

# An appeal for dialogue from Ricci's tomb

by Angelo S. LAZZAROTTO



The decision of Pope John Paul II to attend the concluding session of the International Study Conference on Matteo Ricci, which was held jointly at the University of Macerata and at the Gregorian University of Rome, took the organizers by surprise. The address which the Pope read in the hall of the Gregorian University on the evening of the 25th of October was a significant tribute to Ricci's role as mediator between East and West and an authoritative declaration of Rome's openness to realities of Contemporary China. The Pope's initiative underlined his deep appreciation for the marks of respect being shown in the People's Republic of China for this foreign priest who, four centuries ago, took to heart the scientific progress of China.

A recent article in the China Daily (3 March 1982) explained that the decision to repair and renovate Ricci's tomb, which had been destroyed by the red guards, was taken in March of 1979. China has come a long way since then in

reversing the radical tendencies of the gang of four. A long article in the Renmin Ribao on November 4, 1979, praised Ricci as a pioneer of cultural exchange between China and the West. In the past two years, valuable studies by historians of various Chinese Universities have pointed to several traits of Ricci's rich personality, his openness in sharing with his Chinese friends the scientific knowledge he had brought with him from Europe and the honest and sympathetic way in which he presented the Chinese cultural and social values to the West.

As was rightly pointed out on the occasion of Cardinal Roger Etchegaray's visit to Beijing, "If Ricci were alive today, he would certainly be all in favour of China's modernization programs." (Xinhua, 3 March 1980) A recent article in China Daily acknowledged the fact that, during the Cultural Revolution, Ricci and his colleagues had been falsely charged with bringing to China an "imperialist culture". The paper added that, on the contrary, they should be "recognized for their contribution in bringing to China

scientific knowledge of the West."

Pope John Paul II, besides acknowledging this scientific contribution, underlines the dual nature of the work he did while in China, which made him a true cultural mediator. The Pope speaks of Ricci as a pioneer "who, having been able to penetrate to the heart of Chinese culture and society, brought to that great country the science and technology of Europe and opened to the West the civilization and the cultural riches of the Chinese people." By perseverance in his work and his attitude of respect, Ricci became a "bridge between the two civilizations, European and Chinese."

After analyzing Ricci's efforts towards inculturation at different levels, the Pope points out that Ricci's scientific contribution is particularly appreciated by the Chinese people because of "his humble, honest and disinterested attitude; he was not inspired by ulterior motives and was free of conditioning by any foreign economic or military power."

Pope John Paul II praises Ricci's decision to "bear witness to his religious faith at the very heart of society by following the life-style of the scholars, who, like him, were concerned about the social life of the community. In doing so, Ricci intended to show that his religious faith did

not motivate him to escape from society, but rather to get involved in the world, for the improvement of social life."

Drawing from the long history of the Catholic Church in its encounter with peoples of different cultural backgrounds, the Pope does not hesitate to compare Ricci's effort to that of the Roman philosopher and martyr, St. Justin, of Clement from Alexandria and of Origen, in their concern to translate the Christian message in terms understandable to the cultural world of the second and third centuries.

The tone and the content of the address by Pope John Paul II appear to be a gesture of goodwill and appreciation towards China, along the same lines of his discourse in Manila (February 1981). But, while in Manila, the Pope addressed himself primarily to the Chinese Catholic communities, at the Gregorian University, considering Ricci's experience, he focused on the more general question of the encounter between Chinese culture and Christianity.

Commenting on the "fundamental unity of the human and cultural values of the Chinese people, which are shared by all Chinese even outside the mainland", the Pope added a significant statement which is not without political meaning. He said: "The Church, appreciating the spiritual qualities

of every people, cannot but see the Chinese People, the most numerous in the world, as a great unified reality, a crucible of valuable traditions and vital ferment." By these words the Pope intended, most probably, to indicate that he was not in favor of a 'two China' policy and he is also prepared to deal with the necessary consequences of this position.

Pope John Paul II does not take lightly the "misunderstandings and difficulties which occurred in the past and which are still present even now". But he is convinced that the 'bridge' which Matteo Ricci built between the Church and Chinese culture "appears to stand solid and steady," thus offering new reason for confidence.

Referring to the obstacles standing in the way of a fruitful dialogue, he said: "We can have faith that obstacles can be removed and that an appropriate manner and adequate structures can be found to resume the dialogue and to keep it constantly open. In this fashion all the Chinese believers will be able to feel at ease both within their national community and in the Church. This will surely be to the advantage of the Chinese nation, which the Church deeply admires and loves."

Referring to Ricci's tomb, John Paul II said: "It constitutes an eloquent appeal to both Rome and Beijing to resume that dialogue

which Ricci started four hundred years ago with such enthusiasm and success."

Christians from around the world who share in that same love for China also join the Pope in this heart-felt expectation and pray that this day may come soon.

Rome, 12 Nov. 1982.