

Pope's address on the work of Father Ricci in China



At the conclusion of the International Convention of Ricci Studies, marking the 400th anniversary of the arrival of the Jesuit, Father Ricci, in China, the Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, delivered an address on the work of the great missionary. The address was given at the Pontifical Gregorian University on October 25.

The Holy Father first addressed a cordial greeting to the participants of the Congress, to the numerous religious personalities present (including Cardinals, Archbishops and Bishops), to the laymen, among these also the academic authorities of the University of Macerata (the place of Father Ricci's birth), and to the professors and students of the Pontifical Gregorian University.

After having praised the organizers for the initiatives, both at Macerata and at the Gre-

gorian University, where Father Ricci had received his scientific education, Pope John Paul II proceeded with following discourse:

Father Ricci, a "Bridge" between two Civilizations -- European and Chinese

"But, in addition to these two cities, Macerata and Rome, there is a third which was particularly dear to Matteo Ricci: Peking, where the great humanist and missionary carried out his very fruitful activity, and where his tomb is, guarded and venerated by many generation of Chinese.

Father Matteo Ricci's arrival in China represented the culmination of the dream that had animated his brother Jesuit, Francis Xavier, who thirty years earlier, in December 1552, had died at the age of 47 on a small island within sight of the

great China. Less than two months before the death of Xavier--who had died without realizing his ambition--Matteo Ricci, the future missionary to China, was born in Macerata. Following in the footsteps of Xavier, he would enter China and win the affection of the Chinese people in a way that would give him a place in the history of its culture.

Other Europeans, such as Marco Polo and the Franciscans, John of Montecorvino and John of Pian del Carpine, had already made some contacts with China during the preceding centuries. Nevertheless, it was Matteo Ricci who first succeeded in inserting himself into the vital fabric of Chinese culture and society, making the science and the technology of Europe known to many people in that great country; and likewise familiarizing the West with the civilization and the cultural riches of the Chinese people.

A true humanist, gifted with philosophical, theological and artistic culture, with advanced mathematical, astronomical and geographical knowledge and with the most progressive technical application of that epoch, Father Ricci, with his tenacious, humble and respectful dedication succeeded in assimilating the Chinese classical culture to such a profound degree as to become a veritable "bridge" between the two civilizations, European and Chinese.

The important fruits of this work of cultural mediation remain:

the numerous writings in the Chinese language, carried out with the intelligent and indispensable assistance of his disciples (primarily of Xu Guangqi and Li Zhizao); his contribution (and that of his Chinese collaborators) to the introduction and the modernization of science and of technology in China; and the materials and letters written in Italian on the various aspects of Chinese culture.

And it is specifically for this highly significant mediation that the Chinese people have reserved an important place in their history for this great humanist and missionary of Macerata.

Efforts of Inculturation and the Witness of Social Commitment

A contribution of such value could not have been given except after a long, dedicated period of cultural preparation and through a profound process of inculturation in the Chinese reality. For this reason, Father Ricci made notable sacrifices to study the language, the habits and customs of the Chinese, so as to make them his own. Father Michele Ruggieri, his companion, wrote in one of his letters to a friend: "We have become Chinese, ut Christo Sinas lucrifaciamus".

On his arrival in Macao in 1582, Father Ricci was sent on mission to Zhaoqing in southern China, where he entered upon a long period of experience, of efforts,

of reflection on the cultural context in which he was to perform his mission. It was only after 24 years of patient apprenticeship that he succeeded in reaching the heart of China, and in joyfully reaping in Peking, from 1601 to 1610, the fruit of what he had sown with so much patient effort.

At the beginning, like other missionaries, Father Ricci thought of conforming himself to the dress and to the social condition of the Buddhist monks, because he was convinced that acting thus, he would be considered what he truly was, that is, "a man of religion". Later, however, he saw that the religious concept of the surroundings in which he lived was notably different from that of the West: the monks, in fact, were persons who in a certain sense lived on the margin of society. Even their places of worship were ordinarily built outside the centres of population.

Father Matteo Ricci and his companions then decided to carry their religious testimony to the very heart of society, and for this, they adopted the life style of men of letters, involved like them in the social life of the community. In so doing, they wanted to demonstrate that religious faith does not lead to a flight from society, but to a commitment in the world, in view of perfecting the life of society, to the point of openness toward the redemption in Christ and toward the life of grace in the

Church.

Scientific Contribution and Incarnated Evangelization

Father Ricci--it has certainly been illustrated in this Congress--intended, in the first place, to open to the Chinese a secure way of improving their efforts of scientific progress, and with real courage, he translated the geometry of Euclid into Chinese. This is a matter of a precious contribution offered by the West to the Chinese world. But obviously, this man from Macerata had other objectives in mind, objectives which he always pursued with profound respect for his listeners. In speaking of the Gospel, he knew how to find the cultural mode that was appropriate to those who were listening to him. He began with a discussion of themes dear to the Chinese people, that is, morality and the rules of social life according to the Confucian tradition, the human and ethical values which he acknowledged with affection. Then he discreetly and indirectly introduced the Christian point of view on the various problems and matters. Thus, without imposing or commanding, he ended up by bringing many of his listeners to the explicit knowledge and to an authentic cult of God, the Supreme Good.

Such a message, so concrete and so full of hope--but at the same time, so respectful of all the positive values of classical Chinese thought--was understood by his

disciples and perceived by his numerous friends and visitors.

It was due to such work of inculturation that Father Matteo Ricci succeeded, with the assistance of his Chinese collaborators, in carrying out a work that appeared impossible: that is carefully formulating the Chinese terminology of Catholic theology and liturgy. Thus, he created the conditions for knowing Christ and incarnating his evangelical message and the Church in the context of Chinese culture.

Testimony of Evangelical Life and of Chinese Virtues

The work of inculturation done by Father Ricci did not take place only within the sphere of missionary concepts and missionary work, but also in the sphere of the personal testimony of life. It is necessary, before all else, to bring into relief his exemplary religious life, which in a definitive way contributed to making his doctrine appreciated among those whom he met and taught.

Convinced of the importance that amiability and affability of treatment and of conversation have in the Chinese culture as the expression of gentility of soul, Father Matteo did everything possible to cultivate these virtues, practicing them particularly in the encounters with those who made visits to the residence of the missionaries. Such visits were almost

continuous and often required much time and great sacrifice from the missionaries, especially from Father Ricci, because of his knowledge of the Chinese language and culture. In harmony with this style, he offered to his listeners the Chinese translation of Cicero's "De amicitia".

Also worthy of note was his extraordinary capacity for winning the esteem and the friendship of a large number of literary people and government officials. Often it was specifically these people who futhered the diffusion of the Gospel and the activity of the missionaries in those parts of China, where they had been sent by the Emperor for their administrative duties.

Already at the outset of his missionary activity, Father Ricci was well aware of having entered upon an adventure that was by no means easy. Particularly painful to him must have been the experience of misunderstanding and suspicion of some of his own brothers at Macao, with regard to his missionary methods, which for them were new and unusual. However, humbly and with trust in God, he was always ready to modify his own ideas and his methods of work, when experience showed that he had entered on an inopportune way.

Father Ricci was always clear on the concept and the practice of the mission, convinced that he was not doing his own purely personal work but was carrying out a work entrusted to him by the Apostolic

See, through the medium of his religious superiors of the Society of Jesus, as the Constitutions of the Society indicate.

This was the determining element, especially in his missionary work, gave him the strength to surmount difficulties and discouragement, and prevented him from choosing and following erroneous paths, of isolating himself, or perhaps even becoming stubborn in his ideas, thus compromising authentic missionary effectiveness.

Inculturation of the Gospel with Chinese Values

From personal inculturation Father Ricci and his companions passed on quite naturally and spontaneously to the inculturation of the Gospel message. I myself had occasion many times to return to this concept, so fundamental in the missionary work of the Church.

In February, 1981, speaking in Manila to the representatives of the Chinese communities of Asia, I said: 'From earliest times, the Church has learned to express the truth of Christ through the help of ideas and in the culture of various peoples, because the message that she preaches is intended for all peoples and nations. The Christian message is not the exclusive property of any one group or race' (February 18, 1981, no.4).

Undoubtedly, his was an

arduous and exalted undertaking, even more so when one considers the very connotations of Chinese civilization and culture, which is among the most ancient and celebrated in the world, autonomous in the originality of its thought, of linguistic and literary expression, of traditions and of customs; constituting here one of the richest centres of elaboration of intellectual and human values of universal history.

It is not difficult to think that Father Matteo Ricci must have felt the greatness of the undertaking, no less than the philosopher and martyr St. Justin, St. Clement of Alexandria and Origen felt in their efforts of translating the message of faith in comprehensible terminology to the culture of their age.

Just as the Fathers of the Church regarding Greek culture, so Father Matteo Ricci was justly convinced that faith in Christ not only would not bring any damage to Chinese culture, but would enrich it and perfect it. His Chinese disciples, some of whom became eminent men of government, demonstrated their conviction that to accept the Christian faith does not in fact imply abandoning one's own culture, nor does it mean diminishing loyalty to one's own country and its traditions, but rather, that the faith permitted them to offer a richer and more qualified service to their country.

A Service Honest and Relevant

Four hundred years after his

arrival in China, the figure and the work of Father Ricci appears to assume a great relevance to the Chinese people today, involved as they are in an undertaking of modernization and of progress. For the Chinese nation, this is a moment in which the fundamental unity of the human and cultural values of its people becomes ever more evident to the world; it is a unity which Chinese all over the world recognize as theirs. The Church, too, keenly sensitive to the spiritual gifts of each nation, cannot but look to the Chinese people--the most numerous on earth--as a great unitarian reality, a crucible of exalted traditions and of vital ferment, and therefore, at the same time, as a great and promising hope.

And what the Chinese people particularly admire in the scientific work of Matteo Ricci in China is his humble, honest, disinterested attitude, not inspired by ulterior motives and free from bonds with any type of foreign, economic or military power.

In the light of the spirit of dialogue and of openness that characterizes the Council, the missionary method of Father Ricci appears as vital and actual as ever. The conciliar decree Ad Gentes seems to allude to this when it describes the attitude that Christians must have: 'That they may be able to give this witness to Christ fruitfully, let them be joined to those men by esteem and love, and acknowledge themselves to be members of the

group of men among whom they live. Let them share in cultural and social life by the various exchanges and enterprises of human living. Let them be familiar with their national and religious traditions, gladly and reverently laying bare the seeds of the Word which lie hidden in them . . . ' (Ad Gentes, no. 11)

He too carried the faith that he had inherited from his family and from his people to a far away country; he brought there the science that he had assimilated in this Gregorian University, in order to offer them to a people rich in high moral traditions and of a noble civilization, while his method of evangelization contributed likewise to enriching the Church with such diverse cultural elements, so refined and so precious.

He succeeded in establishing a bridge between the Church and Chinese culture, a bridge that still appears firm and secure notwithstanding the incomprehensions and the difficulties that arose in the past and that are again reasserting themselves. I am convinced that the Church can orientate itself without fear along this path with her gaze turned toward the future.

We may have confidence that the obstacles can be leveled, and that an appropriate method and the adequate structures for resuming dialogue will be found and will be kept constantly open. In this way, all Chinese believers can feel at ease whether in the national communi-

ty or in the Church. We are certain that this will likewise redound to the advantage of the whole Chinese nation which the Church profoundly esteems and loves.



Father Ricci's Tomb, an Appeal to Dialogue and Collaboration

Even after his death, Father Matteo Ricci remained in China. The land for the construction of his tomb was donated by the Emperor himself. Marveling at a decision unheard of in the history of China, the Chancellor responded: 'Nor has it ever happened in the history of China that a foreigner, so eminent in science and virtue as Father Ricci, has come here'.

In addition to giving the

land for his tomb, the Emperor also gave the Jesuits a residence and a place of worship, thus granting his protection to the Catholic Church in China, which consequently was able to work with serenity and success.

May the Society of Jesus, inspired and encouraged by the example of this illustrious son, and led by the inscrutable guidance of the Spirit, even today have the possibility of bringing its efficacious contribution to the work of culture and of evangelization of the Chinese people. The tomb of Matteo Ricci in Peking is like the grain of wheat hidden in the depths of the earth in order to bring forth abundant fruit. It constitutes an eloquent appeal, both in Rome and in Peking, to take up again the dialogue that he initiated four hundred years ago with so much love and so much success.

I invite all of you to strengthen and support this fervent wish with incessant prayer, as I impart to you my very special and gracious Apostolic Benediction'.

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