

BOOK REVIEW

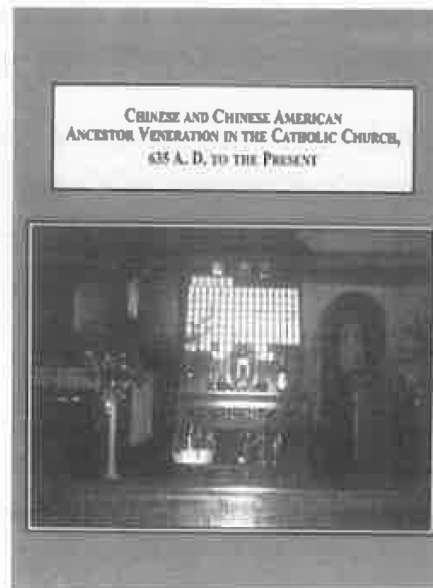
Chinese and Chinese American Ancestor Veneration in the Catholic Church, 635 AD to the Present

Reviewed by Michael J. Sloboda, MM

Chinese and Chinese American Ancestor Veneration in the Catholic Church, 635 AD to the Present, by Beverly J. Butcher, The Edwin Mellon Press, 2010. ISBN-13: 978-0-7734-3624-4

L*ex orandi, lex credendi*, “the law of praying, the law of believing,” is an old guideline for interpreting religious faith: to discover what people believe, we need to listen to the words they pray aloud. For example, the best way to counter the accusation, “You Catholics worship Mary!” is to check the prayers for a major feast, such as the Assumption on August 15. Read what is said about God and Mary:

“Let us pray that we will join Mary, the mother of the Lord...All-powerful and every living God, you raised the sinless Virgin Mary, mother of your Son...By her prayers, help us to seek you...Lord, may we ...be led to the glory of heaven by the prayers of the Virgin Mary.” The prayers of the Mass outrank the Hail Mary of popular devotion, and all prayers during Mass are addressed to God the Father. Gestures such as the priest lifting bread and wine up to



heaven, rather than to a statue of Our Lady on the sidewall, give extra clues about Who is being worshiped and who is merely being venerated or honored.

Liturgical words and ceremonies, especially funeral and memorial services, tend to be extremely conservative. People get upset when things are added to the service, or deleted. Given China's long history, and a Christian presence there of "merely" 1376 years, Butcher has to devote three-fifths of her text to the historical background.

The Nestorians (Church of the East) arrived in 635 and had over two centuries to adapt and grow slowly. They interacted with Buddhist monks, and so they were also hit by the government crackdown on tax-exempt monasteries in 845. Yet they maintained a toehold in China for another five centuries, and coexisted with Franciscan missionaries to the Yuan (元) court until the end of that dynasty in 1368. The Ming (大明國) had no use for foreign religions, and the Jesuits of the late Ming had to start from scratch. Jesuit and Dominican missionaries disagreed on whether to learn from the local culture, make accommodations, and adapt some elements into Catholic rituals, or to insist on doing everything exactly the way it was done in Europe. The divide between rationalistic Chinese scholars and fisher folk with their popular religiosity further confused the issue. The Rites Controversy dragged on for over a century before Pope Benedict XIV nailed the coffin shut with *Ex Quo Singulari* in 1742. Almost 200 years later, in a different historical context, Rome allowed Catholics to participate in ceremonies honoring the Japanese Emperor, since these were civil, not religious. Thus many of the prohibitions of 1742 were lifted in 1939 under Pope Pius XII. Much more would change, and did change, after Vatican II.

Most readers of *Tripod* are familiar with the Rites Controversy. For them, this book will be a good refresher, since Butcher displays a detailed knowledge of the historical sources.

Only a handful of people have studied the current memorial services. It's one thing to attend a Catholic service at Lunar New

Year and step forward to offer incense. It's another to analyze the rite sentence by sentence, gesture by gesture, item by item (the offerings of flowers, fruit and wine), place these elements in their cultural setting, and notice what is deliberately omitted, such as burning paper money to the spirits, since the Sacrifice of the Mass replaces that offering (p.268). The liturgical guidelines do not result in uniform ceremonies. Butcher pays attention, and notices a difference in the sequence or an added flourish from one parish to another.

This book has only a handful of errors: we now say Holy Spirit, not Holy Ghost (p. 25); Sr. Janet Carroll MM went to Taiwan for the first time in 1956, not 1952 (p. 221); it was NOT so easy for the missionary in the field...to make a decision (p. 242); Taiwan does not call itself the People's Republic of China (p. 312); and there are not two Catholic Churches in China, aboveground and underground (p. 235), but rather one divided Church.

This last mistake is more than a typo. Her misunderstanding illustrates the difficulty of distinguishing theology from the sociology of religion. Theologically, there is only one Catholic Church, even if parts of it are restrained from freely communicating with the Vatican. Sociologically, in some parts of China, the two Catholic communities have not spoken to each other for decades.

The prolonged and tragic struggle over ancestor veneration by Chinese Catholics was mostly fought in the no man's land between theology and sociology, while national and international politics, and also anthropology, fired an occasional shell. Now that the war is over and the smoke has cleared, Butcher's keen eye for the details of word and gesture in the ceremonies will prevent congregations (of any ethnic background) from stepping on landmines. Divided Catholics inside Mainland China would benefit from studying the Chinese texts printed in Appendix III, then calling a truce, and gathering on neutral ground to pray for the dead. This will make it easier for them to work with the living. Honoring the departed, and asking the Lord to have mercy on their souls, makes it easier to see something good in their living descendents, *Lex orandi, lex credendi*.