

The influence of Matteo Ricci's missionary efforts on successive generations

~ a summary ~

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We should pay tribute to the Italian missionary Jesuit Matteo Ricci. Because of his efforts the Catholic mission in China has been able to come to the present achievement.

Matteo Ricci arrived in Macao in 1582. In 1583 he entered Zhaoqing, China. After that he began his missionary work under a very difficult situation. However his efforts were successful.

It is already 400 years since Ricci's entrance into China. On the occasion of this anniversary, why do we want to especially remember him and to plan various programs for a special celebration? The reason is that he is a very important figure in Chinese history. His missionary work has had a great influence on the successive generations. He has laid down a foundation for the Catholic missions in China. His missionary work was continued and developed by his followers. After his death virtuous and highly educated Jesuits continued to enter China and developed an exchange between East and West. Such East and West communication happened on a new level which no one had achieved before. Unfortunately 100 years later this communication was suddenly interrupted by the Rites Controversy. From that time on China and Europe did not have positive contacts any more and therefore mutual misunderstandings followed. For the Chinese this interruption and misunderstanding resulted in all kinds of unequal treaties on the political level, and numerous persecutions of the Chinese Catholics on the religious level.

Today we talk about and remember Ricci not only because he was a great missionary bringing the Catholic Church to China and so is a benefactor to the Chinese Church, but also because he is like a wonderful person sent by God to preach the Gospel to the Chinese people, to build the Kingdom of God in the land of China, as well as to inject into the body of the Great Middle Kingdom the blood of the Western culture so that the Chinese society could be reconstructed and thus the Chinese people could benefit.

The Rites Controversy not only damaged the contribution of Ricci and his followers in the next 100 years, but the Chinese people also missed an opportunity to make the country both rich and modernized. It is an undeniable fact that since the Opium War the Chinese political life has corrupted and scientific knowledge has been at a very low level. When we reflect back on the history we cannot but feel regret for the consequences of this disastrous event.

This article stresses the following five points:

I. Ricci preached the Gospel to the Chinese without destroying the Chinese traditional culture. He introduced the scientific knowledge to the Chinese first. As soon as he was accepted by the people he began to teach them the catholic doctrine. His missionary work underwent three difficult stages: A. He adapted to the situation. He learned the Chinese language and studied Chinese literature. He wore Chinese Confucian garments. He really converted himself into a Chinese. B. He changed the situation. He introduced the new Western scientific knowledge to the Chinese scholars so that he was admired by them. C. He created a new situation. After he was accepted and admired by the Chinese people, Ricci began to preach the Gospel and to build churches.

II. Although in the Ming Dynasty Ricci was not the earliest missionary entering China, however he was a highly educated person and was familiar with the Chinese classical literature. All his friends came from the intellectual class. Some of them were even officials working for the emperor. Those people were authoritative persons and had great influence upon the Ming Dynasty. Therefore, even after Ricci's death, his missionary work could perdure. The reason is that the Chinese scholars defended catholicism. From this we can see that in the Ming society in which the Confucianists were a leading class, this missionary methodology, that is, the "from above methodology" was very effective.

III. In their time the Jesuits, following the path of Ricci, did

not forbid the Chinese to worship heaven, to worship ancestors and reverence Confucius. They considered that the Chinese worshipped heaven because they thought that heaven is the source of all creatures. Their liturgy of worshipping ancestors is a result of their filial piety. Their reverence for Confucius was because they respected his personality. They were not worshipping idols. Ricci has shown his appreciation for the Chinese culture. He found out some concepts such as heaven, Lord of heaven and Lord (shangdi) in the Chinese classical literature and explained that the ancient Chinese people expressed their belief in the Creator through such concepts. In so doing Ricci won for himself a large group of Chinese scholars who admired and praised him.

IV. The greatest contribution of Ricci was the promotion of mutual exchange between the East and West. Among all the Western learning that Ricci introduced into China the natural sciences are the most important, including astronomy, mathematics, technology for making gunpowder, mining and water conservancy through irrigation. In Europe almost all of the Chinese classical literature was translated into Latin. Missionaries and merchants were the chief mediators who brought the Chinese literature and arts into Europe. In 18th century Europe there emerged a significant trend toward the appreciation of Chinese culture.

V. Unfortunately in the Qing dynasty the internal conflict among missionaries and the pope's insufficient knowledge of the Chinese culture brought forth the unfortunate event that we call the Rites Controversy. This event irritated the Chinese emperor Kang Xi. He issued an edict banning the missionary work in China. The normal contacts between East and West were interrupted at that time and the Chinese culture was developed in isolation. Since then the Chinese culture did not make any advancement in science and technology so that it fell behind. However 18th and 19th century Europe was in a great evolution. The international situation did not allow China to continue her self-confined policy. Finally the economic and trading problems led to warfare. Because China always lost the battles she was forced to sign many unequal treaties which did great harm to the country. From what we have said above one can see the great influence of the Rites Controversy on the successive generations in China.

The main thrust of this article is to analyze the above-mentioned five points. Today when we reflect back upon the past history we cannot help but give thanks to Father Matteo Ricci for his friendship with and love for the Chinese people. We hope that through the remembrance of Ricci we can be full of confidence and hope once again and open ourselves to all people, cooperating with them in the same faith.