China Immersion Summary

Over the holidays four Year 11 students, Jess Cunnold, Timothy Cusens, Christian Knapp and Rhys Pottinger, embarked on a journey to China to work with our Oblate missionaries in Beijing. I was lucky enough to score a spot on the trip along with Mr Payne. Most times, I was in a state of opposite emotions – it was overwhelming and I felt helpless, but at the same time inspired and filled with hope.

Father Luc coordinated our immersion experience. Together, with Father Giovani, they have linked up with an organization called China Little Flower that has set up a ‘Baby Home’ in Beijing. The mission of Little Flower is to provide children with professional nursing care, foster care, and medical services to help them grow up in a positive, loving environment. The ultimate goal is to have these children, many of whom were abandoned, be able to lead healthy, happy, productive lives. They provide care for babies who are abandoned and cannot go to an orphanage because they have a disability, a deformity or are born premature and their parents cannot afford medical care. The Oblates are not directly involved with China Little Flower but will go and assist when possible and spend time nurturing the babies. They will take groups there to spend time with the babies and promote the work of China Little Flower. At a guess, there would have been about 40 babies living at the baby home when we visited. There were many there with cleft palates, heart disorders, Down Syndrome, Spina Bifida, digestive system problems and babies who were born premature.

We spent five sessions at the baby home where we got to comfort the babies, play games with the older ones, assist with some physical therapy and help out wherever we could. Christian was great at getting babies to eat their lunch and Tim was amazing at getting babies to go to sleep. It was challenging in terms of knowing these babies were left by their parents, and that in most cases, they will never know who they were, for some of them, they will not live long and the enormity of the numbers of children that are abandoned in China. What was uplifting were the volunteers who worked there and the donations they received, the laughs and smiles of the babies.
Once the babies are old enough or well enough they are then moved from the baby home. They will either be sent to their allocated orphanage or to a group home. A group home is similar to a foster home in Australia (sort of, but not really). There are six group homes and each one is run by a couple that have left where they used to live and moved in to a tiny apartment in Beijing to become parents for children from the Baby Home. These homes are generally two or three small bedrooms, a kitchen, a living and a combined laundry/bathroom – our classrooms are probably bigger than their apartments. The number of children in each home varies from 4-7. Some of the children are in wheelchairs, most are incontinent and many require surgery and on-going treatment. These homes are coordinated by China Little Flower, with the Oblates providing the financial needs to set up and run group home number four. We were able to go to dinner at one of the group homes and then stay for a few hours to play games with the kids. The warmth and love from these families was amazing; they really did open their homes and hearts up to us. This night probably had the most profound effect on me, seeing first hand what these two parents are doing with their lives. They are giving so much with pretty much zero financial incentive, but what they gain in return is profound. The laughs of the children, the accomplishments they have been able to achieve together, the way they all work to help each other, the faith they show in God and humanity.

On one Saturday afternoon we took all the group home kids to the local park for an afternoon of games and finished that day off with a pizza and movie night with them back at Luc’s apartment. We also went to a group home one night to pray with the family.

I can’t imagine where the parents of these group homes find the strength and energy to care for these kids, but talking to them, they will tell you that that is not the hard part of what they do. The hard part is when one of the children they have been parents to are adopted to an international ‘forever’ family. It is like one of their own children is being taken from them with little chance of them seeing each other again.
Another component of what the Oblates and their volunteers do is teach English at three primary schools. On the days we visited and did our best to help reinforce the words from the previous week which were playground, slide, swing, sea-saw and the new words we taught were basketball, football (the other kind), badminton, ping-pong as well as some illnesses and body parts to some older students.
The Oblates have established an after-school homework and English support facility. Many of the students we taught were from migrant families they were not from Beijing, but from other provinces within China, who had moved to find work and education. Their homes are generally no bigger than our photocopy room and provide no real area for the students to complete their school work and play. The center, called GuCheng, provides this area and support for their studies. While we were there we tried our best to help the students with their homework. It was a bit hard when the instructions are written in Chinese and even harder was remembering how to do long multiplication. We would play some games with English words to help their pronunciation and spelling and then we would play games to finish off with. Connect Four, Chinese Chess (Rhys and Christian became rather
competitive at this against 8 year olds), Uno, cards and cricket were popular. Jess and Rhys also taught a few notes on the piano.

Along with the mission work Luc does, he is also an excellent English speaking tour guide (generally hard to find in China). He took us on the subway (5 lines, 1.5 hours later) we walked around TianAnMen Square and through the Forbidden City. He took us down WangFuJing street food market - scorpions, spiders, centipedes or cockroaches anyone? On a separate occasion we took the subway (4 lines, 1.25 hours) to the Temple of Heaven and the Pearl Market - fake iPhone watch or Gucci bag anyone? He made room in the schedule for us to go to Olympic Park and walk around the Bird’s Nest. He took us the Great Wall of China - did you know that to get to the BASE of the Wall you need to walk up 1016 steps? And that when you get to the actual Wall on the peak of the mountain ridge, that it’s not a path, it’s more steps!! And did you know that you can also take a cable car to the base of the Wall and that was not pointed out to us as an option? Did you know that the walk there and along the Wall is one of the most amazing things you could do?

Luc took us back to one of the schools we had worked at and the art teachers took us through a crash course on Chinese art and we each produced a masterpiece.
I felt overwhelmed by the scope of the work the Oblates do. I felt helpless that there is too much to do, that it won’t get done, that if this work is only being done in this small part of Beijing, what is going on in the rest of the country? Who is looking after those children? I felt inspired by those who volunteer their time, energy and give their life and love to help these people. I fell in love with the laughs and smiles of those children we worked with. We were taught by Luc not to look at the mountain but the step in front of us, the step we can take.