



The Chinese Rites Controversy

by Peter BARRY

Matteo Ricci died in Beijing on May 11, 1610. It is reported that on his deathbed one of his fellow Jesuits asked Ricci: "Do you know, my father, in what position you leave us?" "Yes," Ricci replied, "I leave you before a door which may be opened to great merits, but not without much trouble and danger."¹

One kind of "trouble and danger" was the so-called Rites Controversy. Ricci felt that Christianity must in part adapt and adjust its teachings and practices to those of China. In December, 1603, in his capacity as superior of the mission, Ricci had issued a directive (no longer extant) declaring as licit the two ritual customs of honoring Confucius and the ancestors, and describing them as most likely not superstitious.² Ricci's directive was approved by the Jesuit Visitor to Asia, Alessandro Valignano, who resided in Macao.

Controversy concerning the rites traces its origins to the arrival in China of other Religious Orders besides the Jesuits. For 47 years, since the arrival of Ricci and Michael Ruggieri in Zhaoqing (Guangdong Province) in 1583, the Jesuits were the only missionaries in China. Then in 1631, two Spanish Dominicans went to Fujian from the Philippines. In 1633, two more Dominicans and two Franciscans arrived in Fujian. One of the former was John B. de Morales and one of the latter, Anthony of Santa Maria. Both Fathers were to play prominent roles in the history of the controversy. Deported back to Manila in 1637, the newcomers had an unfavorable impression of the missionary methods of their predecessors.³ During their brief stay in Fujian, they had compiled a survey, entitled "Informaciones," which spelled out the different views of the rites. This later formed the basis of an appeal to Rome for a decision on the liceity of the rites.

From the beginning, however, it should also be pointed out that Ricci did not have the complete support of all his Jesuit confreres in his view of the rites. An example of this, and a prediction of things to come, was the early permission for Mass in Chinese. At the request of Nicholas Trigault, S.J., Pope Paul V, in the brief "Romanae Ecclesiae Antistes" dated June 27, 1615, granted permission for the celebration of Mass in the vernacular in China. However, the

permission was never used because of the objection to it by the Jesuits in Japan.⁴

In 1643, the abovementioned Father Morales, O.P., now in Rome, submitted to the Holy See some "Doubtful Questions," in which he described the differences between the Jesuits and the mendicant Orders regarding the participation of Christians in ceremonies honoring Confucius or the ancestors. The response of the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda Fide, dated September 1645, was negative. This meant that the rites as presented by Morales were prohibited. Pope Innocent X gave his approval to Propaganda's response, but added "until such a time as His Holiness or the apostolic Holy See should ordain otherwise."⁵

The Jesuits sent one of their number, Martino Martini, to Rome in 1654 to appeal the 1645 verdict on the rites. In a decree dated March 23, 1656, and approved by Pope Alexander VII, Rome ruled in favor of the Jesuit practice. Regarding the ceremonies in honor of Confucius, the decree declared: ". . . the abovementioned rites ought to be permitted for Chinese Christians because it seems that it is simply a civil and political cult." And regarding rites in honor of the dead, it said, "...it is tolerated for Chinese converts to practice the ceremonies for their dead relatives, while rejecting all forms of superstition."⁶

The same open attitude towards local customs was evident a few years later, in 1659, when Pope Alexander VII established the institution of vicars apostolic. The Pope's purpose was to win back control of the Asian missions from the hands of the Portuguese crown. Under the Padroado system, as it was called, the missions in China and in other parts of Asia were under the "protection" of the king of Portugal. Missionaries were obliged to sail from Lisbon in Portuguese ships, and the king had the right to nominate bishops in China.⁷ At any rate, the Monitum (advice) issued by the Pope to the vicars apostolic in 1659 told them not to persuade people to change their customs, if these were not contrary to religion or moral conduct.⁸

A further question which arose was whether the decree of 1656 replaced the one of 1645. On November 20, 1669, the Sacred Congregation issued a third decree (approved by Pope Clement IX) which declared that both previous decrees are in force according to the circumstances described in each one. In other words, it was left to the conscience of each individual missionary to judge whether the circumstances of 1645 or 1656 obtained.⁹

Meanwhile in 1665, during a period when the missionaries were in disfavor, 23 of them were confined to the same house in Guangzhou for the space of five years. They

included 19 Jesuits, 3 Dominicans and one Franciscan. The missionaries used the opportunity of being together to hold a conference about mission methods, and, if possible, obtain uniformity in this. The conference ended on January 26, 1668, and its conclusions were contained in 42 articles. Article #41 declared: "Regarding the ceremonies to Confucius and the ancestors, we decide to follow the responses of the Holy Office approved by Pope Alexander VII in 1656 because they are founded on a very probable opinion, which cannot be opposed by any contrary evidence."¹⁰

To show agreement, all the missionaries signed the articles, except the Franciscan, Anthony of Santa Maria. He did not sign all the articles, and he erased his name from others. Another missionary who had second thoughts was Dominic Navarette, O.P. He escaped to Macao, and eventually made his way to Europe, where in 1676 he published a book critical of the Jesuits' methods, especially concerning the rites.

The next important figure in the controversy is Charles Maigrot, vicar apostolic of Fujian. As was mentioned above, the vicars apostolic were appointed in 1659. The first vicars were the founders of the Paris Foreign Mission Society (est. 1661). One of their number, Pallu, finally succeeded in getting to China in 1683, but died the following year in Maigrot's arms. The Paris Foreign Mission Society was at

last established in China, but they were not warmly received by the Jesuits because they did not sail under the flag of Portugal.¹¹

It should also be pointed out that at this time (1680's), another vicar apostolic, and the first Chinese bishop, Lo Wenzao, wrote a treatise in defense of Ricci's position on the rites.¹²

In 1693, Maigrot issued a mandate which applied to all the missionaries in his vicariate prohibiting the use of "Tian" and "Shangdi" in Catholic worship, and forbidding Christians to participate in solemn ceremonies in honor of Confucius and the dead, "until the Holy See decides the question." Then, in 1694, Mgr. Maigrot sent two Paris missionaries to Rome to ask Pope Innocent XII to re-examine the question of the rites. Four cardinals were at length appointed to take up the case in 1697.¹³

To bolster their position, the Jesuits sought a ruling on the rites from Emperor Kangxi himself. In a statement, dated November 30, 1700, Kangxi expressed agreement with the Jesuit interpretation, namely, that the rites to Confucius and the ancestors were purely civil and political. In the accompanying letter, the Beijing Jesuits assured the Pope that they were gradually replacing the rites with Christian funeral practices.¹⁴

Meanwhile, a new Pope, Clement XI, who was destined to play

a major role in the controversy, was elected on November 23, 1700. A year later, on December 5, 1701, Pope Clement announced that an apostolic visitor would be going to China "to execute the decision of the Holy See concerning the rites."¹⁵

The conclusion of the investigation into the rites by the commission of Cardinals is dated November 20, 1704, but it was not published in Rome or Europe. It took the form of seven responses.

1. The word "Tianzhu" (天主) must be used for the name of God, "Tian" (天) and "Shangdi" (上帝) are prohibited.
2. The words "Jing Tian" (敬天) must be removed from the churches in China.
3. If past responses of the Sacred Congregation have been different, it is no judgment on the truth or falsity of the original appeals.
4. Solemn ceremonies in temples or halls in honor of Confucius or the ancestors are forbidden; however, private ceremonies before a tablet or in a private home are permitted. At public ceremonies at tombs or during funerals, a passive presence and simple material assistance are allowed, so as not to incur the enmity of relatives and friends. What can be tolerated and what precautions to take are left to the judgment of the Visitor in consultation with the bishops and vicars in China.
5. Ancestor tablets with the usual inscriptions are prohibited; but the name of the deceased on the tablet with an explanation of the Christian belief about death alongside is allowed.
6. and 7.

Concerning the nature of Chinese religion, the Sacred Congregation admits that it does not have enough information; the Visitor has the power to render judgment in this matter after consultation with the bishops and vicars in China.¹⁶

Without Portuguese approval, the papal Visitor (legate), Maillard de Tournon, left Europe for China in February, 1703. He arrived in Macao on April 2, 1705 and in Beijing on December 4, 1705. He stayed in the capitol for nine months. Suspicious of the Jesuits at the court, Tournon chose the Lazarist, Appiani, as his translator and Maigrot, MEP, as his counselor.

The negotiations at the court in Beijing did not go well. Tournon attempted to point out the sources of conflict between the Chinese ceremonies and the Christian faith. Angered that a foreigner would presume to pass judgment on Chinese customs, Emperor Kangxi, in August, 1706, ordered the expulsion of Tournon from the country and the detention of Maigrot and Appiani at the Jesuit residence in Beijing. In a further decree, the emperor ordered all the missionaries to keep the rules laid down by Ricci regarding the rites, and to obtain a permit to preach the Gospel in China.¹⁷

After he heard that the missionaries were required to obtain a permit to remain in China, Tournon, in Nanjing on his way out of China,

on February 7, 1707, published the 1704 decree against the rites. Although Tournon did not have the actual text, he knew the general content of the response, and this he made public. If missionaries were interrogated by Chinese authorities (in connection with receiving the permit), they were obliged to declare, under pain of excommunication, that several things in Chinese doctrine and customs were not in accord with divine law, most notably "sacrifices to Confucius and the ancestors, and the use of ancestor tablets," he announced.¹⁸

Disliked by both the Chinese and Portuguese authorities, Tournon was detained in Macao. There he excommunicated the bishop because the latter had issued a pastoral letter forbidding recognition of the legate's power. Pope Clement XI awarded Tournon the Cardinal's red hat, which he received at the hands of some missionaries before his death in 1710.

Some missionaries refused the permit and were obliged to leave China. Others took it, hoping an appeal to Rome could reverse the decisions of 1704 and Nanjing. The appeal was signed by 22 Jesuits and several of the vicars apostolic.¹⁹

The 1704 responses of the Holy Office were published in Europe in March, 1709. On September 25, 1710 a new decree confirmed the Nanjing mandate of legate Tournon, but added that the terms of the

mandate were not meant to go beyond those of the decree of 1704.²⁰

The final blow for all those who had hoped to achieve an accommodation to the rites was the decree "Ex illa die," issued on March 19, 1715 and approved by Pope Clement XI. "Ex illa die" confirmed the decree of 1704, and carried the following sub-title:

For total and absolute, entire and inviolable observation of what has previously been decreed by the Holy See on Chinese rites or ceremonies, and rejects all reasons or excuses for avoiding execution of these decrees, and prescribes the formula of an oath to be taken regarding this matter by all present and future missionaries in these countries.²¹

Pope Clement also added the words: "All are required to submit in humility and obedience. In clear and simple terms, it is declared that the cause is finished."

The terms of "Ex illa die" seem to have left little doubt as to Rome's meaning:

1. The use of "Tian" and "Shangdi" as names for God is rejected.
2. The use of "Jing Tian" in churches is prohibited.
3. Christians are not permitted to be present or to minister

- at ceremonies in honor of Confucius or the ancestors.
4. Christians are not permitted to offer sacrifices, to minister or to perform any rites or ceremonies for the dead, either in temples or in homes.
 5. Christians are not permitted to make offerings, or perform rites and ceremonies before tablets of the ancestors or at their graves.
 6. No merely material assistance, nor express or tacit approval, in superstitious acts of the pagans is permitted.
 7. Tablets which signify that they are the throne or seat of the dead person's spirit may not be retained in Christian homes. However, tablets with the name only of the deceased on them may be used, provided all trace of superstition and scandal are avoided. Where such tablets are retained, a declaration of Christian belief regarding death must be added on the side.
 8. With permission, other rites for the dead, usually performed by the pagans, may be carried out, if they are not superstitious. It is left to the judgment of the apostolic visitor, and the bishops and vicars apostolic of China, to decide what

these rites are and under what circumstances they may be tolerated. Diligent care and study should be exercised, so that in time Catholic ceremonies may gradually be introduced to replace the pagan ones.²²

The decree "Ex illa die" reached Guangzhou in August, 1716 and was distributed secretly to all the provinces. On April 16, 1717 the highest councils in China rendered a judgment calling for the expulsion of all missionaries from China, the prohibition of the Christian faith, the destruction of churches and abjuration of the faith by Chinese Christians. The sentence was approved a month later by Emperor Kangxi.²³

At this time, Rome decided to send another papal legate, Mezzabarba by name, to China. Mezzabarba sailed from Lisbon, with the approval of the king of Portugal, on March 25, 1720. He reached Macao on September 26 and Guangzhou on October 12, 1720. However, when Emperor Kangxi heard that the legate had come to China to seek the emperor's permission for the Christians to observe the Roman decrees, he refused to receive him in Beijing.²⁴

Kangxi's reaction is embodied in a number of decrees issued in the latter part of 1720 (the 59th year of his reign), which were critical of the missionaries. In a reversal of his edict of toleration of Christianity (March, 1692), he now

forbade the propagation of the Christian religion in the empire. In one decree, dated December 21, 1720, the emperor wrote of the missionaries:

No one can read Chinese books, but they preach a lot of doctrine. This is really laughable. How can they presume to speak about Chinese customs and ceremonies? They preach heresy like Buddhist monks and Taoist priests. From now on it is not necessary for Westerners to engage in religious activity in China, and we forbid it. Thus we will avoid a lot of trouble.²⁵

Kangxi's successor, Yong Zheng, likewise took a dim view of Christianity. In 1724, the Emperor Yong Zheng also forbade the preaching of Christianity in China. In later years he penned these words about the Christian religion: "China has Chinese religion; the West has Western religion. It is not necessary for Western religion to carry out activities in China. Can Chinese religion carry out activities in the West?"²⁶

Papal legate Mezzabarba's response to Emperor Kangxi's rejection of his mission was to publish a pastoral letter in Macao, dated November 4, 1721, in which he granted eight permissions

concerning the rites. The permissions are as follows: A tablet in the home, having the name of the deceased only and an explanation on the side, is permitted; all Chinese ceremonies for the dead, provided they are not superstitious but merely civil, are permitted; the cult of Confucius is permitted when it is merely civil; candles and incense may be used at funerals; genuflections and prostrations before the amended tablet or coffin of the deceased are allowed; a table with cakes, fruit, meat or other foods may be set before the coffin or amended tablet; bows of the head before the tablet at Chinese New Year and on other occasions throughout the year are permitted; and finally, it is permitted to light candles or burn incense before the amended tablets or tomb of the deceased, with the requisite precautions.²⁷

Mezzabarba's permissions had originated as possible responses to questions sent to Rome by Bernardino della Chiesa, bishop of Beijing, and several Jesuits about the application of the 1715 decree "Ex illa die." The permissions, however, did not have the approval of the Holy See.

The latter fact was pointed out in the decree "Ex quo singulari" of Pope Benedict XIV, dated July 11, 1742. "Ex quo singulari" reproduced in entirety the decree of 1715, and stated regarding it: "If some think that it is merely an ecclesiastical

precept, which does not have the force of indissoluble law...we declare that it has the full and entire authority of an apostolic Constitution."²⁸

As for Mezzabarba's permissions, Pope Benedict XIV declared:

We define and declare that these permissions ought to be considered as if they had never existed, and we wholly condemn and detest their practice as superstition... we desire that each and all of these permissions be deprived of all force and effect...and that they be forever considered broken, null, invalid and without any force or power whatever.²⁹

Finally, Pope Benedict censored all missionaries who had used the permissions or interpreted them in any way different than what was contained in the 1715 decree "Ex illa die." He also prescribed a new oath against the rites to be taken by the missionaries.

After the Roman prohibition of the rites, Christianity experienced a period of decline in China. Intellectuals could not enter the church because they had to perform the ceremonies in honor of Confucius on the first and fifteenth of the month. Thus only uneducated people could join the church. Moreover, Chinese Chris-

tians became like foreigners. Christians were also considered barbarians, having no ancestors, and the church had to go underground for a period of about 120 years, the historian Fan Hao noted.³⁰

With Emperor Yong Zheng's prohibition of Christianity, all the missionaries, except those who knew astronomy, were obliged to move to Guangzhou or Macao. Several persecutions of Christians are recorded as having taken place during the reign of the next emperor, Qian Long (1736-1796). In 1793, Father Raux told the Englishman, Macartney, that the numbers of Christians had diminished so much that there were only 5,000 Christians in Beijing and only about 150,000 in the whole country.³¹ During the reign of Emperor Jia Qing (1796-1820), no more missionaries were assigned to government service in Beijing. The last man at the Bureau of Astronomy, Pires, died in 1838.³² The number of missionaries throughout the whole country dropped from a high of 107 in 1701 (59 Jesuits, 29 Franciscans, 8 Dominicans, 15 Paris Foreign Missions and 8 Augustinians) to 31 in 1810.³³

These latter and about 80 Chinese priests continued to minister to the estimated (by Latourette) 200,000 plus Catholics at the turn of the 19th century.³⁴

Various reasons are posited by scholars as the cause of the rites controversy. Rouleau points out that the Council of Trent

(1545-1563), in an effort to prevent the breakup of Roman Catholicism after the Protestant Reformation, tended to crystallize the past and make the Catholic Church almost impervious to change.³⁵ Professor Fang Hao mentions that the Jesuits and Dominicans had a history of theological differences, as well as preaching the Gospel in different parts of China. The Dominicans and Franciscans worked among uneducated people in Fujian and Shangdong provinces, whereas the Jesuits associated with the intelligentsia in Beijing. What appeared to be merely civil ceremonies in Beijing seemed like superstitious practices in Fujian.³⁶ Also, as the above narrative reveals, the dispute between Rome and the Portuguese crown (Padroado) over control of the China mission played a major role in the controversy.³⁷ Nevertheless, the Protestant historian, Latourette, views sympathetically the efforts of Pope Clement XI and the papal legate, Tournon, to unify the viewpoints and methods of all the Catholic missionaries in China.³⁸

The next definitive declaration on the Chinese rites came almost 200 years later, with the instruction of Pope Pius XII, dated December 8, 1939, permitting them. In his instruction, Pius XII, newly ascended to the papal throne, declared: 1) Catholics may publicly honor Confucius, 2) The image of Confucius may exist in Catholic schools; 3) Catholic officials

and students may participate in public functions honoring Confucius; 4) A bowing of the head and other manifestations of respect before defunct persons, their portraits, tombs and tablets bearing their names are licit, and even commendable. A further dispatch, dated February 28, 1941, stated that it was not necessary to spell out in detail what was allowed regarding the rites; rather missionaries and Christians could follow their own lights.³⁹

On October 25, 1982, at a convention in Italy commemorating the 400th anniversary of Matteo Ricci's arrival in China, the present Pope, John Paul II, gave a speech in which he praised Ricci for acting as a bridge between Chinese and Western cultures. As an example of this, the Pope singled out Ricci's attempt to adapt Christianity to Chinese culture, comparing it to similar efforts by early Church Fathers in regard to Greek culture.⁴⁰ The year before in Manila (February, 1981), Pope John Paul had cited Ricci's appreciation of Chinese culture as an example for others to follow.⁴¹ As recent writings indicate, Chinese scholars, too, are appreciative of Ricci's role as a bridge between Chinese and Western learning.⁴²

After this somewhat lengthy review of the Chinese Rites Controversy, what lessons can foreign Christians learn from it? Is the door spoken about Ricci on his

deathbed still open? Pope John Paul II, in the October 25, 1982 speech mentioned above, expressed the thought that Matteo Ricci's approach was relevant for China's effort at modernization. Perhaps Catholic universities in foreign countries could offer scholarships to Chinese students, which would prepare them to help with the modernization of their country. At the same time, Catholic universities could establish departments of Chinese studies (where these do not already exist) to help Westerners understand China and Chinese civilization. In this way, they would act as modern day substitutes for Ricci, who introduced both Western learning to China and Chinese learning to the West.

Another lesson to be learned is the need for diligent study and research about China before too hasty conclusions are drawn. In this regard, George Dunne makes an interesting observation. The four missionaries (including Antonio a Santa Maria and J.B.

Morales) who wrote the work "Informaciones" (later to form the basis for the case against the rites), had been in China only two and a half years or less when they wrote it in 1636. They used only about one month's time to compile their material by interviewing 11 Chinese Christians from country villages, where Christianity had been introduced less than ten years previously.⁴³ When compared to the many years which the Jesuits devoted to the study of the rites question, the conclusions drawn by the Fujian missionaries appear to have been somewhat hastily arrived at. Likewise present-day foreign scholars and researchers should realize that many years of study are needed to understand modern China and the changes that have taken place there in the recent past. Such an attitude on the part of foreign scholars would be in imitation of the patient perseverance, intellectual effort and sympathetic outlook of Matteo Ricci and his Jesuit successors in China.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Kenneth Scott Latourette, A History of Christian Missions in China (New York: Russell & Russell, 1929), p.98.

2. Francis A. Rouleau, S.J., "Chinese Rites Controversy, " New Catholic Encyclopedia (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967), Vol. III, p. 612.

3. Brucker, "Chinois (Rites)," Dictionnaire de Theologie Catholique (Paris: Letouzey et Ane, 1905), Vol. II, Column 2369.

4. George H. Dunne, S.J., Generation of Giants (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1962), p. 166.

5. Brucker, op. cit., col. 2369.

6. Ibid., col. 2370.

7. The Padroado traces its origin to the Line of Demarcation of Pope Alexander VI, 1493, by which he divided the world in half between Spain and Portugal for purposes of exploration. The Line meant roughly that Spain had the responsibility for exploration and colonization in the western world, and Portugal in the east. Spain, however, eventually wound up in the Orient - her explorers and missionaries establishing themselves in the Philippines from Mexico.

8. Rouleau, op. cit., p. 617.

9. Brucker, op. cit., col. 2371.

10. Ibid., col. 2372.

11. Latourette, op. cit., pp. 119-20. Latourette adds that even the French Jesuits: Bouver, Le Comte, Visselou, Fontenay and Gerbillon, who landed at Ningpo in July, 1687, did not have the wholehearted acceptance of their Portuguese confreres, because they did not have Lisbon's consent to come to China. At the behest of Verbiest, however, Emperor Kangxi welcomed them to Beijing in February, 1688. In 1700, the Jesuit Superior General separated the two missions, French and Portuguese.

12. Ibid., p. 137.

13. Brucker, op. cit., col. 2373.

14. Ibid., col. 2375.

15. Ibid., col. 2376.

16. Ibid., cols. 2377-8.

17. Latourette, op. cit., pp. 142-4. Latourette points out that Tournon had difficulties with the Portuguese Jesuits in Beijing because he did not have Padroado approval for his mission. He had less difficulty with the French Jesuits, however, one of whose number, Visselou, supported Tournon's position on the rites.

18. Brucker, op. cit., col. 2379.

19. Latourette, op. cit., p. 145.

20. Brucker, op. cit., col. 2380.

21. Ibid., cols. 2380-1.

22. Ibid., col. 2382.

23. Ibid., col. 2383.

24. Ibid., col. 2384.

25. 方豪，中西交通史，五冊，台北，中華文化出版事業社，中華民國四十八年三版，一四零頁。

26. 同上，一六零頁至一六一頁。

27. Brucker, op. cit., col. 2385.

28. Ibid., col. 2388.

29. Ibid.

30. 方豪，同上，一四零頁至一四一頁。

31. Latourette, op. cit., pp. 162-3, 174.

32. Ibid., p. 176.

33. Ibid., pp. 128 and 180.

34. Ibid., p. 183.

35. Rouleau, op. cit., p. 617.

36. 方豪，同上，一三九頁。

37. The modern distinction between political and religious power was not clearly defined in those days. 'On the Portuguese side, religion was used for political ends; while on the Chinese side, the emperor was both head of state and head of religion. The question arises about the propriety of consulting the emperor about the relation of the Chinese rites to the Christian faith.

38. Latourette, op. cit., pp. 154-5.

39. Rouleau, op. cit., pp. 615-6.

40. "Pope's Address on the Work of Father Ricci in China," International Fides Service, November 6, 1982, No. 3178, p. 461ff.

41. "Official Statement of Pope John Paul II to the Chinese (Manila, February 18, 1981), UCA News, February 20, 1981, Dispatch No. 77-X.

42. 陳申如，朱正誼，「試論明末清初耶穌會士的歷史作用」，中國史研究，一九八零年，第二期，一三五頁至一四四頁。

43. Dunne, op. cit., pp. 297-8.