

# *Preface to Di Shang De Yan (Salt of the Earth)*

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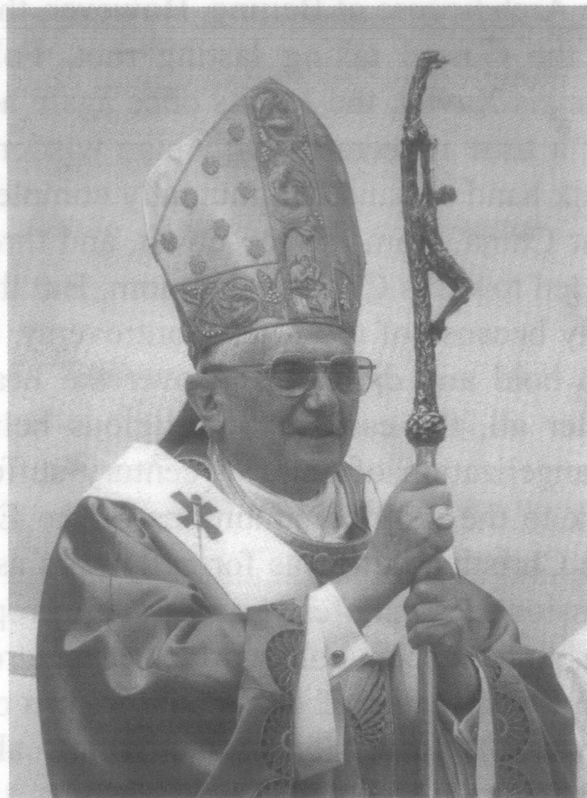
*Joseph Ratzinger*

*Translated by Peter Barry and Purple Kwong from a Chinese translation by Fr. Mark Fang, SJ of the German original text*

*This is an English translation of the Preface to “Di Shang De Yan,” which Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger wrote for this book in 1998. “Di Shang De Yan” is the Chinese translation of “Le sel de la terre” written by Cardinal Ratzinger in 1996, after a detailed interview with Peter Seewald. From this Preface, we can see the view and hopes of Cardinal Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI) on the evangelization of China.*

**W**hen anyone with a Christian mindset thinks of China, inevitably the image of a tragic history enters the mind.

Perhaps one thinks of Francis Xavier waiting on Shangchuan Island for a Christian to take him to China, so that he could preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ there, as he had previously done in India and Japan. The lengthy travels over land and sea of this great saint were a replica of the missionary journeys of the great Apostle of the Gentiles, St. Paul. The missionary journeys of St. Paul resulted in the establishment of the Gentile churches in the



Mediterranean, that is the future Europe, thus bringing that Church into the bloodstream of Asia. In this way he completed the mission Christ had given him by preaching the Good News to the ends of the earth. A striking and unusual comparison can be made here. In his travels throughout Asia Minor, Paul frequently ran into new obstacles, which pointed out to him that this or that road was not the one chosen by the Holy Spirit. The answer to the puzzle came to him in the midst of a dream. He saw a Macedonian, who called to him: "Come over here to help us!" Francis Xavier also strongly believed that deep within his heart he heard the sound of China yearning to hear the Gospel. Unfortunately, his "Macedonian," the one who would open the door of China for him, never arrived. Thus Francis, saddened that he was not able to complete his mission, died. Evidently China's time had not yet come.

Intermittently Christ's Good News had already come in contact with this great nation several times in the past. The Nestorian missionaries came to China in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, and the Franciscans came again in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The latter even managed to establish the Archdiocese of Beijing. However, those two efforts did not result in the Gospel taking lasting root. Following in the footsteps of Francis Xavier, the Jesuits once again advanced towards China, and for a time it seemed that Asian wisdom and Christian faith would walk hand in hand and mutually complement one another. It seemed that China, from the top down, and through its intellectuals, would be led towards Christ's Kingdom. But this hope ended in failure, not only because of the Rites Controversy, but because the method was too bold and did not win over the hearts of the common people. After all, the essence of religious belief is in its simplicity. The evangelization of the 19<sup>th</sup> century suffered the ramifications of its link to the political ambitions of the European Powers. From this, the Christian faith was formally seen as a European matter, and the missionaries manifestly as part of European colonization. Their aim was to have the whole world accept European thought and its way of life. Nevertheless, the sacrificing spirit of the missionaries had a real power of persuasion. As a result, although a great conversion movement never took place in China, the Church did grow quietly. The witness of many martyrs showed how deeply the Gospel of Christ entered the peoples' hearts.

While the Christian faith, and the Church produced from it, was quietly growing stronger, in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century both European culture and European unruliness suddenly entered the country. This created a series of crises for Chinese traditions, which finally concretely manifested themselves in the political structures. Something happened which aroused everyone's interest: although European liberalism shook China's traditional religion and ethics to its foundations, it could not provide anything to supplement it. Japan had gradually changed itself to conform to this liberal foreign model, but China was not able to reform itself based on these premises. Another European "product," Marxism, seemingly tried to eradicate Chinese traditional culture, every flavor of liberalism, and nascent Christianity at one and the same time. Through the words and deeds of Mao Zedong, Marxism seemed to become a Chinese product. Mao gave a clear and firm answer to the problem of finding a better order for human life. As the self-proclaimed representative of science, he established an order, which dominated all aspects of life and of society throughout the country. It looked as if China had found its own road, and had become a model country for applied socialism. At the same time, the Church appeared to be "old fashioned" and seemed to belong to the past. On the path of her history it seemed that China had skipped over this stage.

At this time, the self-contradictions in Marxism caused this pseudo-science to completely and utterly disintegrate. On the one hand, the Cultural Revolution exposed the anarchy and destructiveness of its utopian promises. On the other hand, the internal demands of the economy escaped the state's complete control, and required it to renew dialogue with more liberal schemes. In this new development, does religion have a role to play? Or is it only that some economic systems can mold this world, just as extreme liberalism would like to convince us it can do? Actually this liberalism and Marxism are the same: both are materialism, though in different forms. Is there still any hope for the Christian faith in China? Does China have any hope in herself?

As time goes by, a careful observer will see more clearly that man does not live on bread alone. Economics is not everything. The reason that Marxist totalitarianism fails is that it is unwilling to accept the irreplaceability of religion. Human beings seek infinity;

purely material solutions cannot satisfy them. Marxist theorists of the second and third generation all admit that as long as there are human beings, religion will not stop. The only question is: can the Christian faith be a perpetual answer, not only lived out by a minority in China, but become a power to mold all of China? Will an Asian or Chinese Christianity appear, just as when it went from the Jews to the Gentiles, there appeared a Greek and Latin Christianity? Or when at the end of ancient times, a German, Slavic, or European Christianity appeared, which later shaped the American continent?

Whoever believes in Christ can also deeply believe that Christianity really has this potential, and that as the world's societies remake themselves, Christianity can reach a new stage in its mission. It has the internal power to give to the spirit of an individual culture the ability to move in the direction of a new form and a new existence. We need only recall what happened in the Mediterranean area at the end of ancient time, and it will not be difficult to discover that the existence of the legacy of those ancient religions and cultures was not due to the work of philosophers or to the reforms of kings. Rather, the Christian faith itself received a new form, and so it was able to leave a lasting legacy. Christianity will not push aside China's rich legacy. Rather, after the crises of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, it could become a force to allow this legacy to live on, and to continue to bear fruit. Throughout the course of every kind of change, the Christian faith is not a force of destruction or disruption; rather it is a life-force which continually moves forward. Of course we should not imagine that this new movement of Christianity is a kind of movement aimed at winning the battle quickly. Victories quickly obtained are also quickly lost. We can see this from the relatively short-lived world established by Mao Zedong. Don't worry. Lasting things grow slowly, quietly, and patiently, and even under various torments. The slow growth of the Church in China, which is in the shape of a mustard seed, is precisely that "large tree," on the branches of which the birds of the air will build their nests.

When Francis Xavier knocked on the door of China, it was not yet time for the Christian faith to come to China. However, all the gentle steps, all those steps that made the Christian faith slowly

advance in China, were not in vain. They were only stages on a road, which gradually became more familiar as time went on. Why was progress so slow, why so delayed? Only God knows. For us, the answer of St. Ambrose, a bishop of Milan in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, is a help to our further reflection. At that time the people in the Mediterranean area used to ask: "If the Christian faith is really the tool God used to save the world, why did it arrive so late?" Ambrose answered: "Whoever complains like this, should also complain about the harvest: why does the harvest become ripe so late? They should complain about the grape harvest: why do the grapes become ripe at the end of the year. They ought to complain about the olive tree: why is it the latest tree to produce fruit?" (Letters 18) The mission of the "laborers of the eleventh hour" is no less than that of the laborers of the first hour. The harvest is spread throughout the whole year according to the nature of the fruit trees: first are strawberries and cherries, then there are grain crops, which are followed by grapes, and finally at year's end, you have olives. Are the late ones therefore not so important, not so precious? In the same way God's harvest has its tides and its paths. On these paths, a mature, complete history is always one part of the harvest. In this sense we Christians wait patiently, joyfully realizing that the most precious fruit, the grapes and the olives, will come last. And just because of this, they will gather to themselves all the gifts of the whole year, together with the tides, the sun and the rain, the darkness and the light.

Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger

Written in Rome, on the Feast of the Holy Cross

September 14, 1998