

CELSO COSTANTINI

APOSTOLIC DELEGATE IN CHINA (1922-1933)

The Changing Role of the Foreign Missionary



by Arnulf Camps, O.F.M.

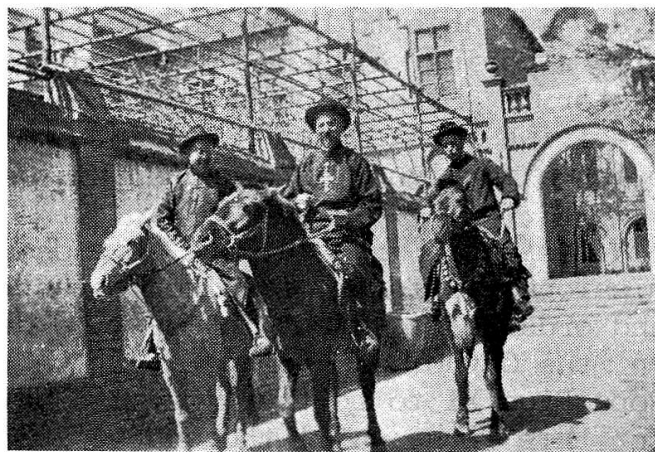
The history of the Church teaches us that it is not easy to be at one and the same time a missionary and a foreigner. From a missiological point of view a missionary is a person whose purpose is to work to build a local church, governed by its own people and fully incarnated in its own culture. During the greater part of the first millennium of the Church this principle was put into practice without much fanfare or public controversy. But a missionary does not exist outside the context of his own culture, and this became painfully clear when, at the end of the fifteenth century, the western branch of the Christian church got involved with the expansionist, imperial policies of the western powers. Many times the foreign missionary was tempted to ignore or gloss over the distinction that exist between the spreading the kingdom of God and furthering the interests of the dominating western nations. Often he was more or less unconscious of his own involvement and often he accepted this situation not knowing how to act otherwise. But there also have been missionaries whose actions left no doubt about their willingness to espouse a dual loyalty - on the one hand to the local church they came to build and on the other to the country they had left behind; and all too often they gave undue preference to the interests of their own home-country over and above the needs of a really local church. Fortunately, there have always been missionaries who opposed this situation. In India Roberto de Nobili, S.J. turned his back on the Portuguese enclaves to go

to work in 'the real India'. In Latin America during the first century of the conquista, many Franciscans worked to build an Indian Church free from entanglement with the ruling Spanish power. In China, Matteo Ricci, S.J. was able to begin an excellent Chinese Christian community through his studying of and profound respect for the Chinese culture and history. Mission history then shows us a variety of approaches to resolving the inner tension which arises from being a missionary and being a foreigner at one and the same time.

In this article, we have chosen to pay special attention to the missionary efforts of Celso Costantini. Born in northern Italy in 1876 and ordained a priest in 1899, he was destined to have a great influence on the Catholic Church's attitude toward mission. He was appointed by Pope Pius XI to be the Apostolic Delegate to China in 1922, and remained in this post until the end of 1933. From 1935 to 1953 he served as Secretary of the Sacred Congregation of the Propagation of the Faith in Rome. In 1935, he was elevated to a membership in the College of Cardinals and he died on October 17, 1958 on the eve of the election of his friend, Angelo Roncalli, to the See of Rome. He was a prolific writer and has left us five volumes of his personal reflections covering all the events of his long and eventful life.(1) He also was a key figure in modern mission-history, though he was always quick to note that his role was merely that of a humble servant of the Roman See. It was during his years of service in China that he was able to confront directly the difficult problem of the changing role of the foreign missionary.

The more pressing issues that Costantini had to deal with in his China sojourn were: the tension existing between the Chinese and the foreign priests, the promotion of a local Chinese clergy leading to the consecration of Chinese bishops, the renewal of the apostolate among Chinese intellectuals, and the liberation of the Church from the political influence of the French protectorate. Costantini arrived in China after having made himself familiar with China's more recent political and religious history. He possessed a natural talent for selecting gifted and well-informed advisors. As an Apostolic Delegate, he stressed the pastoral character of his mission and underlined this from the start by refusing to be formally introduced to the Chinese government by French or Italian foreign ministers when he arrived in Beijing. He first settled in Hankou, and later in Beijing, where Chinese Catholics had offered him a house on land outside the foreign legations. He considered the "protection" of the Church by foreign powers to be one of the chief obstacles to growth of the Church in China. In his dealings with foreign missionaries he often pointed out to them that, in general, they were living in the past and had little understanding of the new

China which was engaged in a vital struggle for radical renewal. He made it very clear that those missionaries who made use of foreign powers brought upon themselves the enmity and hatred of the Chinese people. Costantini preferred to bring his influence to foreign missionaries through personal diplomacy rather than direct confrontation. And he supported those he felt represented his progressive views. We read in his papers where he had long conversations with Father Kovac, a Franciscan, who belonged to the Apostolic Vicariate of Changsha, and who was considered by him to be



a man of enlightened ideas. On one of his visits to Hankou in July of 1923, Kovac outlined for Costantini six reasons why he felt Christianity was making such little headway among the Chinese. Among them he cited the negative effects stemming from the Chinese rites controversy, the continuing humiliation of the Chinese by the interventionist policies and military presence of the foreign powers, the scandal caused by the dissension among Christians in adapting to Chinese customs, psychology and religiosity.(2) Costantini listened in silence, just as he listened to the views of all the foreign missionaries, Chinese priests and lay people with whom he met. It is only in 1927 that we find in his personal papers written reflections about his own view of things. "All these reasons," he writes, "do not explain the failure of Christianity. What is lacking is an apostolic methodology. They have founded missions, but they have not founded the Church. They confuse the two. It is not that we lack Chinese clergy. What is missing is a Chinese hierarchy, and this is something very different."(3) It was Costantini's conviction that the method of the Apostles was to found local churches and hand them over as quickly as possible to local leadership. Many times he travelled throughout China meeting with Apostolic Vicars and foreign priests (there were no Chinese bishop when Costantini arrived in China) and without hesitation, hammered home the necessity to establish a Chinese hierarchy, backing his arguments with quotations from the papal encyclicals (Maximum Illud by Benedict XV and Rerum Ecclesiae by Pius XI (1919 and 1926)). In 1925 he made the following observation: "The missions understood as religious colonies belonging to a particular institute have created a special attitude

among missionaries, and this I would like to call 'territorial feudalism'."(4) Apostolic Vicars and the missionary orders or institutes to which they belong were unwilling to surrender even a part of their territorial jurisdictions to make the creation of new ecclesiastical territories possible. Moreover, they maintained the Chinese clergy in subordinate roles. The Chinese priests belonged mostly to the secular clergy, and they were treated as auxiliaries of the foreign religious priest. Moreover, the foreign religious would not even allow other foreign religious groups in to their territories. Costantini labeled this as 'provincialism and jurisdictional feudalism.'(5)



It was Costantini's task to remedy this unhappy situation. In 1923, he proposed to Rome the establishment of one or two ecclesiastical territories which would be governed by bishops selected from among the Chinese clergy. He hoped to realize this plan before the opening of the First National Council of the Chinese Church which was to take place in 1924. At the time, Costantini was staying in Hankou, the seat of an apostolic vicariate entrusted to the Franciscans. While he enjoyed their cordial hospitality, he tried to persuade the then Vicar Apostolic, Gratianus

Gennaro, to help him to establish the first Chinese vicariate by ceding apart of his territory. Gennaro was an excellent bishop, wrote Costantini, but he was rather timid in implementing his ideas. The Vicar Apostolic observed that Chinese priests had no legal status in China and were not respected by the local authorities. However, if Rome decided to act he would certainly obey. Costantini urged action ex facto oritur ius, which meant in this case that the actual presence of a Chinese ecclesiastical superior would put pressure on the Chinese government to change its attitude. Thus, at the end of 1923, the Apostolic Prefecture of Puchi was erected and Odoric Tcheng, OFM was placed in charge. In April of 1924, a second prefecture apostolic was entrusted to the Chinese clergy (Lihsien), and both Chinese prelates took part in the First National Council of 1924 in Shanghai. In 1926, Costantini took a further step forward by erecting the Vicariate Apostolic of Suanhwafu, which was previously part of the Vicariate of Beijing. Now things began

to move quickly. Cardinal van Rossum in Rome proposed that the newly appointed Chinese Vicar Apostolic of Suanhwafu come to Rome to be ordained bishop by the Pope himself. Costantini gladly accepted this and suggested further that the two previously appointed prefects and, in addition, three newly proposed Chinese vicar apostolics should also go to Rome. Pope Pius XI invited all six and ordained them bishops on October 28, 1926.(6) Costantini accompanied them and was elated that a breakthrough had finally been achieved.

Costantini's next order of business was to build stronger ties between the Chinese government and the Holy See. Through the Catholic Action movement Chinese lay people were urged to take a more active part in the national revival which was then sweeping the country. In 1926 Pope Pius XI registered his approval of this and gave it his full support. In 1927 a Catholic University was founded, which was approved by the Chinese government and based in the capital city of Beijing. There were some vicar apostolics who feared that this would bring about an end to the French protectorate and, in such times of rampant Chinese nationalism would only lead to the expulsion of all foreign missionaries who were relying upon the protection of the foreign powers.(7) Costantini was willing to take the risk. His overriding conviction was that the Church in China must become Chinese in every aspect.



During his term of office, Costantini had to fight many battles. He did so with the utmost courtesy, but also with firmness. An example of this was in handling of Joseph Fabreque, the Auxiliary Bishop of Beijing, in the controversy over a second Catholic University. Fabreque had invited the French Dominicans to start a second Catholic university in Tao-Ming in 1928. He had accepted for this purpose a sum of money from the French government, along with some honorary decorations. This was a clear sign to Costantini that Chinese suspicions of missionaries being used in the interest of foreign governments were not completely unfounded. Costantini saw this symbolic expression of the French protectorate as unacceptable. He termed it an action of 'missionaries of the old style'. It was not long before accusations were made that the

new university represented an attempt at cultural aggression by foreigners who were instruments of foreign imperialism. Students of Fu Jen University made a public outcry against the new foundation, asserting that being a Roman Catholic was a spiritual affair - a personal commitment free of any dependency on foreign powers. In the end Fu Jen University remained as the only Catholic university and Tao-Ming ceased to exist. Costantini had remained firm in his opposition to Fabreque and his followers, but always sought to resolve the problem through courteous dialogue with those involved. He gave full approval to the rising national spirit of the new China and saw it as a good thing; and he urged that faith and support should be given those who sought to construct it.

The changing role of the foreign missionary in the first quarter of the present century is well illustrated in the life and work of Costantini in China. What is striking in his approach was that it was based on the methodology of the Apostles of the infant Church. He constantly makes reference to them in his writings and is rightly regarded today as a reformer in the mission history of the twentieth century. He saw his mission to the people of China as being fundamentally pastoral and in his dealings with the government of China during his days there, he actively supported its efforts to regain China's independence and national dignity. Moreover, Costantini eschewed exclusivism and narrow sectarian approaches and he was acutely aware that there were many other movements within China fighting for the same common goal. When reading the works of Costantini one thinks of the expression; forsan et haec olim meminisse iuvabit! While there remain many reasons for present anger and complaint about the reprehensible role played by many foreign missionaries in China's past, if we begin with the apostolic principles clearly outlined and advocated by Costantini and by the Popes of his time, we may well be able to overcome some of the bitterness of that heritage and make a new and positive start in our approaches to a new era in Chinese history. As Costantini well knew: reform from within always means a return to the original sources and with it always come new freedoms and the possibilities for new relationships.

Notes:

1. We refer to the following books of Celso Costantini: Con i missionari in Cina, 2 volumes, Roma 1946; Foglie Secche, Roma 1948; Ultimo Foglie, Roma 1954; Cum Petro in Christo, Roma 1957. Cfr. a great number of extracts published in: "Reforme des Missions au XXe siecle, Cardinal Celso Costantini, traduit et adapte de l'italien" Jean

Bruls," Tournai 1960. An excellent study was written by Ruggero Simonato, Celso Costantini tra rinnovamento cattolico in Italia e le nuove missioni in Cina, Pordenone 1985.

2. Reforme des Missions au XXe siecle, Tournai 1960 35-36
3. Ibid., 43
4. Ibid., 45
5. Ibid., 51
6. Ibid., 126-138. Josef Metzler, Die Synoden in China, Japan und Korea 1570-1931, Paderborn, 1980, 199-222. Primum Concilium Sinense anno 1924 Acta-Decreta et normae Vota, Zi-ka-wei 1929
7. Reforme des Missions, 142-153
8. Ibid., 153-162. For the Franciscans mentioned in this article: Joannes Ricci, OFM, Hierarchia Franciscana in Sinis, Wuchang 1929; and Johannes Beckmann, Die Katholische Missionsmethode in China in Neuester Zeit 1942-1912, Immensee 1931, and Die China-Mission, Versuch einer Kritischen Rechenschaft: Wort and Wahrheit 14 (Freiburg-Wien 1959) 3-40

PAPAL
DOCUMENTS
RELATED TO
THE NEW
CHINA

天主
教

Edited by
Elmer Wurth, M.M.

A selection from 46 encyclicals
and major addresses from Pius XI
to John Paul II on New China and
the Catholic Church.

With an introduction and summary
comments by Elmer Wurth.

Published jointly by
Orbis Books, New York &
The Holy Spirit Study Centre, HK

Order from:
1) Orbis Books, P.O. Maryknoll,
N.Y., 10545, USA
2) Holy Spirit Centre, 6 Welfare
Road, Aberdeen, HK

Price U.S. \$5 or H.K. \$40