well respected by the local Religious Affairs Bureau and also by national Catholic bodies.

What is a typical day like for you?

I wake up every day around 5.30-6.00am and say prayers, maybe saying mass too in the morning or in the evening.

I get to the office around 8.00am, check emails, deal with any emergencies, receive guests and meet with staff to discuss the work. Lunch is about 11.30-1.00pm.

In the afternoon I do my writing, e.g. further emails, telephone calls to partners like CDCs. I look at written proposals from staff and have individual meetings with staff on important issues as necessary.

Twice a week, I also take care of financial reimbursements and sign receipts to cover staff expenses in their project work. My working day ends at around 5.30pm.

How are your projects run and evaluated?

To do our work, we do need experts. We often see needs but lack expertise. More often than not, we simply learn by doing. For example, in the beginning, we just wrote all our project proposals by ourselves. We do see the need for capacity building, programmes and capacity building go hand in hand. So, we try to create opportunities for our staff to learn, either inside or outside of China. To date, we have seen around 30 opportunities to receive training locally, domestically or overseas. We do need more help and training from other groups more experienced than us, for example, Jinde Charities or the Amity Foundation. At the moment, we don't have that much contact with Jinde Charities but we do have contact with other Catholic Social Service centres in China, such as the ones in Xi'an, Shanghai and Hebei.

For project implementation, project managers meet twice a week and we have a monthly all-staff meeting to discuss the past month, evaluate whether we've fulfilled our goals, discuss problems and raise any questions.

For our finances, we have a very strict financial system and we believe in financial stringency and transparency. One of our sisters is a cashier and Jiang Fei is a professional accountant. Any receipts that are submitted by staff for reimbursement go through three checks: the project manager, then Jiang Fei the accountant, then me.

What are your current most pressing needs?

We always need more support for our work.

Most of the HIV/AIDS work is supported by Catholic Relief Services in the US, and our rural work is mostly sponsored by Misereor. Currently, only about 50% of our costs are covered and we would need a further US\$50,000 to cover all our present needs, without even thinking about any unexpected needs or future projects.

How would you answer people who say that the government should be responsible for doing much of the work that you do?

I think we have to define the position of the church in relation to HIV/AIDS. The government has its limits, it can't cover each and every need, and this is especially true in the later stages of the disease where the most pressing needs are for care and counselling. And these areas are precisely the ones where the church is and should be strong. So we don't compete with the Centres for Disease Control, we complement their work, picking up where they leave off. We defer to the government to do what they can then we pick up the slack.

I find that the church has a lot of freedom to operate in this area. This was reinforced for me recently when we held an ecumenical conference for faith-based groups working in the area of HIV/AIDS, it was held in Shenyang on 8th-9th January 2007. Representatives from Catholic and Protestant churches, as well as the Amity Foundation and local Religious Affairs Bureaux and Health Bureaux came to discuss their work and see if we could build up a network and support one another. We are hoping that we can hold another conference later in the year which will involve members of China's other religious groups too.

Which projects is your Service Centre currently involved in?

Our work with HIV/AIDS came first. Later, we saw other great needs in rural areas. So, around 2005, we started getting involved in other projects, for example, subsidising education fees, constructing bridges and wells, vocational training for rural migrants, etc. You can see a complete list of our current work on our website: <http://www.csscln.org/english.item.asp>

In 2005, we also started our Youth Development Programme. We had had youth programmes in the diocese in the past, but these focussed more on pastoral care issues, such as catechism, the sacraments, getting them more involved in the church, etc. This new programme focussed not so much on pastoral issues and getting young people in to the church but on social needs.

To carry out our HIV/AIDS or rural projects, we need people to be engaged and get involved. So our youth programme focuses on raising awareness among

young people about HIV/AIDS or about environmental protection issues, for example. We give training, give lectures and talks, and we involve both Catholic and non-Catholic young people from every part of society. We focus on each person's social responsibility. Today, young people tend to focus on money a lot, they become selfish and unhappy and lose their sense of social responsibility. We try to change such attitudes through this programme, teaching young people to understand the meaning of life, of service, of giving to others, of leading a meaningful life. We seek to change their attitudes towards materialism.

We plan to start a home help programme for the elderly who don't have any children or family to look after them, also for the terminally ill living at home, e.g. cancer sufferers. We especially want to get young people involved in this, even if just to visit such people on a regular basis. We have a proposal for this project but not sponsors yet.

What motivates you personally to do this work?

I find this work is meaningful both for the wider church and also for my personal faith. Whenever we do charitable work, our faith is enriched and I just feel happier in myself, I feel I am going beyond classroom theory. I see a great need, and I feel compelled to do something about it. The people we work with face a lot of difficulties, and through the outreach of the sisters they receive hope. It is the church's task to offer hope – serving people is at the heart of the church and of the Gospel.