
Matteo Ricci, friend of China'

by **Edward Malatesta**



On August 7, 1582 Matteo Ricci arrived in Macao from Goa to begin an intensive study of the Chinese language. Thirteen months later, on September 10, 1583, Matteo, together with his fellow Jesuit Michele Ruggieri, arrived in Zhaoqing in southern Guangdong Province. From that day until now Christian communities have existed uninterruptedly in the great nation of China.

The years 1982 and 1983 mark therefore the four hundredth anniversary of the humble beginnings of Christian presence in China from the late Ming dynasty onwards. This third encounter of Christianity with Chinese life and culture has proved to be more fruitful and lasting than the coming of the Nestorians in the seventh century and the missionary efforts of the Italian Franciscans in the thir-

teenth and fourteenth centuries, which, after some initial successes, had left few permanent effects.

And so the years 1982 and 1983, which recall the arrival of Matteo in Macao and Zhaoqing, offer the occasion for various celebrations in Macao, Hong Kong, Taiwan and mainland China.² An academic symposium on the first two centuries of Jesuit presence in China (1582 - 1773) was held in October at Loyola University, Chicago. Likewise in October, celebrations were sponsored by the Ricci Institute in Paris and jointly by the University of Macerata and the Pontifical Gregorian University of Rome. In 1983 the Institute of Jesuit Sources, which is located in St. Louis, will publish the first English translation of one of Ricci's major works, Tianzhu shiyi (The True Notion of God). The major celebration of Hong Kong is planned for

September - October 1983. I am grateful for the kind invitation to share some reflections on the meaning of the 4th centenary.

During the years 1582-1800, over nine hundred European Jesuits came to dedicate their talents and their lives to China.³ Already during Ricci's lifetime, the first Chinese members made their notable contributions to the work of the order in their homeland. After 1631 other religious orders and diocesan priests also came to China. Among so many good and dedicated men and women, why is it that Matteo Ricci is remembered and admired more than anyone else? Many answers might be given to this question, but it seems to me the basic reason why Ricci was and is so highly esteemed and so affectionately remembered is that he deeply loved China and the Chinese people and he lived, spoke and wrote in such a way that the people of China understood that he loved them and their country.

Ricci was able to become such a lasting friend of China because from his youth, first in his family and town, then in the Society of Jesus in Rome which he joined at the age of 19, he learned to love and be loved. His letters reveal to us the strong bonds of affection that bound him to his family, teachers, superiors, and confreres. Unfortunately of the many letters Matteo wrote from China, less than sixty have survived.⁴ They are an important

source for knowing his mind and heart.

Matteo was probably the eldest of the nine sons and four daughters born to the pharmacist Giovanni Battista Ricci and his wife Giovanna Angiolelli. He wished his elderly father to write to him or to have his brothers write in his place.⁵ He remembered and deeply appreciated his grandmother Laria and the love she showed him as a child.⁶ He could reassure his brother Anton Maria, also a priest, that his love for him had increased rather than diminished with the years.⁷ In his letters he asks to be remembered to his aunts, uncles, and cousins.⁸ His native place was very dear to him and he asks Father Costa, who was also from Macerata, to give him news about their city.⁹

To his first teacher, the diocesan priest Nicolo Bencivegni who became a Jesuit in 1559, Matteo was grateful "for the love he taught us" and for the initiation he gave to a devout Christian life.¹⁰ He had a particular affection for his master of novices, Father De' Fabi,¹¹ and for Father Maselli who had been his rector when he studied at the Roman College and to whom he would write with many tears.¹² He presented his teacher Clavius to the Chinese as "a man of worldwide renown" and he taught, translated and adapted his works. Some of these were dedicated by the author in his own hand and sent to his former student in China.¹³

From the first moment Ricci entered China, he attracted many persons. I would suggest that, although the Chinese may have been drawn to him just because he was a foreigner and a learned one at that, they appreciated even more his rich sensitivity and exquisite tact in establishing human relationships, and especially his capacity for friendship.

The first Chinese person to become a Christian after the Fathers had settled in Zhaoqing was a poor incurable who had been abandoned by his family which could no longer care for him. The Fathers built him a little house and everyday sent him what he needed. When asked if he would like to hear about the Christian faith, he replied "that the help they gave him came from heaven and that he would readily listen to our teaching because if it taught persons to act in such a loving way it must be true." While continuing to care for him, the Fathers instructed him and then baptized him a few days before he died.¹⁴

Ricci showed his love for China and the Chinese by devoting himself during many years to a serious study of the language. At the age of 41, and already established in China for six years, he wrote to Father General Acquaviva that he was becoming a schoolboy again to learn classical Chinese, "out of love for the God who became man for love of me."¹⁵ His reli-

gious motivation was the wellspring of his love for China.

He wished to adapt himself to his new locale as far as possible. In a letter to his brother Orazio, Ricci writes:

I have chosen to live in exile, far from my dear ones and without the company of other Europeans. I no longer eat bread or drink wine. I wear different clothes and have let my hair and beard grow long. I am plagued by thieves who attack our house and death is always before my eyes. I willingly bear all this out of love for God so that He pardon our sins and free us from hell.¹⁶

A characteristic of the first Fathers which aroused much admiration was their readiness to pardon those who had offended them. On one occasion in Shaozhou (now Shaoguan), some young men attacked their house with stones during the night damaging the roof and mistreating the servants. The servants had one of the delinquents arrested, but Ricci interceded for him and he was released. Ricci willingly did this "because of his obligation as a religious person, and to lead non-Christians to understand that the Christian way of life not only does not take revenge but also returns good for evil".¹⁷

Ricci dedicated much of his time to study and to publications. But one of his favorite occupations was to converse with the many persons who came to see him or invited him to their homes. In these conversations Ricci generously shared his culture and his faith. He willingly taught the mathematics and science he knew, presided over the first translation of six books of Euclid into Chinese and introduced his acquaintances to European techniques of painting and to the arts of making clocks and maps. When the opportunity was present and his friends wished, he would speak about the meaning of life, God and the human soul, the person of Jesus, the Church and religious life. To those who seemed disposed, he offered a more extended teaching about the Christian faith, received into the Church those ready for baptism, and cared for their spiritual needs after they became Christians.

Gradually his days became so full that he had to reserve part of the nights to say some of his daily prayers and to answer in Chinese the many letters he received from various parts of the country.¹⁸ In 1599 he wrote to Father Costa from Nanjing saying: "I am careful to take my nourishment early in the morning. Because of the constant succession of visitors, I am forced to fast throughout the day."¹⁹

So total was Ricci's love for God and for others that he

desired to be able to shed his blood for the Christian faith and its progress in China. In a letter to Father Costa from Peking in 1605 he asked his friend: "Pray for me, most beloved Father, that one day God may grant that I culminate my life with the gift of a holy death in such a way that our Christian Church in China may not be inferior to those which were watered not only with the sweat of labor but with the blood of martyrdom."²⁰

In point of fact, it might be said that Ricci, after living a life of friendship, died as a martyr to friendship. In the Spring of 1610 imperial examinations were held in Peking for some 3000 scholars. Many of these wanted to come and meet "the wise man from the West". Ricci, in addition to his other occupations, received all those he could. His hospitality surely contributed to the deterioration of his already weak health, and ultimately led to his death on May 10th of that year.

Ricci was quick to notice and praise the importance Chinese culture attached to friendship. He notes with special interest the relation of deep and lasting friendship established between those who obtain degrees and between the graduates and those who examine them. "The graduates of the same year at the doctoral and licentiate levels are such close friends that they treat each other like brothers and mutually help each other and their families all their lives. The bond of friendship is even stronger

between teachers and their disciples who love each other as fathers and sons with much respect and reverence."²¹

While admiring the people and customs he saw about him, Ricci was not blind to the defects that he observed and which exist in every people. He was not favorably impressed by the spirit of insincerity and consequent distrust that often marred human relations. He shrewdly remarked on the basis of some sad experiences of his own: "Their way of dealing (of some people) consists merely in external politeness and fine sounding words, without that interior truth and love in the heart which belong to friendship."²²

Because of the vast size and population of China, Ricci wished that many more of his confreres would come there to share their culture and their faith. But in asking the Father General to send others, he insists that they be men of charity and patience, for he considers these qualities as most necessary for those who want to live and work in China.²³ At the same time Ricci wished that Chinese men would enter the Jesuit order and serve their country as religious. On October 10, 1589, when Ricci had been in Zhaoqing for only six years and the new Christian community numbered only some 80 persons, Valignano petitioned the General to admit into the Jesuits four Chinese of Macao. Two began the novitiate on January 1, 1591.

Fifteen years later, on August 22, 1606, Ricci wrote that in the four Jesuit residences in China, there were thirteen foreign priests and four Chinese brothers; a fourth Chinese novice had been received that year, and four or five young men were candidates for reception. In 1610, the year Ricci died, there were eight foreign priests in China and eight Chinese brothers. In the short space of 27 years, one-half of the clergy was already Chinese.²⁴

Ricci labored with a humility as deep as his love. As the first modern missionary to China, he considered that his role was not "to gather the harvest, nor even to sow seeds, but to clear the forests". He looked upon the enterprise of mediating the meeting of Chinese culture and Christian faith as "something very great" ("cosa si grande"), and thought himself to be a "very poor instrument" for the task,²⁵ "an unworthy son engaged in some occupation because other persons are lacking".²⁶ He believed that his contribution to the work was to be measured not so much by the labors undertaken as by the love with which they were undertaken. In his humility he judged that his own love for God and for others was too little.²⁷

During his years in China, at the same time that he gave of himself, Ricci was continually and eagerly receiving and learning from the Chinese. China's geography, language, literature, history and

social customs fascinated him. He studied the ancient classics and sought in the earlier Confucian tradition correspondences with the Christian conception of God. It is true that he did not understand the part of truth contained in Buddhism and Taoism, but that was due not to any refusal to accept persons, but rather to the limitations of the scholastic, philosophical mindset that was his, and the negative attitudes of the Confucian scholars he frequented. He was grateful for the help he received from government officials, scholars, servants and the many friends he made wherever he went.

Shortly after his arrival in Nanchang, between November 4 and December 31, 1595, Ricci wrote out 76 sentences in Chinese and offered them to the Prince of Jianan. This was the beginning of what was to become one of his most popular works, Jiaoyou Lun (Treatise on Friendship). By February 1601, there were 100 maxims. These sentences were written both in the appropriate Chinese characters, and in other characters that produced the sounds of the original Latin. "So many learned persons asked to see and copy it," Ricci wrote, "that I always have some copies on hand to show." One friend published the treatise in 1595 or 1596 near Nanchang. In 1599 another edited it in Nanking. In his preface, Su Da Yong said that by his doctrine Ricci shows that the two civilizations of East and West are in accord with each other as

the two pieces of a contract. But Ricci not only put into Chinese a hundred sayings on friendship; as we have seen, he cultivated and treasured friends, and so lived out the meaning of the maxims he circulated.²⁸

CONCLUSION

Matteo Ricci has often been called a bridge builder, for it was he who was the first in modern times to bring about a mutually enriching exchange between China and the West. This article has attempted to show that the foundation on which this bridge was built is mutual esteem and love. From his side Ricci brought a love for the country of China, Chinese culture, and most of all the Chinese people. The quality of his life and love elicited a response of love from the side of China. Through him China came to appreciate the countries, cultures and peoples of Europe. Through him some Chinese were drawn to share belief in and love for the person of Jesus Christ, the source of his relationship to China.

In celebrating the 400th anniversary of Ricci's arrival in China -- the arrival of Christianity and of the Society of Jesus, he would say -- we are remembering the bridge he built between China and the West upon the foundation of love. This bridge still exists, for the bond of love between China and other countries continues. It is the challenge of our generation and of

the generations that will come after us to maintain and strengthen this bond of love. The many friends of China throughout the world rejoice at the new possibilities for progress which have emerged in recent years. They are ready to collaborate in appropriate ways to the building of the New China and to favor mutual understanding, esteem, love and exchange between China and all other countries.

Many friends and admirers believe that China has a unique and indispensable contribution to make to human society. The cultivation of virtue and of personal relationships, promotion of the family, respect for elders and for learning, frugality and diligence, patience and humor, readiness to share possessions with others, love of the nation and tireless efforts for its progress, in short, the Chinese way of living human life has much to teach the Western countries.

Those of us who are Christian friends of China also believe that when the Christian faith is expressed and lived in an authentically Chinese way, Christians throughout the world and all people will receive many benefits. This was the hope expressed in the last words of Ricci's Tianzhu shiyi (The True Notion of God). The

Chinese scholar concludes his dialogue with the Western scholar by saying:

You have caused us in this age of the the Great Ming dynasty to receive the sacred will of our great Father and to keep it. As I silently think things over I find myself experiencing both great joy and a deep feeling of sorrow. I must return home, review the teachings I have heard and write them down so that I do not forget them. I hope I can hear everything about this true doctrine concerning man's return to his sources!

I trust that the Lord of Heaven will protect you so that you may promulgate His teachings, so that each family in China will hand them down from generation to generation, so that every person will chant them, and so that everyone will cultivate goodness and cease to do evil. The contribution this would make to the general welfare of mankind would be so great as to be beyond calculation!

NOTES:

1. These pages represent an expanded version of a conference given

at Wah Yan College, Kowloon, Hong Kong on September 12, 1982. I would like to express my gratitude to Monsignor Otello Gentili, noted Ricci scholar and archivist of the diocese of Macerata, Ricci's birthplace, for kindly sharing with me a copy of his essay "Le virtù eroiche del P. Matteo Ricci, S.J., anima e complemento del suo metodo apostolico" ("The Heroic Virtues of Father Matteo Ricci, S.J., Source and Soul of his Apostolic Method"), from which I have drawn references to Ricci's letters.

2. China Pictorial (Beijing, no. 7, 1982) contained two very fine pages with illustrations entitled "Matteo Ricci, Pioneer of East-West Cultural Exchanges".

3. See Joseph Dehergne, S.J., Répertoire des jésuites de Chine de 1552 à 1800. Rome/Paris, Institutum Historicum Societatis Iesu. Letouzey & Ané, 1973.

4. The known letters were edited by Pietro Tacchi Venturi in the second volume of Opere storiche del P. Matteo Ricci, S.J., Macerata, 1913. We will cite this work as Op st II.

5. Op st II, 100.

6. Op st II, 97.

7. Op st II, 220.

8. Op st II, 100.

9. Op st II, 245.

10. Op st II, 245.

11. Op st II, 88, n. 1.

12. Op st II, 112.

13. Pasquale d'Elia, Fonti Ricciane. Roma, 1942-1949 (cited hereafter as FR), I, #262.

14. Op st II, 251.

15. Op st II, 118.

16. Op st II, 279.

17. FR, I, #381-382. See also #406-407, 415, 417, 428; II, #879.

18. Op st II, 206.

19. Op st II, 249.

20. Op st II, 277.

21. FR, I, #73; see also #100.

22. FR, I, #164.

23. Op st II, 59.

24. FR, I, pp. CXXIX-CXXX; pp.9-10, n.7; pp.271-272, n.5; p.258, n.1; p.289, n.3; pp.290-293, n.1; II, pp.435-436, n.7; pp.465-467, n.5; p.641.

25. Op st II, 269.

26. Op st II, 66.

27. Op st II, 370-371.

28. FR, I, #482.