

Papal Address on 400th Anniversary of Matteo Ricci's Death

“An Example of Balance Between Doctrinal Clarity and Prudent Pastoral Action”

Pope Benedict XVI

VATICAN CITY, JUNE 21, 2010 (Zenit.org) — Here is a Vatican translation of the address Benedict XVI delivered May 29 upon receiving several dioceses of the Marches region on the 400th anniversary of the Italian Jesuit missionary Father Matteo Ricci (1552-1610).

Your Eminences,
Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate and in the Priesthood,
Distinguished Authorities,
Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I am pleased to meet you to commemorate the fourth centenary of the death of Fr Matteo Ricci, SJ. I offer a fraternal greeting to Bishop Claudio Giuliodori of Macerata-Tolentino-Recanati-Cingoli-Treia, who is leading this pilgrimage.

With him, I greet my Brother Bishops of the Episcopal Conference of the Marches and their respective Dioceses, the Civil, Military and Academic Authorities, the priests, seminarians and students, as well as the Pueri Cantores.

Macerata is proud of such an illustrious citizen, a religious and a priest! I greet the Members of the Society of Jesus to whom Fr Ricci belonged and in particular Fr Adolfo Nicolás, Superior General, the Jesuits, friends and collaborators and the educational institutes connected with them. A thought also goes out to all the Chinese.

This great missionary, a true protagonist of Gospel proclamation in China in the modern age, following the first evangelization there by Archbishop Giovanni da Montecorvino, reached the end of his earthly life in Peking on 11 May 1610.

The extraordinary privilege he was granted, unthinkable for a foreigner, of being buried in Chinese soil is proof of the high esteem in which he was held, both in the Chinese capital and at the Imperial Court itself.

Today it is also possible to venerate his tomb in Peking, fittingly restored by the Local Authorities. The many initiatives promoted in Europe and in China in honour of Fr Ricci show the keen interest that his work continues to kindle in the Church and in the different cultural contexts.

The history of the Catholic missions includes figures important because of their zeal and courage in bringing Christ to new and distant lands; but Fr Ricci is a unique case of a felicitous synthesis between the proclamation of the Gospel and the dialogue with the culture of the people to whom he brought it; he is an example of balance between doctrinal clarity and prudent pastoral action. Not only his profound knowledge of the language but also his assumption of the lifestyle and customs of the cultured Chinese classes, the result of study and its patient, far-sighted implementation, ensured that Fr Ricci was accepted by the Chinese with respect and esteem, no longer as a foreigner, but as the “Master of the Great West”.

Among the important figures of Chinese history in the “Millennium Museum”, Peking, only two foreigners are recorded: Marco Polo and Fr Matteo Ricci.

This missionary’s work presents two dimensions that must not be separated: the Chinese inculturation of the Gospel proclamation and the presentation to China of Western culture and science. The scientific aspects often attracted greater interest but the perspective with which Fr Ricci entered into relations with the Chinese world and culture should not be forgotten. It consisted of a humanism that viewed the person as part of his context, cultivated his moral and spiritual values, retaining everything positive that is found in the Chinese tradition and offering to enrich it with the contribution of Western culture and, above all, with the wisdom and truth of Christ.

Fr Ricci did not go to China to take it the science and culture of the West, but rather to bring to it the Gospel, to make God known.

He wrote: "For more than 20 years, every morning and every evening I have prayed with tears to Heaven. I know that the Lord of Heaven takes pity on living creatures and pardons them.... The truth about the Lord of Heaven is already in human hearts. But human beings do not immediately understand it and are not inclined to reflect on such a matter" (*Il vero significato del "Signore del Cielo"*, [the true meaning of the "Lord of Heaven"], Rome 2006, pp. 69-70).

And it was precisely while he was proclaiming the Gospel that Fr Ricci discovered in those with whom he was conversing the request for a broader exchange, so that the encounter motivated by faith also became an intercultural dialogue; a disinterested dialogue, free from financial or political ambition and lived in friendship. This makes the work of Fr Ricci and his followers one of the loftiest and happiest peaks in the relationship between China and the West.

The "Treatise on Friendship" (1595), one of his first and best known works in Chinese, is eloquent in this regard. In Fr Ricci's thought and teaching science, reason and faith find a natural synthesis: "Anyone who knows Heaven and earth," he wrote in the preface to the third edition of the world map, "can prove that the One who rules Heaven and earth is absolutely good, absolutely great and absolutely one. The ignorant reject Heaven, but knowledge that does not relate back to the Emperor of Heaven as to the first cause is no knowledge at all."

However, admiration for Fr Ricci must not lead us to forget the role and influence of his Chinese conversation partners. The decisions he made did not depend on an abstract strategy of inculturation of the faith but rather on events as a whole, on the meetings and experiences that he continued to have, which is why what he was able to achieve was also thanks to his encounter with the Chinese.

He experienced this encounter in many ways but deepened it through his relationship with a few friends and followers, especially his four famous converts, "pillars of the nascent Chinese Church".

The first and most famous of them was Xu Guangqi, a native of Shanghai, a literary man and a scientist, mathematician, astronomer and agricultural expert who reached the highest ranks in

the imperial bureaucracy, an integral man of great faith and Christian life, who was dedicated to serving his country and occupied an important place in the history of Chinese culture.

It was he, for example, who convinced and helped Fr Ricci to translate into Chinese Euclid's *Elements*, a fundamental work of geometry, and who persuaded the Emperor to entrust the reform of the Chinese calendar to Jesuit astronomers.

Li Zhizao, another of the Chinese scholars who converted to Christianity, likewise helped Fr Ricci in completing the last and most developed editions of the world map that were to give the Chinese a new image of the world.

He described Fr Ricci in these words: "I believed him to be a unique man because he lives in celibacy, steers clear of intrigue in his office, speaks little, has an orderly conduct, and this is his daily practice. He cultivates virtue secretly and serves God ceaselessly."

Thus it is right to associate with Fr Matteo Ricci his closest friends who shared with him the experience of faith.

Dear brothers and sisters, may the memory of these men of God dedicated to the Gospel and to the Church, their example of fidelity to Christ, their deep love for the Chinese people, their commitment of intelligence and study and their virtuous lives be an opportunity to pray for the Church in China and for the entire Chinese people, as we do every year, on May 24, addressing Mary Most Holy, venerated in the famous Shrine of Sheshan in Shanghai; and may they also be an incentive and an encouragement to live the Christian faith intensely, in dialogue with the different cultures but in the certainty that in Christ true humanism is fulfilled, open to God, rich in moral and spiritual values and capable of responding to the deepest desires of the human soul.

Today I too, like Fr Matteo Ricci, express my profound esteem to the noble Chinese people and to their several thousand year-old culture, in the conviction that a renewed encounter with Christianity will bear abundant fruits of good, just as it then fostered a peaceful coexistence among peoples. Many thanks.