



THE FOURTH CENTENARY OF
MATTEO RICCI'S ARRIVAL IN CHINA

by Angelo S. Lazzarotto

"If all missionaries who came to China in the past were like Matteo Ricci, Christianity would not have gone through all the difficulties and trials it encountered in its recent history".

I heard this remark from a Chinese priest during a recent visit to Mainland China. It is difficult to imagine what would have been the development of Christian Churches during the past 400 years, if the line of Ricci had consistently been followed. Ricci was an exceptional man and he had clear ideas on two big issues which afterwards became the source of misunderstandings within the Church and in the relationship with China. I refer to the controversy concerning ancient Chinese culture and religion, and to the "protection" that in the 19th century was extended or rather "imposed" on the missionary activity by foreign powers which forced "unequal treaties" on China.

Even if through great crises, the Church established by Matteo Ricci has survived and is very lively after four centuries. French Card. Roger Etchegaray of Marseilles in France, when visiting Peking in March 1980 went to pay his respect at the tomb of Ricci. "This tomb", he commented, "bears witness to the continuity of the presence of the Catholic Church in China and to the possibility for it to have a place here". Ricci is rightly considered the founder of modern-day Christianity in China (1), and the memory of this great missionary as well as great friend of China encourages us to look at the future with hope and confidence.

It is a well known fact that Christianity had reached China at least one thousand years before Matteo Ricci. But no Christian community had survived from those ancient times. Only a big engraved stone was left, describing the propagation of the Christian faith (called the "Religion of Light") from the year 635 to 781, when the famous "stele" was sculpted in the city of Sian (Shensi). Actually, the first information on this important monument was given by a disciple of Ricci, a teacher named Mathew Chang Keng, who saw it in the year 1625 (2).

Also the great efforts made in the 13th and 14th centuries by the Franciscan Order had not been able to root the Christian faith firmly in Chinese soil. Historical research indicates as one of the main reasons the fact that most of the converts in those early times were not Chinese but foreigners (Mongols),

Connected with the rulers of that epoch (3). Four hundred years ago the seed of Christianity was sown again by this enlightened and scholarly priest, Matteo Ricci, who took as his Chinese name Li-Ma-t'ou. This time the seed went down deeply among the people of China and has proved to have great vitality.

To be exact, even in modern times, he was not the very first to enter the "Middle Kingdom" and to baptize some citizens of the Ming empire. Some confreres of his, like Fr. Michael Ruggieri had preceded him by a few years to the Macao trade port and from there had made some trips to Canton city and province. Ricci gladly acknowledged also that it was due to the great vision and the sincere esteem that his superior, Fr. Alessandro Valignano, had for the Chinese people and culture, that he was assigned to that mission and asked to study as much as he could the Chinese language and literature (4).

But it was due to the outstanding way in which Ricci accomplished this task, exchanging with the Chinese scholars the science and technology of the West for their ancient philosophy and literature, that in just a few years he won the respect and the admiration at the highest levels. It was because of this that he was granted permission to reside in China, first in two towns of Kwan-tung province, Chaoching (1583) and Shaochow (1589), then in Nanchang (1595), provincial capital of Kiangsi, then in Nanking (1598), and finally in Peking (1601). And at his death at the age of 58 (11 May 1610), Ricci was granted the extraordinary privilege of having a burial site offered by the emperor.

When some high court official complained that such concession was something unheard of in the whole Chinese history, the emperor's chancellor Yeh T' ai-shan answered: "Have you ever heard, from ancient times till today, of any foreigner who came here displaying the virtue and the science of doctor Ricci? Even if it was only for his translation of the "Elements of Geometry", not to speak of the other works of his, he would have deserved a burial place" (5). The imperial minister of Rites, Wu Tao-nan, expressed also support for the petition asking for a tomb. He gave credit to the friendly attitude of Li-Ma-t'ou,

Who "had come from far away regions attracted by the fame of this kingdom", and who "wanted to consider himself as a Chinese." He praised him for having been "keen in learning so that little by little he acquired great knowledge and published many famous books" (6). On this petition presented by his friends and endorsed by the chancellor, emperor Wan-Li marked his positive decision ("shi sce") on the 23rd day of the 4th moon of the 38th year of his reign (14th June 1610) (7).

The governor of Peking Huang Chi-shih was entrusted with the execution of the imperial wish, and he proposed land just outside the city, which had recently been changed into a pagoda and had accrued to the public treasury. This large piece of land, with a 38 room villa, was intended to be both the site for Ricci's tomb and a convenient residence for his confreres. The fact prompted one of his disciples to comment: "It seems that as this good father (Ricci) was responsible for the providential entry of the Society of Jesus and of the Gospel into China, so his death was the occasion to confirm the presence of the members of the same Society in this kingdom and to authorize the preaching of this doctrine". At the end of the precious book completed by Ricci himself a few weeks before his death, the "History of the Introduction of Christianity into China", one of his companions, Fr. N. Trigault, added the details of his death and concluded by noting that: "Fr. Ricci, founder of this mission, was the first to find burial in this kingdom and to obtain the privilege for his friends (...) In this way we shall witness (our love) by giving them not only our lives but also our bodies" (8).

Governor Huang Chi-shih wanted to express his admiration for "Matteo Ricci from the Great West" by writing an inscription: "To him who loved righteousness and published books" (9). The tablet, displayed at the door of the house donated, aptly expresses the two main aspects of the life of Ricci: his remarkable Christian way of life and his high scholarship.

About the year 1650, at the time when in Peking another Jesuit, Adam Shall von Bell, was famous for his scholarship, a

big "stele" was erected in front of Ricci's tomb, with massive ornaments sculpted all around and with an inscription both in Chinese and in Latin in the middle. It is the stone which can still be admired today (10). The site which was offered by the emperor was located in a place called "two ditch", about one km. outside "Feucem mon"; it was later called "stone precinct" and from this the name "Chala" derived, which is used up to the present. Many other missionaries were buried over the years in this place, which remained under the custody of the Jesuits till 1773, when the Order was suppressed. The Lazarist Fathers then followed till 1900. During the uprising of the "Justice and Harmony Fists" (the "Boxers") in 1900, the cemetery was destroyed and the funeral monuments overthrown. Fortunately, Ricci's big "stele" was not broken. Restored a few years later in a simpler set up, it stood there till the radical wave of violence damaged it again, during the Cultural Revolution.

In may 1978, an official delegation of the Italian Chinese Institute for Economic and Cultural Relations headed by Sen. Vittorino Colombo, a minister of the Italian Government, asked to visit the tomb of the famous Italian scholar and missionary. Mr. Wang Bingnan, president of the Chinese Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries, answered that it was to be soon repaired, after the Red Guards ransacked the place.

Presently the ancient place is reduced to a small brick precinct in which, besides Matteo Ricci's, the tombs of two other famous Western scholars and missionaries (Adam Shall von Bell and F. Verbiest) are preserved; it stands in the compound of a Cadre School of the Peking Municipality, and for this reason a special permit is needed to visit it. A few months ago, while in Peking with a group of Italian friends, I was happy to see that the memorial stone erected over three hundred years ago in front of the tomb of Ricci has been restored to its original form.

In November 1979, while Chairman Hua Guofeng was visiting Europe, the "*People's Daily*" published a long article by Lu Tong Liu, entitled: "Matteo Ricci, The Vanguard of the Cultural Exchange between China and the West" (11). In it the scienti-

fic contribution of Ricci is praised, as well as his great love for the Chinese people and culture: "Besides practising missionary work, he tried his very best to introduce to China the Western science, and studied very hard the Chinese science and technology". The article states "Matteo Ricci was also an eminent sinologist. He ardently loved China and the Chinese culture". Lu Tong Liu gives a long list of the scholarly works produced by Ricci either by himself or with some of his famous Chinese disciples and friends. The writer mentions two of them, Li Chih-tsaio and Hsu Kwang-ch'i ("the eminent scientist and official of the Ming dynasty"), without specifying that they had both become Christians. Also with regard to Ricci, the "*People's Daily*" article only mentions once his concern for the propagation of Christian religion in the "Middle Kingdom".

Certainly, the scientific contribution of Ricci and of his friends and disciples was most important to China in the 17th century; and it is very natural that this aspect be underlined even today, when the whole country is mobilizing all its energies for the "four modernizations", and is again opening to the outside world and to the Western nations in particular in an effort for cultural and technological exchange. But the other aspect of Ricci's personality cannot be overlooked. In fact his "vocation to China", which became a reality just four hundred years ago, was determined both by his love for the Chinese people and by his love for the Gospel. Born in Macerata (central Italy) in 1552, at the age of 19 he entered the Society of Jesus (which had been founded only a few years before) and volunteered to go to carry the Christian message to the Far Eastern regions. He spent seven years of intense spiritual and cultural preparation in Rome, before departing (via Lisbon) for Goa in India, where he studied theology for three more years and was ordained a priest. It was just in the middle of 1581 that Ricci received new instructions from the Superior of the Far Eastern missions to get ready for the new China Mission.

The sculpted stone erected in front of his tomb underlines that Ricci spent 28 years in China bringing back to China "the Christian faith" and establishing there a permanent residence for

his confreres: he was "famous because of his scholarship and of his saintly life". The Chinese text adds that he "first entered China in 1582 to preach the (Christian) religion". Even while he was honoured as one of the greatest scholars at the court of the emperor, he never made a mystery of the fact that his coming to China was prompted first of all by the desire to share what he considered the greatest treasure of his life, that is the "Good News" of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. A good number of people, both simple and noble, both learned and ignorant accepted from him the message of the Gospel and decided to follow his way of life. In 1610 the baptized Christians in China were already about 2,000 (12). In this fourth centenary of Ricci's coming to China, we would like to honour him both for his scientific contribution to the modernization of the Country and for his inspiring missionary activity that made him the pioneer in establishing the Catholic Church in China. Most of his scientific and technical books, written or translated into Chinese, are today of great historical interest, obviously. The moral and religious books which prepared in Chinese are also important, because of his effort to express the Christian message through a sincere appreciation of Chinese culture and mentality.

Some years ago, the Italian National Academy sponsored a critical official publication of the Works of Matteo Ricci. It still has a long way to go, and it would surely need the co-operation of Chinese scholars if a complete survey of the scientific contribution produced by Ricci in Chinese language is to be included. At least his moral and religious books written in Chinese should have a place in the Italian official collection (13).

But the Chinese scholars, on the other hand, have not been able, so far to know the vast and fundamental works written by Ricci in foreign languages, which have never been translated into Chinese yet. This is particularly true of his famous "History of the Introduction of Christianity into China", which he wrote in Italian, and of the rich collection of his letters, which he wrote originally in different languages (14). While

visiting recently the Institute for the Study of World Religions at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, in Peking, in a friendly conversation I was impressed by the interest shown by two scholars there, Prof. Zhao Fusan responsible for the Foreign Affairs of the Academy and prof. Gao Wangzhi, head of the Christianity Department at the Institute. They both expressed the hope that the works by Ricci which allowed the Western world to know China for the first time, in a friendly and accurate description, be finally translated into Chinese also, as a precious instrument for a deeper mutual understanding between East and West, and as a documentation of a new beginning of Christianity in China. This centenary should offer the opportunity for a combined effort of Chinese and foreign scholars (15).

NOTES

1. RICCI. Matteo, S.J., *Fonti Ricciane. Storia dell'Introduzione del Cristianesimo in Cina*, P.M. D'Elia, ed., 3 vols., Roma, 1942 - 1949.
2. *Ib.*, vol. I, p. LV; vol. II, p. 355.
3. *Ib.*, I, p. LXXXII.
4. *Ib.*, I, p. 142-3.
5. *Ib.*, II, p. 630, note 1.
6. *Ib.*, II, p. 585-6.
7. *Ib.*, II, p. 587.
8. *Ib.*, II, p. 631-2.
9. *Ib.*, II, p. 616 In 1615, the new governor of Peking Wang Yu-sha, who had been a good friend of Ricci, composed a long funeral inscription; although the original stone on which it was sculpted disappeared since, the text is known from several sources; cf. *Fonti...*, III, p. 9 - 19.

10. *Ib.*, II, p. 626, note 2.
11. "Renmin Ribao", 4 Nov. 1979, p. 6.
12. *Fonti...*, I, p. 289, note 3; II, p. 482, note 9.
13. On the occasion of the third centenary of Ricci death, a two volume collection *Opere Storiche del P. Matteo Ricci* was published by P. Tacchi-Venturi (Macerata, 1911-1913); it contains Ricci's *History of the introduction...*, whose original manuscript had just been discovered, and Ricci's letters. The three volume *Fonti Ricciane* edited by D'Elia in the years 1942-49 provides the definitive edition of Ricci's text on the history of the mission. But the letters would also need a similar scholarly edition. And no systematic attempt to collect in a critical edition the other religious works of Ricci has yet been made.
14. Even in Europe, for three centuries Ricci's history of the mission was known only through the Latin translation published in 1615 by his young Belgian confrere Fr. N. Trigault, with the title *De Christiana Expeditione apud Sinas ab Societate Jesu suscepta*. The only English edition available is based on Trigault's (sometimes inaccurate) Latin version; it was published in 1953 (Random House, New York), by L. Gallagher, under the title: *China in the Sixteenth Century: The Journals of Matteo Ricci: 1583-1610*. A valuable French edition, utilising both Ricci's original and Trigault's Latin version, has been recently produced by G. Bessiere (with introd. by J. Shih), with the title: *Histoire de l'Expedition Chretienne au Royaume de la Chine 1582-1610* (Desclee, Paris, 1978, pp. 740).
15. A good basis for such exchanges could already be books published in the past 25 years: O. GENTILI, *L'Apostolo della Cina; P. Matteo Ricci*, 2 vols., Macerata, 1963.-F. BORTONE, *Il Saggio d'Occidente; il P. Matteo Ricci S.J.*

(1552-1610) *un grande Italiano nella Cina Impenetrabile*, Roma, 1965.-V. CRONIN, *The Wise Man from the West*, New York, 1957.-G.H. DUNNE, *Generation of Giants; The Story of the Jesuits in China in the last Decades of the Ming Dynasty*, Notre Dame, 1962.-G. L. HARRIS, *The Mission of Matteo Ricci, S.J.: A case Study of an Effort at Guided Culture Change in China in the Sixteenth Century*, in "Monumenta Serica", vol. XXV, 1966, pp. 1-168.

