

# *Ancestor Veneration within the Catholic Church*

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**A**lthough the Chinese word *pai*, or worship, can have religious implications, it may also simply mean “reverence,” “to pay respects to,” “to visit,” or “to make obeisance to”. Nevertheless, the phrase ancestor worship is often used by scholars and lay persons alike to refer to those ritual acts which connote that the ancestors of family members are actually being worshipped in a supernatural sense, as if the deceased were deities of some sort. Because this connotation is frequently associated with the phrase, it is preferable to use the more overarching expression ancestor veneration because it does not necessarily connote any spiritual significance in English. Ancestor veneration may refer to either ancestor worship in the sense described above or it may refer to those rituals which are performed simply as a means of expressing honor and/or respect for deceased family members.



## *Filial Piety and Ancestor Veneration*

Whether or not traditional ancestor veneration rituals for Chinese have or have had supernatural significance for the individuals concerned, it is certain that for all who participate in such ceremonies, filial piety is and always has been, at least to some extent, a motivating factor. Many of the historical records, dating from the first millennium before Christ, incorporated into the Confucian canon by the great scholar/teacher Confucius, or K'ung

Fu Tzu (551-479 B.C.), clearly indicate that filial piety has been an important part of Chinese tradition since 2200 B.C. During the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.- 222 A.D.), government officials sought to revive traditional Chinese values and in the process rediscovered the works of Confucius. As a result, Confucian teachings became the official canonical books and standard texts of the Chinese educational system. These writings highlight the monumental significance of filial acts in the maintenance of traditional Chinese values.

The meaning of the expression *filial piety*, called *hsiao* in Chinese, is represented by the character composed of the ideogram for old with the graph of the son placed underneath. This

symbolizes the obligation of the child to respect and take care of the parents according to what is known as *li*, or the socially acceptable behavior of individuals in all circumstances. The Confucian *Hsiao Ching: Classic of Filial Piety* details the



way in which children are to respect and to show gratitude to their parents. The extent to which traditional China expected children to express filiality towards parents during various periods of history is demonstrated by the law which permitted putting children put to death if they were found to be unfilial.

Filial piety has ramifications for an individual beyond the parent/child relationship. Learning to be filial to one's parents prepares a child to be responsible in four other major relationships. These, as defined by Confucius, are: older and younger brother, husband and wife, ruler and minister, and friend and friend. Filial piety helps to maintain the stability of all these relationships, and ideally serves to achieve harmony in society as a whole.

The Confucian Canon not only describes how children should behave towards their parents in life; but also prescribes how children should behave towards their parents after the latter have died. Confucianism maintains that filial piety must continue and be demonstrated in outward form after death in order to maintain harmony in the world. The assumption elaborated upon in the Canon is that the ties which exist between parents and children are not severed with death, but rather continue afterwards in a different

form. The *Li Ki*, the *Book of Rites*, states that a filial child's responsibilities towards his/her parents are evidenced by supporting them while they are alive, by performing the rites of mourning when they are dead, and also by enacting periodic ancestral rites when the period of mourning is over (Bk XXII, 3). It is believed that if every individual behaves according to the rules of *li*, there will not only be harmony in society, but also in the universe.

A traditional ancestral veneration ceremony which may be performed in honor of one's ancestor/s as a form of filial respect may take different forms depending on the specific occasion, location and economic means of the family involved; however, food and drink, flowers, incense, candles, a tablet, prostrations, (*kowtow*) and the burning of paper money are fundamental ingredients of the ceremony. The ritual is typically performed at the grave site, in the clan temple (if the family can afford it), and at the family altar located in the home. Some Chinese traditionally believe that the spirit of the deceased has three souls and that each of these souls resides in three separate places: in the grave, in the tablet mentioned above, and in the spirit world (although there is a variation of belief also in this regard). Thus, when a family offers food and drink at the grave site or before the ancestral altar, which non-Christians called *shen wei*, "*seat of the spirit*," or *shen chu* "*lodging place of the spirit*", some traditional Chinese may believe that the spirit of the deceased is really present and that he or she actually partakes of the food and drink being offered. At the time of a food offering, words spoken may take the form of an announcement, e.g., the birth of a child, a marriage arrangement, or the beginning of journey.

### *The Chinese Rites Controversy*

When the Jesuits arrived on mainland China in the late sixteenth century, they were led for the most part, by the Italian Jesuit Matteo Ricci (in China 1582-1610). They had to decide how to interpret these traditional ancestral veneration rituals. They needed to discern whether or not the ceremonies performed in honor of the dead were merely secular rituals of respect or whether there were any "non-Catholic" beliefs associated with them. In the no longer extant Directive of 1603, Ricci described the Jesuit position on ancestral

rites: they were not, in fact, superstitious in nature since they had not been conceived as such. However, he recognized that there were a variety of beliefs associated with the rites and qualified this statement in later writings by adding that “perhaps” the rites were not superstitious.

After the death of Matteo Ricci in 1610, the Pope gave other missionary groups permission to establish missions in China: The Dominicans began to establish missions in China in 1631, and the Franciscans arrived in 1633. By 1680, the Augustinians were also on the mainland, and the Paris Foreign Mission Society arrived in 1683. The arrival of these new missionaries not only increased the



The name for God, Lord of Heaven

likelihood of new Catholic converts, but also increased the possibility of disagreement in interpreting the ancestral rites. This disagreement among Catholics came to be known as the Chinese Rites Controversy. This controversy which began in the mission field in seventeenth century China did not remain confined to that time and place. It spanned over 300 years. Not only was the bishop of Manila involved, but so were twenty-six popes; numerous Cardinals of the Holy Office (today, the Congregation for the Doctrine and the Faith); two apostolic delegates; 160 scholars at the Sorbonne; the Kings of Spain, Portugal and France; the Jansenists; the Preachers Fenelon and Bossuet, the writers Leibnitz and Voltaire; the Jesuit confessor of Louis XIV; as well as two seventeenth century Chinese emperors, and twentieth century government officials from China and Japan. The Chinese Rites Controversy which formally began in 1633 did not end until 1939.

The question of interpreting the ancestral rites as civil in nature or as having religious significance for the Chinese was only one of the three major issues of the Controversy. The other two involved whether to interpret the ceremonies performed in honor of Confucius

by scholars who ritually paid their respects to him - primarily in his *wen miao*, or temple, as secular or religious in character (these rites closely resembled those ceremonies performed for the ancestors, but often added the sacrifice of a pig or bull and/or pantomimes or musical performances depending on the particular circumstances). The other was the “Term Question” or the “Term Issue”. This dealt with the difficulties missionaries encountered in coming to agreement on the best Chinese word to use to express the Christian concept of God. Although all three issues involved in the Chinese Rites Controversy are of the utmost importance, the history of ancestor veneration within the Catholic Church is the only issue with which we are here concerned. (Ricci had also described the Jesuit position on the civil nature of Confucian rituals in his 1603 Directive.)

Before the rites issue was put to rest in the twentieth century, the Church had issued a series of decrees. The Decree of 1645, which was made in response to the questions brought to Rome by the Spanish Dominican Juan Baptista Morales, was the first official statement made by the Church regarding ancestral rites. This decree passed judgment against the Jesuit interpretation that the ceremonies were secular in nature. Those which followed generally were alternately for or against Catholic participation in or attendance at the ancestral rites. Typically, when the Jesuits issued a series of questions on the Rites for Rome’s consideration, the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith (SCPF), (today the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples), the organ of the Church in charge of missions, ruled in their favor. Whenever a non-Jesuit missionary group issued a series of questions to the Holy Office describing the situation from their perspective, the Church sanctioned their interpretation--that the rites should be interpreted as being essentially religious and that Catholics should not be permitted to be involved. Afterwards, the significant Church Decrees of 1645, 1656, 1669, the 1704 decision, Clement XI’s Decree of 1710, his Apostolic Constitution *Ex illa die* of 1715, the 1721 Pastoral Letter of Papal Legate, Jean Ambrose Charles Mezzabarba, and the 1735 Brief of Clement XII were issued. *Ex quo singulari* of 1742 was the final bull issued by the Holy Office until the twentieth century. This bull reiterated the issues contained in the above listed documents. Essentially, it confirmed *Ex illa die* of 1715 (based fundamentally

on the Decree of 1704) which took a strong stand against the rites and required missionaries to take an oath to follow these guidelines. *Ex quo singulari* also nullified Mezzabarba's "eight permissions" outlined in his 1721 letter which comprised some of the requirements of *Ex illa die*. The bull attempted to clarify a clause in the Apostolic Constitution which was ambiguous as to what rites were to be considered civil and political and which were not. *Ex illa die* also indicated that every aspect of this Constitution had to be followed under threat of excommunication and that religious personnel would be denied "an active and passive voice" if they failed to obey these directives. There was also an addition to the oath already contained in *Ex illa die* of 1715 requiring that missionaries intensify their promise to follow every aspect of the 1742 bull.

The 1742 bull *Ex quo singulari* also disallowed any further official discussion of the Chinese Rites Controversy within the Catholic Church (although there were still problems of interpretation in the field due to the fact that there were ambiguities in the document, e.g., whether an ancestral tablet with simply the name of the deceased carved upon it should be permitted); nevertheless, the issue became active again with an incident which occurred in Japan. Wishing to inspire spiritual unity and to mobilize the people, the Japanese military instituted state Shinto in the early 1930s. It required that all citizens pay their ritualized respect before a government shrine. In addition, because the Japanese had occupied and seized Manchuria (Manchukuo) and because there the Japanese army had instituted *Wangtao*, a form of Confucianism, in order to unify the spirit of the new regime, all citizens were required to pay homage at Confucian shrines.

As a result of rulings in Japan and Manchuria, Catholics experienced a crisis of conscience in both locations. In Japan, Catholics reacted overtly. On May 5, 1932, a few Catholic students from Sophia University refused to pay homage at Yasukuni Shrine. This incident forced the Japanese government to declare in writing to the Catholic Church that the rituals performed before the Shinto shrine in Japan and before the Confucian shrine in Manchuria were not religious in nature but merely of civil significance.

In response to this official government statement, the SCPF, on December 8, 1939, issued a decree allowing Catholics to participate

in ancestral veneration and Confucian ceremonies, thus reversing the decree of *Ex quo singulari* of 1742. This 1939 Instruction, known as *Plane compertum est*, and approved by Pope Pius XII, declares that the state rites for Confucius, as well as the mortuary and periodic rituals conducted for ancestors, are performed to demonstrate honor and respect. It also states that in former times the rites may have had pagan connotations, but with the passing of the centuries these rites were now merely civil expressions. The instruction also permitted the use of an ancestral tablet but with nothing other than the name of the deceased inscribed upon it. It is interesting to note that the Emperor K'ang Hsi's Declaration of 1700 stated that the Chinese rites were civil, but Rome gave the government document no credence.

### *Vatican II's Decree on Missionary Activity*

The next significant development in regard to the rites occurred as a result of Vatican II (1962-1965) when, among other issues, the Catholic Church called for the recognition of the native genius of each and every culture throughout the world as expressed through their indigenous traditions. The Vatican II pronouncements go beyond simply permitting Catholic participation in native traditions such as is allowed in *Plane Compertum est* for Chinese ancestral rites. The Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church, *Ad Gentes*, for instance, advises native Catholics to imbue their national treasures with the Christian message, while the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, calls for the creation of new rites within the Catholic Church to express clearly the world view of a particular people or culture. (*Inculturation* is the term used to describe these processes.)

These decrees of Vatican II made it possible for Cardinal Yu Pin, the only Chinese Catholic Cardinal at the time, to be the first among the Catholic clergy to conduct an ancestral veneration ceremony. The event took place in Taipei, Taiwan, on January 27, 1971, with one thousand persons in attendance. The ancestral rite was also nationally televised. Many elements of a traditional ceremony were evident: food, drink, candles, incense, flowers, bowing (*jugung*), and spoken words. The traditional ancestral tablet

was omitted, however. Archbishop Lokuang and Bishop Paul Chen Shihkuang, Confucian scholars who created the guidelines for this Catholic performance, integrated words which referred to the Christian concept of God and the Catholic tradition of the Communion of Saints with words which encouraged reverence and remembrance in the Confucian tradition of filial piety.

### *Catholic Ancestral Memorial Services*

The first formal Chinese ancestral memorial service liturgical text, known as the “Proposed Catholic Ancestor Memorial Liturgy (for Church and Family Use),” was issued by the Chinese Bishops’ Conference in Taipei, Taiwan, on December 29, 1974. This liturgical text combines Catholic tradition with ancestor veneration even more thoroughly than the Cardinal’s rite. Here, all of the offerings mentioned in regard to the 1971 public ritual are included; however, this six-part liturgy also includes a statement of objectives, general principles, details of the style of the ancestor tablet (which allows more than the name of the deceased as declared in *Plane Compertum est*), and specifics for both the Church rite and the home ritual, some of which are here named: both include the traditional offerings and a reading from the Book of Sirach 44:1-15 or “another suitable reading”; the Church rite is to be performed during Chinese New Year, on the Ching Ming Festival, All Saints’ Day and All Souls’ Day; the family ceremony is to be enacted on national holidays and important family occasions; the Church rite includes a Prayer of the Faithful, and a homily; the home rite includes prayers for the ancestors, and the optional recalling of the deeds of ancestors.

In Cardinal Yu Pin’s rite, it is apparent that when the sacrifices were symbolically offered to the ancestors as a sign of veneration and respect in demonstration of filial piety, and that when he and those gathered prayed for the ancestors just as any Catholic would pray for or to the Church Suffering (those in Purgatory) or the Church Triumphant (those in heaven) within the Catholic tradition of the Communion of Saints, that Confucian tradition and Catholic tradition complemented each other to such an extent that the two became one. In the Bishops’ Conference liturgy this intermingling of



indigenous Confucian and Catholic traditions, in accordance with the inculturation goals of Vatican II, was even more noticeable due to the plain statements made at the beginning of the liturgy on the meaning and significance of the ceremony. The “Objectives” and “General Principles” proclaim that the filial rite serves a Christian purpose: it brings individuals closer to God. In fact, the first objective states the reason for the ceremony as “to emphasize God’s commandment to ‘Honor thy Father and thy Mother’ as the basic spirit, to encourage filial piety among Catholics, and to increase filial love towards God”. The first principle named clarifies that for Catholics to be truly filial, they must participate in the Communion of Saints tradition by praying for the deceased: “In honor of the ancestors, to give return for their blessings towards us, we must always pray and offer Mass for their entry into heaven and to fulfill our duty of filial reverence.” Hence, the first two sections of the bishops’ liturgy not only testify that the Catholic performance of the ancestral rite expresses the Communion of Saints tradition, but is also a way in which to obey the Commandment to honor one’s parents. Of course, these traditions are also expressed during the ceremony particularly when prayers are being said.

Versions of the Bishops’ Conference liturgy can be found in Taiwan, the United States and possibly wherever else Chinese Catholics may be located. There are at least fourteen parishes in the United States which perform a version of the above described Church ritual during Chinese New Year. Some perform the rites on the other holidays named in the Bishops’ liturgy. There are slight variations in the seven liturgies available in the USA.. For example, only four mention the Prayer of the Faithful and one does not mention the reading of Scripture. Some explain the meaning of the ritual at the beginning of the text while others do not. However, it appears that the inclusion of the Salutation (in four texts) and the Memorial Oration (in two texts) is unique to the American liturgies. The address to the Christian God and to the ancestors in the Salutation expresses not only the Chinese custom of remembering life’s origins with gratitude (especially by the frequent use of “water” and “mountain” images taken from various Confucian texts), but it also expresses acknowledgment that all of the “gifts” from the ancestors are only possible because God is responsible for

the creation of our souls. The Memorial Oration, on the other hand, praises the antiquity and virtues of Chinese culture and recognizes the contributions it can make to the rest of the world. Obviously, there is no set liturgy at this time; rather variations of the Bishops' liturgy is the norm.

There is no evidence to indicate that the Chinese Catholic rites performed in Taiwan and the United States are also performed in Hong Kong or mainland China; however, abbreviated forms of veneration such as flower offerings and bowing at the grave site do occur in China as they do in Taiwan and the United States. Of course, the Chinese are not the only individuals who come from a culture which has a tradition of ancestor veneration, and efforts are presently being made to incorporate Catholic beliefs with ancestral customs in countries such as Korea, and Africa, and in other cultures as well.

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