

From the Editor

Ancestor worship, rituals intended to provide for the souls in the afterlife with everything essential for their peace and well being, goes back to the dawn of history. Within the Chinese context these rituals are expressions of family unity and respect and are deeply rooted in filial piety (*hsiao*).

Confucianism maintained that filial piety in outward form was absolutely necessary to maintain worldly harmony. Traditional China was very serious about children's obligations towards their parents in life and in death. The importance of this Confucian tradition was abundantly clear in the law that authorized putting children to death if they were found to be unfilial.

Filial piety, a hallmark of Chinese culture, finds one of its most important manifestations in ancestor veneration. Ancestor veneration itself, however, is not peculiar to China. It is, in some way, rooted in just about every other culture in the world. Most people everywhere consider it very important to remember their dead and to make preparation for their own afterlife. Different cultures, of course, have different ways of doing this..

While Christians do not believe in furnishing their dead with food, clothing and money, items essential for the living, they nonetheless have a long tradition of remembering their loved ones with prayers, flowers and Masses offered for the repose of their souls.

Christianity, influenced by Greek and Roman culture, had to confront the matter of ancestor veneration very early in its development. After long deliberations, the early Fathers of the Church unanimously concluded, with the author of the Book of Maccabees, that "it is a healthy and wholesome thing to pray for the dead."

Nevertheless, the Church has often frowned on certain aspects of ancestor worship. In fact, one of the most painful chapters in China-Church relations and missionary history deals precisely with this issue. What began as an argument among the Jesuits, the Dominicans and Franciscans in China on a question of methodology--how best to evangelize the Chinese and what traditions and practices could be assimilated into Christianity--ended up, precisely because of ancestor worship, involving twenty-six popes, numerous cardinals and Roman

Congregations and lasted for 300 years. The Chinese, of course, never really had any part in this discussion!

By finally ruling in favor of the rites in 1939, the Church acknowledged that ancestor veneration is not only fundamental to the Chinese social order, but also basic to the very ethic of Confucianism which, until the Cultural Revolution, was the norm against which to judge morality, values and behavior.

In this issue of *Tripod* we explore the meaning of ancestor veneration as it is practiced today by the Chinese Catholic communities in Taiwan, Canada and the United States. We have taken as one of our two articles on the matter, the last chapter of Beverly Butcher's doctoral dissertation, entitled *Ancestor Veneration within the Catholic Church*, and Yang Ni's, *Ancestor Worship in the USA*. This is a partially fictionalized account of a young mainland student abroad who encounters the ancestor veneration ritual for the first time. Although the author does not seem aware of it, the experience of the main character is clearly presented through the eyes of "a child of the revolution", stripped of his country's history and traditions. These rituals are totally foreign to him, even ludicrous, especially when performed by Westerners for the Chinese communities. His impressions tell a great deal about China's success in trying to do away with the "four olds" during the Cultural Revolution. It also reveals the influence this campaign had even over young people of faithful Catholic families,

Michael Sloboda examines the similarities and differences in China's White Papers on human rights of 1991 and 1995.

The documentation section features two China documents. The first is the new *Regulations from the Shanghai Religious Affairs Bureau*, which reiterates many of the contents of decrees No. 144 and No 145. It is very much a further development of these materials. These regulations became effective on March 1, 1996. The second piece of documentation is the conclusion of the speech given by Ye Xiaowen, the recently appointed national director of the Religious Affairs Bureau. In his report, he carefully and clearly explicates the direction religious works will take in 1996 under his directorship. The article is entitled, *An Outline of Religious Affairs for 1996*.

Finally, we present a few items of news that may be of special interest to our readers.