

## ***Acknowledging Mistakes, Clarifying Misunderstandings: Keynote address***

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***Translated by Arthur Chung and Peter Barry***

Bishop Zen, Bishop Tong, President Li, Scholars, Specialists,  
Honoured Guests,

Scholars who have researched the Catholic Church's history of mission in China know that the Church's enterprise is made up of successes and failures, splendor and shame. There has been extreme happiness in times of growth, and tears in times of persecution. In the Yuan Dynasty the Pope had appointed Giovanni de Montecorvino as the archbishop of the capital (Beijing) and as papal legate for all of the Far East. He built a church and established a seminary in Beijing. He also sent missionaries south, to such areas as Quanzhou to preach the Gospel. Church affairs prospered for awhile, but it was merely a brief moment of brightness. With the demise of the Yuan Dynasty, all that the Church had accomplished in China vanished without a trace.

St. Francis Xavier had a heart full of zeal and esteem for Chinese culture, but he could not enter China. Finally, with eyes gazing at the China mainland, he died on Shangchuan Island but with his lofty aspirations unfulfilled. When Matteo Ricci entered China, he proceeded with extreme caution. He carefully observed the habits and customs of the people. He adapted himself as best he could to Chinese culture. He communicated widely with the intelligentsia, and introduced Western science and technology to them. For a period of time the Catholic Church garnered a measure of respect from the intelligentsia. But then came the Rites Controversy. From that time on, the Catholic Church in China did not know a day of peace, and there were many cases of missionary litigation.

Following the Opium War and the opening of the five treaty ports, and due to the signing of the unequal treaties, the forces of the Western Powers continuously invaded China. This aroused anti-foreign and anti-Christian feelings in the hearts of the general populace. It could be said that for the Church, disasters came one after the other. Missionary litigation cases took place continually. The Western Powers used these court cases as pretexts for claiming land and indemnities from the Chinese government. The Western Powers' protection of the Catholic missions gave the impression to the Chinese people that Catholicism and imperialism were linked. This was one of the primary causes for the hostility of the Boxers towards the Church.

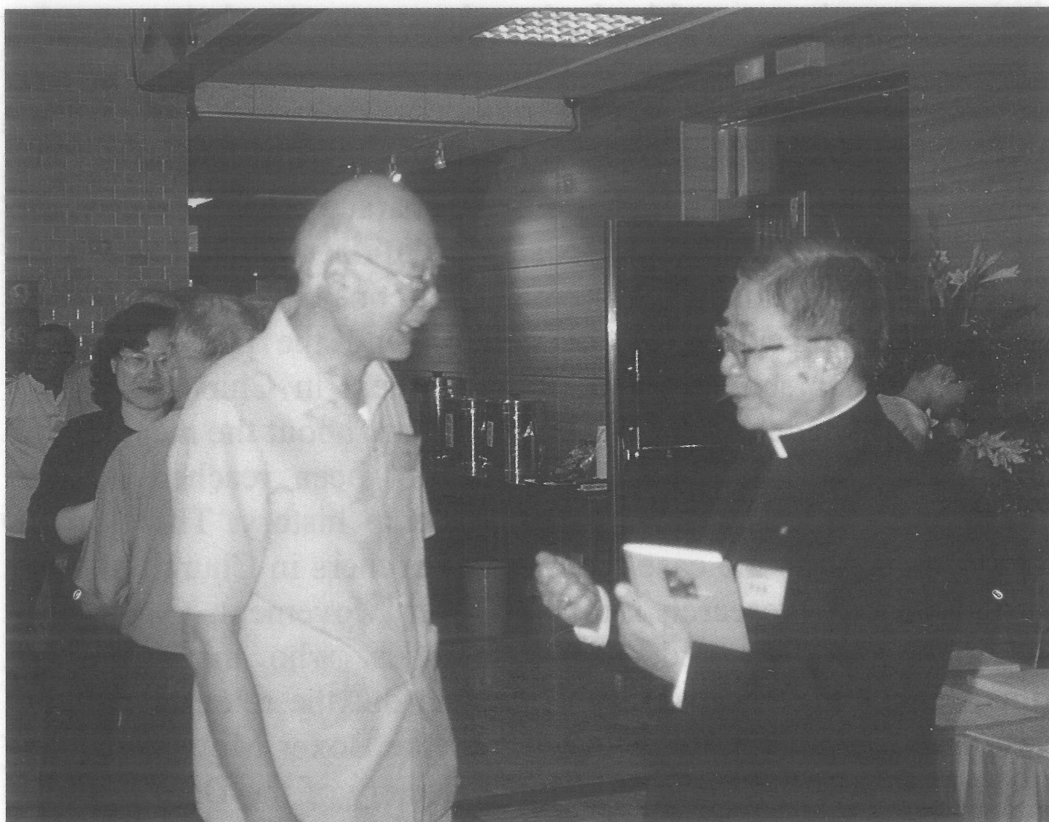
Today, many scholars and specialists are engaged in investigating the causes and effects of the Boxer Movement from all aspects. Let me speak briefly to the following points: 1. The wounds remaining from the Protectorate, 2. Misunderstandings arising from unsettled cases in history, 3. Prophetic pioneers within the Church, 4. The Church's reflections and apologies, 5. The importance of objective research into the Boxer Movement.

### **1. Wounds remaining from the Protectorate**

There still exists among our nation's populace the general impression that so-called imperialism and the Church's development in China cannot be separated. After the Opium War and the opening of the five treaty ports, some missionaries came to China on the ships of the Western European powers. These Western European powers entered into many unequal treaties with China. Some foreign missionaries relied on these treaties, and on the warships and cannons behind these treaties, to carry out missionary work. Most Chinese people believe that this was the cause of the frequent clashes between the Church and the local populace after the mid-nineteenth century. Some missionaries used strong-armed tactics in their missionary work. They thus took on the role of oppressors, and were the collaborators in imperialism. The Chinese people, in a spirit of patriotism, opposed these oppressive acts. The Boxer Movement was the most representative episode among these defensive actions. Although there was an element of superstition in the movement, such as the

belief that the gods would descend and abide in the persons, making their bodies impenetrable to sword or gun, its primary aim was to destroy foreign missionaries and their religion. Their motto was "Support the Qing, and destroy the Foreign."

The missionaries' purpose in coming to China was to "spread the good news of the Gospel." No matter whether in the 17<sup>th</sup> or the 19<sup>th</sup> century, or even at present, the missionaries' purpose remains constant, namely, "to preach the Gospel." Our purpose in promoting the spread of the Gospel remains unchanged, whether in essence, or as regards time or place. The problem with some missionaries between the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was that the spirit of nationalism was running high at the time. Missionaries from France, Germany, Spain, Italy and Belgium could not have been unaffected by the trend of the times. They could not avoid the feeling that their own country's culture was glorious. In comparison, China's material conditions were quite backward at the time; therefore, some



**Professor Lu Shiqiang of Academia Sinica talking to Cardinal Shan during the Conference on the Boxer Movement.**



missionaries naturally displayed an attitude of superiority. In their missionary jurisdictions they introduced some of their own cultural elements, which were not an essential part of their religious faith.

The Catholics of the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and of the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and our Catholics today espouse the same faith and beliefs. According to my practical experience and observation, the majority of the faithful in the past lived a better moral life. This is because society in the past was less sophisticated, and the Church's ethical demands were stricter. The atmosphere of secular society today is more degenerate. In the past, however, some among the faithful had an insufficient understanding of the faith. Seeing the relationship between some missionaries and the foreign forces, observing believers being protected by the foreign missionaries, and seeing the national flags of France and Italy being freely hung inside the churches, some Chinese became believers in the hope that, relying on the guarantees of the missionaries, they would obtain advantages in their struggle concerning property or in other court cases.

## **2. Misunderstandings from unsettled cases in history**

The Boxer Uprising has been characterized as the worst case of conflict between the local population and the Church in Chinese Church history. There is a considerable difference between the perception of the Church and the perceptions of Western secular scholars and of researchers in China, who are under the influence of historical materialism, about the meaning of the uprising. A final conclusion has not been reached on the matter, and it remains an unsettled case in history. There is no other way to settle the case than for researchers in Church history to enhance their research into the Boxer Movement. Concerned missionary religious orders and societies, who ministered in China, have the responsibility of sorting out the relevant data to serve as a foundation for research into the Boxer Movement: the Vincentians and Jesuits in Hebei, the Society of the Divine Word and the Franciscans in Shandong, the PIME Foreign Mission Society in Henan, the Paris Foreign Mission Society in the northeast, the Franciscans in Shanxi, the Franciscans and PIME



Society in Shaanxi, and the Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in Inner Mongolia. Western and Chinese scholars have rarely used the fundamental information belonging to these religious orders. I believe that this is also the principal reason for the presence of numerous misunderstandings regarding the Catholic Church.

I believe that the word “misunderstanding” best characterizes the role of the Catholic Church when researching the Boxer Movement. The first reason for the misunderstandings was exaggeration, and taking a part for the whole. The whole body of missionaries was blamed for the bad deeds of a minority. The loathsome acts of a small minority of the faithful caused all the Catholics to be considered as a criminal syndicate. Due to longstanding conflicts in society and the breakdown of security, the Catholics organized bands for self-protection. They were accused of setting up a nation within a nation, and of showing utter disdain for the law. Farmers, women, children, all good people, who became martyrs for their faith, were categorized as local riffraff, gangsters and traitors.

The second reason for the misunderstandings was taking the cause for the effect, and the end for the beginning. There were many antagonisms in Chinese society at that time. The missionaries and the faithful became one of the elements in the midst of all the antagonisms. However, the faithful and the missionaries were not the sources primarily responsible for these antagonisms. In the midst of a hostile environment, the missionaries and faithful were the subjects of many attacks. Therefore, it was only in such circumstances that a majority of the missionaries sought the protection of foreign governments. These missionaries also asked the foreign governments to negotiate with the Chinese government on their behalf. Leaving aside for the moment the question of whether or not such acts hurt the feelings of the Chinese people, the reason that these unfortunate representations took place was due to the oppression that the Catholic Church was undergoing. The missionaries did not intend to subjugate the Chinese people by undertaking such representations.

This sort of misunderstanding subsists not only in historical documents, but also in present day politics. The Chinese

Communists, even today, completely misunderstand the Catholic Church. They considered the purely religious act of the conferral of sainthood on the 120 Chinese martyrs by the Holy Father in the jubilee year of 2000 to be a political act with a political motive. If the Chinese Communists were sincere, then setting up a local church with Chinese characteristics should be their fervent hope! One would think that the canonization of Chinese native saints would be a great help in establishing a local Chinese church having Chinese characteristics.

### 3. Prophets and people with foresight in the Church

Actually, the Catholic Church does have sufficient powers of self-reflection. After the Boxer Uprising, the Church in China proceeded gradually to rectify the mistakes of the past. To begin with, Father Vincent Lebbe took down the French flag that was hanging in the church and replaced it with the dragon emblem of the Qing Dynasty. In 1915 and 1916, in the Lao Xikai incident in Tianjin, Father Lebbe stood with Chinese people, and resisted the French move to expand their leased territories. The Chinese people responded with their support and respect. Ying Jianzhi and Ma Xiangbo jointly sent a letter to the Pope asking him to set up a Catholic university in China. Then Fathers Lebbe and Anthony Cotta sent a report to the Holy See on the Lao Xikai incident. The Holy See came to understand the unusual phenomena existing in the Catholic Church of China. In 1919, Pope Benedict XV issued the encyclical *Maximum Illud*. The Holy Father requested that the distinctive quality of the Church's missionary work not be colored by imperialism, and that the missionaries give special attention to training local clergy. In 1922, in the circumstance where France could yet intervene, the Holy See resolutely assigned Celso Costantini to China as apostolic delegate. In 1924, Celso Costantini convoked the Shanghai Synod, which determined that the directives of *Maximum Illud* would be thoroughly implemented in the Chinese local church. In 1925, the Fujen Academy, the forerunner of Fujen University, began admitting students. In 1926, Pope Pius XI ordained in Rome the first group of six native Chinese bishops. Thereafter, the number of native Chinese bishops gradually increased. In February 1946, Holy

Father Pope Pius XII appointed Bishop Tian Gengxin of Qingdao as the first Chinese Cardinal, and the first Cardinal in all of Asia. Later, in the same year, the Pope announced the establishment of the Chinese hierarchy. My only reason for enumerating these facts from Chinese Church history is to prove that the universal Church was working for a long time to free itself from the hegemony of the Western powers. At the same time, the Chinese Church, in full communion and union with the universal Church, was gradually undergoing changes in its constitution. It is just that the Chinese Communists appear not to have known about, or have been unwilling to acknowledge, these facts of history.

#### **4. The Church's reflections and apologies**

We must humbly admit that some missionaries in those days committed mistakes. Those missionaries had insufficient respect for Chinese culture, insufficient understanding of Chinese customs, and were insufficiently adapted to Chinese society. With a sense of Western cultural superiority, some missionaries were overwhelmingly arrogant. That was a mistake. Because of their pride, these missionaries thought they understood the complex conflicts between the people and the Church. Thinking that they could mediate in disputes, they carelessly got themselves involved in peoples' court cases. This also was a mistake. Some missionaries went even further. They thought that their interference in court cases would help some people to enter the Church. This was an even bigger mistake. Some of the faithful in those times did not have a sufficient understanding of their own national identity, and so they became accustomed to seeking the assistance of the missionaries, and of the foreign governments that were backing the missionaries. This also was a mistake. The worst mistake was to wear the badge of a Christian believer, and relying on the support of foreign governments, stir up trouble on the local level and scheme for advantages. I do not believe that we would have taken such persons to be true members of the Church at any time.

On October 24, 2001, in an address to the International Symposium to Commemorate the 4<sup>th</sup> Centenary of the Arrival of Matteo Ricci in Beijing, Pope John Paul II said:



History, however, reminds us of the unfortunate fact that the work of members of the Church in China was not always without error, the bitter fruit of their personal limitations and of the limits of their actions. Moreover, their actions were often conditioned by difficult situations connected with complex historical events and conflicting political interests. Nor were theological disputes lacking, which caused bad feelings and created serious difficulties in preaching the Gospel. In certain periods of modern history, a kind of "protection" on the part of European political powers not infrequently resulted in limitations on the Church's very freedom of action, and had negative repercussions for the Church in China. It harmed the good image of the Church in the hearts and minds of the Chinese people. This combination of various situations and events placed obstacles in the Church's path and prevented her from fully carrying out – for the benefit of the Chinese people – the mission entrusted to her by her Founder, Jesus Christ. I feel deep sadness for these errors and limits of the past, and I regret that in many people these failings may have given the impression of a lack of respect and esteem for the Chinese people on the part of the Catholic Church, making them feel that the Church was motivated by feelings of hostility towards China. For all of this I ask the forgiveness and understanding of those who may have felt hurt in some way by such actions on the part of Christians.

## **5. Importance of objective research into the Boxer Movement**

Perhaps due to a sense of guilt over the invasion of China on the part of European and American imperialism, Catholic historians are not very disposed to engage in in-depth investigations into questions connected to the Boxer movement, and into Chinese Catholic Church history as it relates to the Boxer movement. There is already a dearth of publications in the field of Chinese Catholic Church history. What is available for this particular period of the Church's history appears to have been hastily drafted. Historians are mostly interested in investigating the eras of Matteo Ricci, Adam Schall and Ferdinand Verbiest. For although the Chinese Church experienced many difficulties at the end of the Ming and the beginning of the Qing dynasties, for the

most part, the Chinese government and gentry classes permitted missionary activity, and even respected and accepted it. That particular period of history was characterized by caution, intelligence, communication, adaptation, respect, cordiality, tolerance, and forgiveness. We would very much like to rectify the errors committed in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. It would be best if the errors of that historical period had not occurred at all. But, of course, it is impossible to erase them.

The best attitude to have is directly to confront the past. We cannot escape from it. Pope John Paul II has said:

The Church must not be afraid of historical truth, and she is ready, with deeply felt pain, to admit the responsibility of her children. This is true also with regard to her relationship, past and present, with the Chinese people. Historical truth must be sought serenely, with impartiality and in its entirety. This is an important task to be undertaken by scholars, and is one to which you, who are particularly versed in Chinese realities, can also contribute. I can assure you that the Holy See is always ready to offer willing cooperation in this research. (Pope John Paul II's address to the Symposium to Commemorate the 4<sup>th</sup> Centenary of the Arrival of Matteo Ricci in Beijing)

We have closer connections with the modern Chinese local church and the local church of 1900 than we do with those of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, or those of late Ming and early Qing. I belonged to the Xianxian Diocese when I was young. Memories of the Boxer Movement are still deeply imbedded in the minds and hearts of the old Catholics there. From a certain standpoint these wounds are painful memories. But on the other hand, the courageous acts of martyrdom are an encouragement for us, and make us firmer in our faith. This is because the Church, in order to give definitive recognition to those martyred, spent fifty years of investigation, and carried out demanding assessment procedures. Finally on April 17, 1955, Pope Pius XII declared 56 martyrs of the Jesuit diocese of Xianxian, which was previously the Prefecture of Southeastern Zhili, to be named blessed. Among the martyrs were four French Jesuit missionaries and fifty-two Chinese Catholics. The Catholics comprised both men and women. The oldest was 79 years old, and the youngest was only 7 years old. Prior to this, in 1946, the Pope had declared as blessed

29 Catholics who were martyred in 1900 in a Franciscan diocese. In 1951, the Holy Father had declared blessed Alberico Crescitelli of the PIME missionary society, who was martyred in south Shaanxi. In 2000, the Holy Father announced the canonization, i.e., being raised to sainthood, of these 86 Blessed, as well as 34 other Blessed, who had suffered martyrdom throughout previous Chinese Church history.

With what has been said above as a basis, we can understand the importance of researching the Boxer Movement. From the seldom-used documents of the Church, coupled with the widely circulated documents of Chinese history and of diplomatic exchanges, we can draft an objective history of the Boxer Movement. From the abovementioned documents, we can do historical research, which can be publicly criticized. Then we will be able to know, in the last analysis, what mistakes were made. Regarding the mistakes, we should humbly acknowledge them and truly repent. From another perspective, through more objective research, we can clarify misunderstandings and mitigate prejudices. I believe that a Church that was persecuted in Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> and in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century could not take on a different form after coming to China. Actually, it is unfair to place all the crimes committed by the Western Powers completely on the shoulders of the Church. In fact, the Church itself suffered at the hands of these Powers.

## **Conclusion**

This “International Conference on the Boxer Movement and Christianity in China,” which takes place during these days, is only a beginning. At least the conference makes known some facts of history that have not been made known before. These can serve as an important basis for a more complete research, which will hopefully take place in the future. We see that most of the concerned religious orders are represented here, or have presented papers. In the future we should have a collective plan for research, so that we can carry out deeper and more thorough research. For this we rely on cooperation among religious superiors, university chancellors, scholars, and other experts.

I would like to thank Bishop Joseph Zen of the Hong



Kong Diocese and Bishop John Tong, director of the Holy Spirit Study Centre, for their efforts over the past few years towards making this conference possible. I would also like to thank Professor Chen Fangzhong, director of the Research Center of Catholic History at Fujen University for his wholehearted efforts in preparing for this conference. On June 14, 2004, the Holy Spirit Study Centre, together with the Center for Research into Religion and Chinese Society of The Chinese University of Hong Kong's Chung Chi College, will offer a one-day conference on the Boxer Movement and Christianity in China. Scholars from Mainland China, who could not come to Taiwan, will participate in that conference. From this we can see the sensitivity of the topic of research into the Boxer Movement and Christianity in China. However, scholarly investigations and objective research present a real picture of historical facts. This is the best way to do away with those unnecessary sensitivities. Finally, I wish this conference every success.

Thank you.