

Catholic Church in China

Written by Zhou Tailiang and Li Hui

Translated by Zhou Tailiang



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Preface

Catholicism was first introduced into China during the Yuan Dynasty (1206-1368). In 1294, Pope Nicolas IV sent John of Montecorvino, an Italian Franciscan priest, to Beijing to preach the Gospel. Counting this as the beginning, Catholicism has existed in China for over seven hundred years. But due to over-emphasis put on the upper class, the Church nearly disappeared when the Yuan dynasty fell.

In 1582, with the arrival in Macao of Matteo Ricci (1552-1610), an Italian Jesuit priest, a new and important period began for the preaching of the Gospel in China. Ricci respected the Chinese culture, made friends with high-ranking scholars and officials. During the ten years he lived in Beijing, he earned respect from the court, and from the Emperor himself. He preached the Gospel and among those received into the Church during this period, were three renowned scholar- mandarins: Xu Guang Qi, Li Zhi Zao and Yang Ting Jun. That was a landmark in the history of the Catholic Church in China; the three learned and faithful laymen laid a solid foundation for the Catholic Church in their country.

After the death of Matteo Ricci, missionaries who came to China included learned scholars

such as Adam Schall, S.J (1591-1666) and Ferdinand Verbiest (1623-1688). After the manner of Ricci, these latter continued to serve at the imperial court. They too, respected Chinese culture and while carrying out their mission of evangelization, contributed to the cultural exchange between China and the western countries. It happened however, that among the missionaries who came afterwards, there were different views regarding traditional Chinese rites. The case came to be known as the “Chinese Rites Controversy” which greatly displeased the Emperor and impeded the advance of the cause of the Gospel. For, in 1721, Emperor Kang Xi prohibited the preaching of Catholicism in China. But the missionaries who respected the Chinese rites were permitted to continue their activities.

After the Opium War in the 19th century, China gradually became a semi-colonial nation and the western missionaries re-entered China under the protection of the unequal treaties signed by the Qing government with various western countries. Consciously or unconsciously, some of the missionaries served the political interests of their respective countries, so much so that the Catholic Church came to be regarded as a “foreign religion” and thus rejected by many among the Chinese people. The reputation of the Catholic Church badly suffered from it.

In October 2001, on the occasion of the 400th anniversary of Matteo Ricci’s arrival in Beijing celebrated in Italy, the late Pope John Paul II recalled that part of history and said in his message said: “In certain periods of modern history, there appeared a ‘right for the protection of religion’

which was based upon the political power of European nations. Although on the one hand, it more or less helped the missionary activities of the Church, on the other hand, it resulted in limiting the Church's freedom of action and damaged the Church's image in the minds and hearts of the Chinese people. The development of the Church in China was thus inadvertently impeded and the Church could not whole-heartedly carry out the mission that her founder Jesus Christ confided to her for the good of the Chinese people."

The inculturation process of the Catholic Church in China has not been smooth-sailing. To wit, the first native bishop Luo Wenzao (1616 –1691) was baptized by the Spanish Franciscan Antonio de Santa Maria (Li An Dang) in 1633, studied philosophy and theology in Macao and Manila, and ordained a priest in Manila in 1654. Although he was appointed bishop by Pope Clement X (1670-1676) in 1673, his episcopal consecration only took place twelve years later (1685) in Guangzhou.

The hierarchical system was established in China in 1946. At the end of 1948, there were twenty archdioceses, eighty-five dioceses (Macao not included) and thirty-four apostolic prefectures in China, but among the one hundred and twenty-eight bishops, only eighteen were Chinese. At the same time, there were about three million Catholics throughout China.

After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, Catholicism counts as one of the five main religions in China. The government implemented a religious freedom policy, respected and guaranteed people's religious belief. Adhering to the principal of love for both nation and

Church, and in accordance with St. Paul's teaching "I become all things to all people" (1 Co. 9. 21), the Catholic Church in China understands herself to be the same as that in other countries, that is, she shares with the rest of the Catholic world one faith and one baptism, and stands loyal to the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church. She is in communion with the universal Church in matters of faith and morals though in matters of politics and Church administration, she holds to independence in accordance with the Chinese situation and cultural characteristics. It has explored a path suitable for preaching the Gospel now.

At the present time, there are about 5.3 million Catholics, 6000 churches throughout China. There is a patriotic organization on the national level called the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association. It is a non-profit mass group composed of clergy and laity who wish to express their effort in unifying their love for country and religion. Essentially, the tasks of the association are as follows: to unite all clergy and faithful in the country, to lift high the banner of "love our country, love our Church", to abide by the constitutions, laws, regulations and policies of the nation, to safeguard the interests of our people, to observe the good ethos of Chinese society, to unite all the different nationalities in China, and to maintain the unification of the whole nation. The Catholic Church in China has a leading body, which responsible for the Church affairs throughout China, namely, the Bishops' Conference of the Catholic Church in China. Its main task is in accordance with the Bible, and the traditional spirits came down from the One, Holy and Apostolic Catholic Church, to maintain

the deposit of faith, strengthen the disciplines; in the grace of the Holy Spirit, to unite all the clergy and laity to abide by the constitution, laws and regulations, following the social morals and customs. It adhere to the principle of management of the Church independently, also the spirit of democratic running of the Church, making efforts to adapt to the modern society, preaching the Gospel and extending widely the Church.

The Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association and the Chinese Catholic Bishops' Conference is briefly called "Yi Hui Yi Tuan" (One Association and One Conference). There are six commissions: the Church Affairs Commission, the Theology Study Commission, the Seminary Education Commission, the Overseas Friendship Commission, the Liturgy Commission and Social Service Commission. Though their functions are different, but they cooperate with each other to undertake the pastoral and evangelization works of the Catholic Church in China.

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1. Historical Reviews on the Catholic Church in China

*T*he message of Christ was brought into China as earlier at the Tang Dynasty in 635. The monument of Da Qin Jin Jiao Liu Xing Zhong Guo Bei (The Nestorian Monument of Xi An in China) unearthed at the suburbs of Xi'an City was the first proof to indicate the message in China. From 13 centuries then on, Rome has sent envoys to Yuan Dynasty (1206-1368) at several occasions. However, there are lacks of solid records about their missionary works. This situation has not been changed until an Italian Franciscan Fr. John of Montecovino, who was delegated by Pope Nicolas IV as an envoy to East for preaching the

Gospel. In 1294, Fr. John arrived in Dadu (today's Beijing). He was regarded as the very first person to introduce the Catholicism into China. Fr. John stayed to preach in Beijing for 30 years, about 6000 peoples baptized by him. He passed away at an age of 81 in 1328. After founding of the Min Dynasty (1368-1644), the Catholic Church was nearly disappeared in the central parts of China. At the end of Min Dynasty and the beginning of the Qing Dynasty of the 16th centuries, Italian Jesuit Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) and Belgian Jesuit Ferdinand Verbiest (1623-1688) and other European missionaries

came to China. They not only preached the Gospel, but also undertaken the cultural exchanges between China and the West. Under their influences, Xu Guang Qi (1562-1633), Li Zhi Zao and others were baptized as the earliest Catholics in the history of the Catholic Church in China. They laid a foundation for preaching the Catholicism in China.



Remain of a typical Roman Catholic church located at the ancient A Lun Si Mu City of Da Mao prairie, Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region. This was the oldest Catholic church discovered in Asia, which had about 700 years of history



An ancient stone monument with a cross unearthed in Quan Zhou, Fujian province, in the periods of the Late Min Dynasty (1595)

大秦景教流行中國碑

[illegible]

Rubbings of Da Qin Jing Jiao Liu Xing
Zhong Guo Bei (The Nestorian Monument
of Xi An, Shanxi province)

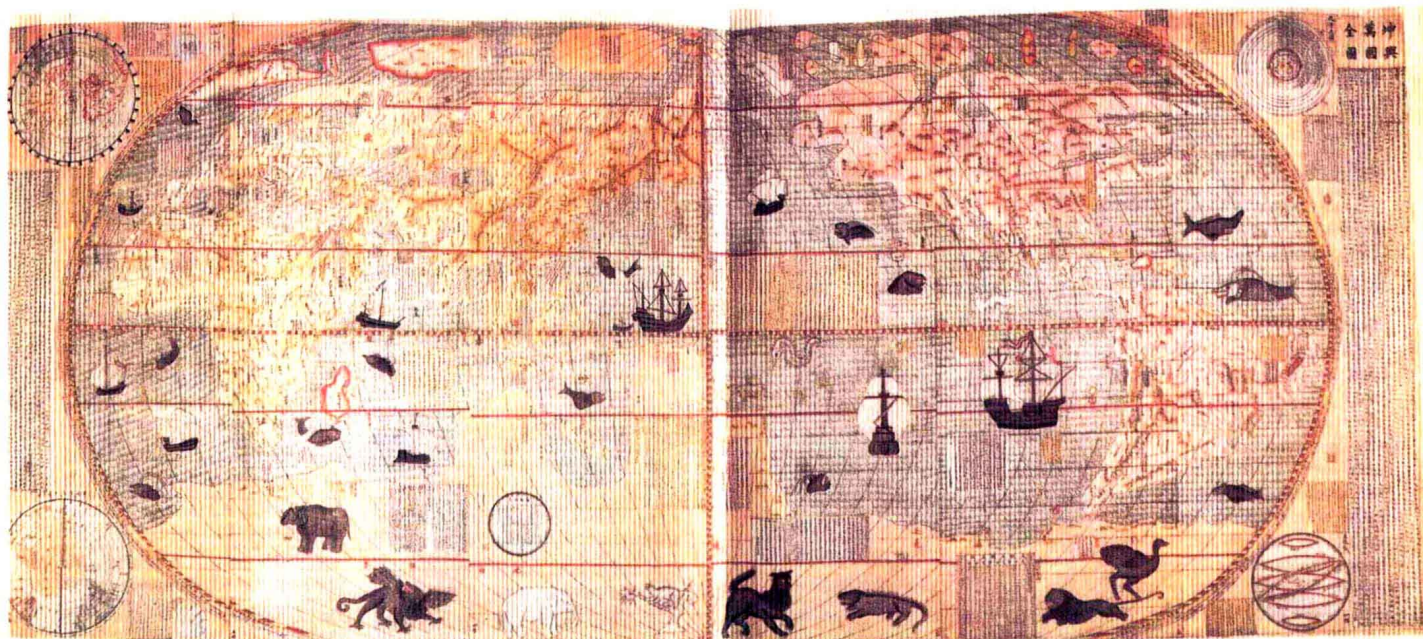


Fr. Matteo Ricci, S.J.(1552-1610)



Matteo Ricci and Xu Guang Qi (1602-1633)

Matteo Ricci was an Italian Jesuit Missionary and a scholar. He arrived in China during the reign of Emperor Wan Li in Ming Dynasty. He took Li Ma Dou as his Chinese name. Along side preaching Catholicism, he also introduced the western astronomy, maths, geography, science and technology into China. His works not only greatly contributed to Sino-Western cultural exchange, but also produced an important influence on the cultures of Japan and Korea.



"Complete Map of the World" from the original by Matteo Ricci, 1608

The original map was made by Ricci. According to his personal experience of European countries, and visiting the Chinese cities of Nanjing, Beijing, Hangzhou, etc., he placed the Chinese cities on a world atlas according to their longitudes and latitudes. With the help of a world map, people could learn geography and gain scientific knowledge about the five continents, the South pole and about climates. It was very helpful to Chinese peoples fond of learning new knowledge.



Fr. Ferdinand Verbiest (1623-1688), maker of the Celestial Globe

Belgian missionary Ferdinand Verbiest arrived in China in 1659. He first did missionary work in Shan Xi. In 1676, he was appointed as the superior of the Jesuits in China. Emperor Kangxi of the Qing Dynasty gave him the charge of conducting researches in astronomy. He made great contributions in the fields of science and technology. The Celestial Globe made by him was one of the results of the Sino-Western cultural and scientific exchanges at the end of the Ming and beginning of the Qing Dynasty.