

## Three Pioneers in XVI Century China

During the XV and XVI centuries in Europe, exploration and discovery of the “New World” were motivated not only by seeking commercial and political advantages, but also by the concern for the conversion of the new peoples to the Christian faith. For this intention, the Popes encouraged the Portuguese and Spanish kings to bestow a particular patronage upon the Catholic Missions, giving them special authority and privileges (*Real Padroado*).

Missionary interest in the evangelization of China, in particular, was indeed strong. St. Francis Xavier (1506-1552) had been the precursor and the model. After the failure of his attempt to enter the Chinese Empire in 1552 with his death on Shangchuan island, other missionaries tried the same enterprise, before the Jesuit Fathers Michele Ruggieri and Matteo Ricci succeeded in establishing a residence at Zhaoqing on 10 September 1583. Among these pioneers three missionaries deserve to be retrieved from relative obscurity and given special consideration, namely the Jesuit Fr. Melchior Nuñez Barreto, the Dominican Fr. Gaspar da Cruz, and the Augustinian Fr. Martin de Rada. Let us see their contributions.

### Fr. Melchior Nuñez Barreto (1519/20-1571)

Fr. Melchior (Belchior) Nuñez Barreto was born in Porto, Portugal, about 1519 and joined the Jesuits at Coimbra in 1543. He was sent to India in 1551, where he could have met St. Francis Xavier and learned about his plan to reach the Chinese Empire.

In May 1554, Fr. Melchior, then the Portuguese Provincial Superior of the Jesuits, left Goa to make a visitation to Japan, and spent the winter in Malacca. On 20 July, 1555, he reached Shangchuan island, where he celebrated Mass on the former tomb of St. Francis Xavier. On 3 August, he went to Lampacao island about five leagues further north, then the meeting place of Portuguese and Chinese ships for trade. From there he decided to go to Canton with a ship captain well known to the Chinese authorities, bringing also with him Bro. Estavão de Goes (1526-1588). His intention was to get for de Goes a permit to stay and study the Chinese language and customs. The main purpose, however, was to obtain the release of some Portuguese prisoners. He returned a second time with a commission to hand over some money to redeem the prisoners. He stayed for another month, but again with no success.

On 20 November, Fr. Melchior from Canton returned to Macau where, on 23 November, in a long letter in Italian, he informed the confreres in India about his travels and suggested two possible ways to spread the Gospel in China:

*The following is the major obstacle for people in China to become Christians: that is, humanly speaking, they seem to lack enough courage to accept a new doctrine and law without the permission of those in authority: nor will the latter dare to give it without the permission of the King. Consequently, according to what I experienced in this land, it seems that there are only two possible ways, both difficult, to follow in order to bring about their conversion, not to speak of the grace and intervention of the Spirit who is always necessary. The first way seems more human: it consists in negotiating*

*an embassy to come to this kingdom, to achieve a peaceful agreement between them and the Portuguese; together with the ambassador, some of the members of the [Jesuit] Company should go to the place where the King resides, which is said to be a journey of a thousand and five hundred miles inland, most of which is by river. And since, after the arrival of the ambassador in Canton, it takes almost one year to send the request to the King, and wait for his acceptance of the request, there will be time and opportunity enough to practise the language and to get acquainted with the local customs. Then, going with the ambassador where the King lives, efforts should be made to get the license to celebrate the divine offices, to engage in charitable works and to teach people; and after receiving some news of their virtue through the same ambassador and even through the same members of the Company who have gone, a sealed approval could be requested from the King, that all his subjects who would like to accept the law of the Creator, could freely do so, without scandal or prejudice to the King, and that neither the Mandarins nor the other Governors could forbid it, but give favour to those who follow the Christian Religion...*

*The second way is not so much founded on human means and requires fasting: it consists in this: two Fathers of the Company knowing the languages, should go to Canton; and when the Portuguese ships leave, they should remain with the risk of being beaten with canes and start to preach our most Holy Faith, both in the squares and in the houses; and even if they are put into prison, they should never stop preaching the Word of God, both in favorable and adverse conditions, in consolation as well as in afflictions, proposing it with steadfast faith and hope: if the grain will die, it will produce ears and fruits...*

*What I feel in this land with my weak judgment is that some of the Fathers of the Company should come here, learn well the language, keep their spirits high, that our Lord God might work some miracles through them and would bestow His mercy on some Chinese the grace of the faith in Jesus Christ Our Lord: in this way, many fruits will be harvested, God help those in authority so that they do not put up any obstacle.<sup>1</sup>*

On the same day, Fr. Barreto wrote a report on China.

The above quoted proposals were sent to India by Fr. Barreto; certainly they were known by, and influenced Fr. Alessandro Valignano (1539-1606) who decided on the so-called “adaptation strategy” to be carried out through Frs. Michele Ruggieri and Matteo Ricci.

Fr. Barreto, after a third visit to Canton, on June 5, continued his journey to Japan. On 4 December, 1556, he reappeared in Macau and found Bro. de Goes very ill. Therefore, he took him back to Goa. He reached Goa in February 1557 and died there on 6 October, 1571.

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<sup>1</sup> *Letters of M. Barreto to Fathers in Goa*, 23 Nov. 1555, from Macau (<http://www.upf.edu/asia/projectes/che/che16.htm>).

## Fr. Gaspar da Cruz (?-1570)

Dominican Friar Gaspar da Cruz was born at Evora in Portugal. He joined the seminary in Azeitão. In 1548 he left for Goa, India, together with other confreres, marking the official beginning of the Asian mission of the Dominican Order. He spent about six years on the west coast of India. Around 1554, he went to Malacca, where he founded a seminary. He worked there until September 1555 and then he went to preach the Gospel in Cambodia, at the request of the King Ang Chan I (1476-1566, reigned since 1516) who desired to trade with the Portuguese.

In 1556, facing opposition from Buddhist monks, Fr. Gaspar left Cambodia for China. Toward the end of the year he reached Canton. In this city he started preaching on the streets, but after a month he had to leave, a bit discouraged. To the question why he did not remain there preaching the Gospel and converting people, he gave the following reasons in his "*Tractado das Cousas da China*": [[]]

*There are two very great inconveniences to make any Christians in this country. The one is that in no way will they permit any novelty in the country, as in some sort it may be seen in the matter of the Moors. So that whatsoever novelty appears in the country, the Louthias [the authorities] take order forthwith how to repress it, and it goes no further... The second is, that no strange person may enter into China, nor remain in Cantam [Canton], save only with leave of the Louthias, who do give him license to stay for a certain fixed time in Cantam, and when the time of the license has expired, they labour to make him depart... Add to the above-said, that the common people greatly fear the Louthias, wherefore none of them dares become a Christian without their license, or at least many would not do it. Therefore as a man cannot be settled in the country, he cannot continue preaching, and by consequence he cannot fructify and preserve the fruit. There is notwithstanding one way by which a man could preach freely, and whereby fruit might be made in the country, without even a dog barking at the preacher, nor any Louthia do him hurt in any way; which is, if he could have a license for it from the King, and it might be obtained if an official embassy were sent with a solemn present to the King of China, in the name of the King of Portugal, religious men going with the ambassador to obtain the license for going about the country, showing themselves to be men without arms; and how our faith is no prejudice to his dominion and government, but a great help that all might obey him and keep his laws. This is the only remedy that there is for to reap any fruit in China... and because I had not this remedy, having the above-said inconveniences, I came away from China; and therefore neither I, nor they of the Company of Jesus, who undertook this enterprize sundry times, could fructify in China.<sup>2</sup>*

He reached Macau, and in early 1557 left for Malacca; then he went and took up residence in Ormuz, where he worked for twelve years before returning to Lisbon in 1569. There he published the work, "*Tractado das Cousas da China*" (Lisboa: Evora, 1569-1570), the first book published in Europe exclusively related to China.

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<sup>2</sup> See his 'Tractado', in C.R. Boxer, *South China in the Sixteenth Century* (Hakluyt Society 1953, Kraus Reprint Limited 1967), pp. 221-222.

*Nine-tenths of Cruz's Tractado is directly concerned with China... All the omissions of Marco Polo are there made good, and our friar has many observations on Chinese life and customs which anticipate those of the later Jesuits writers who are usually credited with first revealing China to Europe. It might, perhaps, be going too far to claim that Gaspar da Cruz made better use of his few weeks' stay in Canton than did Marco Polo of all the years he spent in Cathay... I think that most people who have had the opportunity of travelling in China and of reading the Tractado of Gaspar da Cruz, will agree that this Portuguese account will stand comparison with any of those printed in Europe before 1625 – and with many of those printed much later.*<sup>3</sup>

Fr. Gaspar reached Lisbon “at the height of a great pestilence.” He soon volunteered to take care of the sick people. When the plague started to diminish there, he immediately moved to Setubal where it was still raging. He worked there and got sick of the same disease, dying on 5 February, 1570.

### **Fr. Martin de Rada (1533-1578)**

Fr. Martin de Rada (or Herrada), was born in Pamplona, Spain, on 20 July, 1533, to a noble family. He studied first in Paris, and then, at the University of Salamanca where he achieved brilliant academic results. He joined the Augustinian seminary in 1553 and made his religious profession in 1554. Then, he continued his studies at Salamanca and worked in Toledo. In 1560, he departed for Mexico, where he worked for a few years among highland Indians speaking the difficult Otoni language. Then he volunteered to accompany Miguel Lopez de Legaspi (1502-1572) and Fr. Andrés de Urdaneta on their expedition to the Philippines, reaching Cebu on 26 April, 1565. There Fr. Martin, thanks to his language talents, soon worked among the Visayan people, and, at the same time, getting in contact with local Chinese and merchants. He showed a great desire to go preach the Gospel to their people and started to study Chinese. His first reference to China was in a letter dated 8 July, 1569 to the viceroy of Mexico, in which he gave a brief description of China. In 1572 he went to Manila and was elected Provincial Superior for three years. One of his main concerns as Superior was the conversion of China. The occasion was provided by the arrival of a Chinese war junk off the port of Manila looking for the pirate, Limahon. The Spaniards promised to hand him over, if they could catch him. In return, the captain invited a Filipino delegation to meet the provincial authorities of Fujian. Fr. Martin and Fr. Jeronimo Marin (c.1540-1606) were invited to join it. They left on 12 June, 1575, sent by the Governor of the Philippines as ambassadors of King Philip II. Their purpose was to get permission for the missionaries to stay and begin the evangelization work, as well as to get a trading port for Spain. They reached Zhangzhou, and then, Quanzhou, and finally the provincial capital, Fuzhou. Here the Viceroy accepted the letter and the document in which the fathers stated the purpose and the religious intention of their journey. The Viceroy, using the excuse of getting the permit from the emperor, simply dismissed them, offering them some presents. The Fathers returned to Manila on 28 October, 1575, without fulfilling their dream to remain in China.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., pp. lviii-lxvii.

Fr. de Rada brought back to Manila a large collection of Chinese books, some of which were subsequently translated. Among them was a description of the Kingdom of China, with details about its provinces, boundaries, culture, religions and wealth. Unfortunately, most of the books have been lost.

Back in the Philippines, Fr. Martin busied himself in writing religious, linguistic, mathematical, cosmographical and astronomical works. He wrote a *True Report of the things of the Kingdom of the Great Ming (Da Ming), whose other name is China and of the travel of the Rev. Father Martin de Rada, Provincial of the glorious Order of the Doctor of the Church San Augustin, who went to the province of Fujian in the year 1575, written by the same person.*<sup>4</sup>

The first line of the text states clearly the identity between China and Cathay: *News about the Great China, that is about the kingdom that we call China, even if there is a certain confusion due to some old writings, such as that of the Venetian Marco Polo who calls it the Kingdom of Cathay.*

Thus, “*it is high time that Fr. de Rada was given the credit which is his due for being the first European writer on China who clearly and correctly identified this country with Marco Polo’s Cathay.*”<sup>5</sup>

Fr. Matteo Ricci seems to be unaware of it: he announced the identification of China with Cathay much later, in a letter, dated 18 October 1607, after the confirmation given by Bro. Bento de Goes (1562-1606), who went from India to Gansu for this purpose.

Fr. de Rada was called out of his studies by the Spanish Governor in order to take part to an expedition to Brunei. But unfortunately, many soldiers got sick and died in the unhealthy climate, among whom the Father himself, some time between the 8th and the 15th of June, 1578.

To conclude: the presentation of these three missionaries, truly exceptional persons, serves not only to shed light on their greatness and contributions—both to the knowledge of the Chinese world and to the innovation of the missionary methods—but also to see in the right perspective the role of later missionaries.

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<sup>4</sup> It was published by Juan Gonzalez de Mendoza, *Historia del gran Reyno de China* (Madrid, Pedro Madrigal Printer, 1586); see also Pablo Fernandez OP, *History of the Church in the Philippines, 1521-1898* (Metro Manila: Life Today Publications, 1988).

<sup>5</sup> C.R. Boxer, *South China in the Sixteenth century*, op. cit., pp. lxxv-lxxvi.