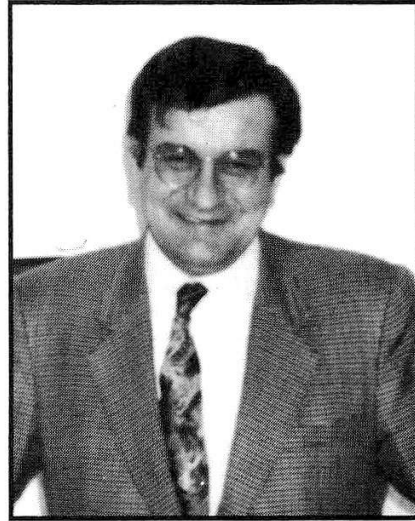


# *An Occasion of Pride and Joy for All*

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*By Gianni Criveller*

**T**he canonization of October 1 expresses the spirit of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, already marked by important events. Among them is the prayer for forgiveness in St. Peter's on the first Sunday of Lent, and the solemn celebration at the Coliseum in memory of the witnesses of the faith of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. With these events "we do not praise this heritage out of a partisan spirit, and still less from the desire for retaliation on the persecutors, but because it manifests the extraordinary power of God, that has continued in all times and under every heaven. We do it, forgiving in our turn, and following the example of so many witnesses who died while they prayed for their persecutors" (John Paul II).



When the Church remembers the martyrs, it does not do so from the desire of retaliation. Besides, in St. Peter's the Pope asked forgiveness for the faults committed by the children of the Church. At the Coliseum he offered forgiveness for the faults committed against the Christians who were martyred. Forgiveness represents the Christian response to the violence that in diverse forms, and by opposing parties, has bloodied human history and in particular, the 1900s. John Paul II wanted the church in the Great Jubilee Year 2000 to seek and offer forgiveness for the violence committed or suffered. In that way, he solemnly reaffirmed his own faith in the "weak strength", the peaceful strength, of the Gospel.

"The present celebration is not the right place to formulate judgments on those historical periods: we can and should do it in a different context. With this solemn declaration of sainthood, the Church wants only to acknowledge that these martyrs are an example of courage and coherence for all of us and for the noble Chinese people" (John Paul II, October 1, 2000).

This is the viewpoint that the Church brings to the October 1 celebration. The martyrs to be canonized are innocent victims of violence. They are also eloquent witnesses of the uselessness of violence perpetrated in a most difficult political situation. In China between 1840 and 1911, Western powers imposed their commercial and military presence profiting from the weakness of the Celestial Empire. The European powers, opposed to the Church and to the Pope at home, shamefully used the religious issue for their self-justification. They pretended to protect the interests of the Church by enforcing the “freedom” to evangelize. The 120 martyrs show the uselessness and counter productivity of violence: the violence of European imperialism and the fanatical violence of the Boxers. In fact, non-ideological Chinese historiography considers the Boxer revolution not as a genuine patriotic movement, but rather as a violent, fanatical, local and sectarian party, used by elements of the court of the Empress Dowager for their partisan aims. The same Chinese communist ideology rejects the policy of the late Qing court, accused of feudalism and corruption.

With this canonization, the Church is not passing a historical or political judgment on that situation; it is remembering the holiness of these martyrs. As the Holy Father said on September 3, 2000: “Holiness lives in history and no saint is exempt from the limits and contradictions of our humanity.” In beatifying one of its children, the Church does not take sides in any particular historical dispute or the historical choices they may have made, but rather it calls for the imitation and veneration of their virtues. The missionaries were in China not to realize national expansionist dreams (the first died as early as 1646), but simply to preach the gospel. They all loved the Chinese people and served them through acts of supreme self-sacrifice.

The martyrs in China paid the price for misunderstandings and for problems begun long before their time, and for which they were in no way responsible, e.g., the unfortunate rites controversy which was the origin of the decline of the Christian presence in China between the XVII and XIX centuries. The difficulties of the situation of Christians in China in the XIX century are demonstrated by the biography of the martyrs, victims of exceptionally unpredictable circumstances, in which they never renounced their right to preach and to live the Gospel. For specific examples, see other articles in the present issue of *Tripod*.

The French used the death of Father Auguste Chapdelaine to join the English in the Second Opium War. Father Chapdelaine was tortured and killed (1856), only within two years of his arrival in China, where he was caught in a dispute between two officials who held opposing ideas on how to deal with the Christians. He offered his life together with Lawrence Bai Xiaoman, a loyal and courageous Christian also canonized on October 1. Chapdelaine's canonization today praises the witness of the Gospel and the friend of the Chinese, who would have rebelled at this horrible war with its pretext of avenging his death. The canonization exalts the saint, the testimony, the man of charity, certainly not the citizen of a country that stirred up a war in China. Interestingly enough, the two German missionaries, whose murders were used as an pretext by Germany to occupy part of Shantung province (1897), are not in the group of the canonized martyrs. Not all the numerous Christians killed in China (3000 during the Boxers' revolution only) were proclaimed saints. The Church investigated every aspect of the lives of the candidates for canonization, and did not embrace them simply as a group. For the church each person is valuable. Each person, no matter the age, sex, nationality and education is valuable for his or her own virtues and witness, and not for the political environment in which he or she happens to live out the principles of the gospel.

It is also important to note that these 120 martyrs were beatified on seven different occasions: five in 1893 (Leo XIII); 13 in 1900 (Leo XIII); 14 in 1909 (Pius X); 29 in 1946 (Pius XII); one in 1951 (Pius XII); 56 in 1955 (Pius XII); two in 1983 (John Paul II). Again: the church, as usual, made a long and specific investigation into the life of each one of the persons, and this was done in seven distinct processes, over a long period of more than one hundred and twenty years. The political upheavals in China had no part whatsoever in the various investigations of the personal virtues of the candidates. In fact the first three groups of beatification were made when China was still an empire. The majority of martyrs were beatified before the proclamation of the People's Republic of China. And never before, in the occasion of the seven celebrations, did the Chinese authorities complain. Why, suddenly, is there so much opposition?

It is unbelievable that someone would accuse the Church of rushing these canonizations, as if they were done without proper investigation, or at the wrong time, or under pressure from the

Taiwan bishops. The latter, in any case, are also Chinese, and being from Taiwan does not make them less worthy or qualified. Besides, they were not the only Chinese bishops pleading for the canonization. The official Bishops' Conference of the People's Republic of China cannot complain of not being consulted on the matter and at the same time claiming, in its statutes, to be independent from the Holy See and the Universal Church. You cannot have it both ways.

These canonizations are not mainly about heroic missionaries. Those to be canonized on October 1 are for the most part, Chinese, including many simple faithful, women, teenagers and also children. They were crushed by a situation wherein many contradictory interests obstructed their simple right to be Christians. They were victims, they were killed simply because they refused to give up their faith. To adhere to a universal religion cannot amount to a crime. They cannot be held responsible for the complex and tragic circumstances in which they happened to live; instead they were courageous and generous enough to die for a great ideal. For this they deserve honor and respect from everyone. In fact, "Giving up one's life for the Good" is considered to be the greatest virtue in Confucian teaching.

It should be well known that Catholic faith arrived in China not with colonialism, but rather with great figures like John of Montecorvino and Matteo Ricci. I want to point out that since the 1800s the Church tried to unshackle itself from the asphyxiating "protection" of the European powers. It was a long story and crammed with difficulties. In 1860, Pius IX, who actively opposed the hegemonic plans of the Western powers, wrote to the Chinese emperor to establish direct relations, and to seek his effective "protection" for the Christians of China. This direction was strengthened during the pontificate of Leo XIII, who sought insistently to establish diplomatic relations between the Holy See and Peking, but was blocked by France's veto. Benedict XV attempted to do the same later, but he also was hindered by similar motives. But these were not useless efforts, since Pius XI was later able to send an apostolic delegate to China, Celso Costantini, who rejected the protection of the European powers and set up his residence far from their embassies.

Upon arriving in China, Costantini in a certain sense absorbed the legacy of the martyrs now being canonized. They had

tried, at the price of so much suffering, and attitudinally, to be close to the Chinese people. Following the instructions received from Pius XI, Msgr. Costantini showed deep respect for Chinese culture and was persuaded that the announcement of the Gospel had to go deep into this culture. In agreement with the ideals of Matteo Ricci, this apostolic delegate used the proper means to close the unfortunate rites controversy, and to foster an attitude of loyalty towards China and its laws among the Chinese Christians.

For Costantini, the memory of the Chinese martyrs was a sign of the deep love of the Catholic Church for China and esteem for its culture. To remember these martyrs is not to reopen today a page of the past, a contention about who killed them, nor to excuse the wars of the Western powers. The Church recalls, in all simplicity, these her children, Chinese and European, who gave their lives for the Gospel and in service to the people of China. For the Catholic Church a remembrance is not to establish a right, or an occasion to legitimize behavior, or even worse, to seek revenge.

It is also regrettable that the fortuitous coincidence of the canonization on the feast of the proclamation of the people's Republic of China has been interpreted as holding political significance. Mainland authorities see in it as a sign of confrontation, and (quite incredibly) some in Taiwan see it as an improper concession to please Beijing authorities. Unfortunately, even in the Church camp someone saw the chosen date as a challenge to Beijing authorities. But the supposed challenge or concession was simply not there. In the official calendar of the Jubilee 2000, published as early as May 28, 1998, the date of October 1 was already reserved for canonization.

The candidates were not chosen yet, and then it turned out to be the Chinese martyrs, the African Canossian Sister Josephine Bakhita, and two foundresses of religious orders, the Basque Maria Josepha Sancho de Guerra and the American Katherine Drexel. Let me add a few obvious things: if October 1 did not fall on Sunday this year, the chosen date would be different. However, this Sunday is the closest to the liturgical feasts of the Chinese Blessed Martyrs: September 28. It is the first day of the missionary month of October, and of course, it is the feast of Saint Therese of the Child Jesus, the much-loved young contemplative saint, patroness of the missions. Why not consider it a fortunate coincidence, a singular occasion for joy and pride for the Universal Church as for all of China? It is in

this spirit, we believe that the Holy Father John Paul II has canonized 120 Chinese martyrs.

*[A few paragraphs in the above essay are taken from an article written by Professor Andrea Riccardi, professor of History and leader of the San Egidio Community in Rome, and translated by the Holy Spirit Study Centre]*

**Below: The China martyrs of the Franciscan Order**

