

DID CATHOLICISM IN THE YUAN DYNASTY

SURVIVE UNTIL THE PRESENT?



by **Bernward H. Willeke, OFM**

"Catholicism was imported into China in 1582." These words of Donald F. MacInnis written in 1972 reflect the general attitude of most contemporary Sinologists and historians of Christian mission activity in China. While they readily admit that during the first half of the 14th century Franciscan missionaries were active in China, they maintain that their converts were restricted to the Mongols and other foreign elements. They also assert that with the restoration of Chinese rule at the beginning of the Ming Dynasty, the Franciscan missionary enterprise came to an abrupt end and nothing survived of it. Thus the general opinion today is that the Chinese Catholic church of today traces its establishment to the Jesuits who arrived in China at the close of the sixteenth century.

In 1994 the Catholic church will celebrate the 700th anniversary of the arrival of John of Montecorvino in Peking. He was appointed by the Pope as the first bishop of Peking and Patriarch of the Far East. The question arises: Was his work just a passing occurrence lasting but a few decades only to disappear without a trace?

It is the purpose of this article to explore certain testimonies which make us question whether or not the Catholic faith did actually

disappear during those days of the early Ming Dynasty only to be re-introduced in 1582 by Matteo Ricci. On the contrary, our sources suggest that during Yuan times not only Mongols, but also Chinese accepted Christianity and that the faith was handed down in an unbroken tradition as a sacred treasure even to our present day.

I THE STORY OF LIU-CHIA-CHAI

In 1937 Louis Gautie, a French Franciscan, wrote in Echo de la Mission de Chefoo an article entitled "Souvenirs d'un vieux Broussard." In it he reports on his missionary experiences in Liu-chia-chai, a village in Po-hsing County in eastern Shantung. He states:

In Po-hsing, the principal Christian communities of the district are Liu-chia, Tung-hsi, Kao-chia-chuang, Yang-chia-kuan-chuang and Yen-t'uan.

Liu-chia-chai in 1907 had 114 baptized Christians and 5 catechumens. In the second year of the Emperor Yung-lo (Ming Dynasty 1405) a Christian family had come from Yu-she-hsien (Shansi) and founded this Christian community. This Christian community, then, has been in existence for more than 500 years."

Wenceslaus Ronflet, another French Franciscan working in the Prefecture Apostolic of Idu Shantung, has this to say about the Liu-chia-chai community:

The oldest Christian community of the prefecture is that of Liu-chia-chai in Po-hsing. It should be dated from the fifteenth century. A funeral stele which was erected in that village in 1387 states that the Liu family came from Nanking. One of the emperors of the Ming dynasty had taken a daughter of these Liu's as a concubine. They lived on imperial estates in Tai-yuan-fu in Shansi, and emigrated in 1404 to Po-hsing where they founded the village of Liu-chia-chai.

A report of the minister Feng Ch'i written in 1665 (sic! 1601?) on the activities of Matteo Ricci and other Jesuits makes the first serious mention of the village of Liu-chia-chai as a Catholic community. Feng Ch'i, a native of the Lin-ch'u District which is a subprefecture of Idu, was the Minister of Rites charged with examining them.

Here it is stated that the Liu family originally came from Nanking. Today many believe that there was a Franciscan mission in Nanking as early as the 14th century, and the Wu-liang Hall, there, which is dedicated to the memory of Kuo-ming-tang heroes, is said to be an extant medieval structure that once belonged to the mission.

Feng Ch'i is well-known. He was born in Lin-ch'u of a scholar-official family and lived there from 1559 to 1603. In 1599 he was appointed by the Imperial Court as Vice-Minister of Rites and in 1601 as Minister of Rites. Ray Huang in his biography of Feng Ch'i written in 1975 does not make any mention of a relationship between Feng Ch'i and Matteo Ricci. Wolfgang Franke, however, does state that Ricci was once introduced to Feng Ch'i.



If there was a Catholic village named Liu-chia-chai at the time Ricci came to Peking and Feng Ch'i wrote his report, it must have been founded earlier. Were the Catholics of this village descendants of the first Catholics of Yuan times?

II CATHOLICS IN KAO-CHIA-CHUANG

Louis Gautie mentions two other Catholic communities in Po-hsing Hsien in 1907, one Kao-chia-chuang East with 115 members and the other Kao-chia-chuang West with 122 Catholics. He claims:

These two Christian communities have an existence going back more than 500 years. The first Catholics, like those of Liu-chia-chai, came from Shansi.

If it is true that these communities have been Catholic for over 500 years, they must be descendants from Catholics baptized by the early Franciscans during the Yuan Dynasty.

III THE OLD CHRISTIAN VILLAGE OF PUN-LI IN SOUTHERN SHANTUNG

Richard Hartwich, SVD, reports in his work Steyler Missionare in China of an oral tradition in the Chang family which claims that their family has been Catholic for 700 years. Mr. Chang Shang-yum, who now lives in Kia-yi in Taiwan, made a tape-recording on July 6, 1981 in which he speaks of this tradition. According to him, the Chang family lived in Puo-li, a secluded Catholic village in Yang-ku Hsian in southern Shantung.

No written documents are left regarding the history of the Catholic faith in Puo-li. All documents are said to have been destroyed at the time of the persecution. Only the oral tradition is still alive. If the oral tradition is true, these Christians go back to the time of the early Franciscan missionaries who were led by Giovanni de Montecorvino.

IV CATHOLICS IN EARLY MING TIMES

In 1949 Richard Henning called attention to the discovery of an ancient manuscript dated 1404 (Libellus de Notitia Orbis) found by Dr. Anton Kern in the university library of Graz. Its author is a certain Johannes III de Galonifontibus, a French Dominican, who was then Archbishop of Suithanyeh (Soldania) in the Near East. He was sent back to Europe by Timur Lenk (Tamerlan) to serve as an emissary in fostering commercial relations between Europe and the East. The manuscript contains important information about the Catholic church in early Ming times. Richard Henning writes:

Until a short time ago, it was believed that Christianity which flourished during the Yuan Dynasty, and was well tolerated, was destroyed with the fall of this dynasty in 1368.

But a new find seems to contradict this. With some surprise it was learned that after John of Montecorvino another archbishop, of whom nothing is known, worked in Peking and that decades later an apparently not small congregation existed in Peking. Thus the assumption that Christianity had disappeared under the Ming Dynasty seems not to be correct.

The Archbishop of Sulthanyeh described the situation of the church in China in the following words:

In that country there was an archbishop of Kambalech, of the Order of Friars Minor, a venerable and saintly man named Charles of France, whose acquaintance I made in my younger years. This man lived in those regions and had done much for the spread and glorification of the Faith. Since his death, many years ago, no one has gone into these regions. As a consequence, I myself have been asked repeatedly and I would go there, but I have waited for the consent of the Holy See. If it is pleasing to the Most High, I shall move into those parts because we have there a good number (bonam partem) of Catholics.

The text of the Libellus de Notitia Orbis is very illuminating. Most important is the remark: "We have there a good number of Catholics." Thus we might conclude with Richard Henning:

His Libellus gives us the certainty that medieval Christianity by no means ended abruptly in 1386, but that later colonies of Christian Chinese did exist.

V THE MADONNA OF T'ANG YIN

At the beginning of 1988, Joseph Spae published his book The Catholic Church in China, a 1988 Digest in which he included a picture of a Chinese painting called the "Buddhist Madonna", which is preserved in the British Museum in London. This fine painting is attributed to the famous Ming painter T'ang Yin (1470-1524). There is another Chinese Madonna attributed to T'ang Yin, which now hangs in the Field Museum in Chicago, and which was discovered by Professor Berthold Laufer in 1910 in Sian, Shensi. While the first painting seems to have been modeled after a 16th century picture of the goddess Kuan-yin, the inspiration of the second comes from the European tradition of painted Madonnas. Though Berthold Laufer did not recognize it, it has an obvious resemblance to the famous "Mater dignissima" of St. Mary Major's Church in Rome. In accordance with the general assumption that there were no Christians in China in Ming times, this painting was at first believed to be a work of the early 17th Century. Professor Schuller, a specialist on the history of fine art, maintains on artistic grounds that both paintings are by T'ang Yin. If that is true, then many questions arise demanding an answer. T'ang Yin himself was a Buddhist. What then was his motive for painting this Madonna? What was the source of the interest in producing such a work? Was it, perhaps, done at the request of Chinese Christians? If so, these obviously must have been Catholics who were descendants of

those baptized by the Franciscans during the Yuan Dynasty and then living in China in the early 16th Century.

The above historical testimonies would seem, in this writer's opinion, to challenge the prevailing view that Christianity disappeared in China after the fall of the Yuan Dynasty, and would argue for a continuity in the catholic missionary tradition in that country reaching back to the arrival of John of Monte Corvino in 1290 in an unbroken line.

Bibliography:

- Franke, Wolfgang, Ricci, Matteo - Li-ma tou Vol. II, p. 1141
- Gautie, Louis, "Souvenirs d'un Broussard" Echo du Vicariat de Chefoo 34 (Chefoo 1937), p. 149-150
- Hartwich, Richard, SVD, Steyler Missionare in China, Vol. 1 Missionarische Erschließung Sudschantung 1879-1903 (St. Augustin 1983) p. 34
- Henning, Richard, "Das Ende des Christiantums in spatmittelalterlichen China" Stimmen fer Zeit 74 (1948/49) p. 312-314
- Huang, Ray, "Feng Ch'i (1559-1603)", Dictionary of Ming Biography (1368-1644). Vol. I (New York, 1976 p. 443-445
- Kern, Anton, "Der Libellus de Notitia orbis" Archivum Fratrum Praedicatorum 8 (1938) p. 82-123
- Laufer, Berthold "The Chinese Madonna in the Field Museum", The Open Court (Chicago, 1912) January edition
- Li Chu-tsing, "T'ang Yin" Dictionary of ming Biography, 1368-1644, Vol. 2 (New York 1976) p. 1256-1259
- Ronflet, Wenceslaus, O.F.M. Histoire de la Prefecture Apostolique de Y'tou en Shantung Oriental. Unpublished manuscript.
- Schuller. Sepp, Die Geschichte der Christlichen Kunst in China. (Berlin 1940) p. 18-20
- ----"Die Chinesische Madonna, der bedeutendste Fund aus der ersten Missionsperiode in China." Die Katholischen Missionen (Dusseldorf 1936), p. 177-183