

THE SOCIETY OF JESUS: A FOREIGN MISSIONARY ORDER



A PANORAMIC VIEW OF ITS EVANGELIZATION WORK IN CHINA

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The objective of the Society of Jesus since its foundation has been to accept the mission of the Church to preach the Gospel everywhere. It is an international community in the Church and all members join accepting the mission of the Church to spread the Gospel around the world. The Jesuit assigned to mission outside his own country remains permanently in the new country unless reassigned elsewhere. Even if the local Church is established the Jesuit will continue to work there in the local Church. When the Jesuits are sent to a place to preach the Gospel, they stress recruitment of new members into their Community. The basic concept that a Jesuit should be ready to be sent to any place in the world has not changed since the foundation of the Society. Even today, looking back on the 450 years of its history, the Society believes that this principle, coming from the inspiration of St. Ignatius, can still make a contribution to the Church.

The Jesuit Order's missionary work in China dates back over 400 years to the time of Matteo Ricci. Considering the many changes in the Chinese Church throughout history, it can be said that there was almost no long period of tranquility for the building up of the local Church. Basically, however, there have been no striking changes in the China missionary approach of the Jesuit Order. The actual situation has led to many changes in the Society. Not the least was when the Society of Jesus was suppressed for a period of time, by the Holy See. All its works of evangelization in China came to a halt and were transferred to other religious Orders.

The following points can explain in a concrete way the changes that

took place in the Jesuits' missionary work in China and how they came mainly from external situations rather than from within the Society itself.

As far as evangelization is concerned, the first Jesuit who came to the area, St. Francis Xavier, accepting the missiology of his time, concentrated on preaching and baptizing. When Matteo Ricci entered China, understanding clearly the cultural situation there, he emphasized the work of what later would be termed "pre-evangelization". His many encounters with the intellectuals of that time and his attempts at cultural dialogue gave a favourable impression of the Catholic Church. Matteo Ricci's methods of evangelization were followed by Jesuits who served in the Imperial Court at the beginning of the Qing dynasty. Generally speaking, the early Jesuits in China emphasized humanism and respect for the Chinese culture. They leaned toward adaptation in evangelization work. This was one of the positions presented during the Rites Controversy. There is no need to say more about this period in the history of missionary work in China, all the Catholics suffered in the struggle.

At the end of the Qing dynasty, when the doors of China were opened by Western cannons, the Society of Jesus, which had been restored after its suppression, was again sent to do missionary work. Generally speaking, the Jesuits of that time were influenced by colonialism. This is characteristic of that period of missionary history. Actually the Church's "missiology" had not changed much. The Jesuits, holding to the tradition of St. Ignatius, complemented the preaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments with educational and academic work, publication and social welfare organizations. The Jesuits sent to China at that time could not compare to the Jesuits like Matteo Ricci and others of the late Ming and early Qing period. They continued in their tradition of recruiting local vocations. When the regime on the mainland China changed hands, there were outstanding Chinese members of the Society, such as Father Beda Chang. As a result of the emphasis on the formation of local vocation, when the foreign Jesuits were expelled from China, the Chinese Jesuits maintained the status quo for a period of time. However, if the preparation of local leadership had developed earlier, the results would perhaps have been better.

The Jesuits did not make many changes in their theories regarding missionary work in China. What they did in practice was very close to the methods used today. Hence, the changes brought about by Vatican II could be easily adapted to the work of the Jesuits in China. The direction taken by the Jesuits in their missionary work in Taiwan today is proof of this.

Having looked at the concept of evangelization, we should look at the question of leadership. The formation of a local Jesuit leadership by the Jesuit missionaries in China had not produced great results. However, when the current concept of indigenization and the building up of the local Church was put forth at Vatican II, the response of the Jesuits was prompt. As the foreign members have accepted the concepts of Vatican Council II, local leadership is emerging at all levels. Practically no great difficulties have arisen in regard to leadership and basically the concept of the Jesuits as an international community has not changed. The charisms of the foreign members are respected. Charisms from the Holy Spirit are not to be suppressed by the principle of indigenization. However, under the influence of present day ecclesiology, it is worth reflecting upon the direction of the Jesuits' missionary work in China today.

1. With the new emphasis on local Church, the Jesuits in China, on the one hand emphasize incorporation into the local Church and efforts at indigenization. On the other hand, based on the concept of the Jesuits as an international community and the Order's charism, they desire to preserve the universality of the local Church.
2. In choosing missionary works, the Jesuits follow the principle established by St. Ignatius for discernment, namely, "for the greater glory of God." But Ignatius' principle has great flexibility. Its aim is to follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the needs of the Church.
3. Although the Jesuits, as an international community, have a policy on missionary work for the whole Order, it should be concretely implemented and adapted to the situation in each place. At their 32nd Congregation the Jesuits placed special emphasis on serving the Church, promoting justice, and giving priority to the poor. This should also be the guideline for the Jesuits in China.
4. Although the local Church had been formally and legally established in China, in reality the setting up of a so-called hierarchy is still in process. Therefore, in this formation period, the Jesuits cannot concentrate all their efforts on certain works which may be more in line with the signs of the times.

Finally, for the Jesuit Order, there are three functioning units working for China at this time -- the China Province, the Macau-Hongkong Province and the Delegation for the Chinese Apostolate. This article relates primarily to the China Province.