

A Critique of the Biography of the Saints and Other Present-day Historical Issues

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*An underground bishop sent Bishop Wang Milu a copy of Liu Yisheng's book, **Short Biographies of the Chinese Martyrs**. The following article is Bishop Wang's commentary sent to the donor after reading the book.*

I wish to thank the bishop for sending me *Short Biographies of the Chinese Martyrs*. Later I also read *Biographies of the Chinese Martyrs* published by the Taiwan Bishops Conference's Commission for Canonization. As a matter of fact this is also a short biography with only some added details. Each saint has his or her own eloquent story to tell. I had previously read *The Red Lily* and the long biographical poem about Saint John Gabriel Perboyre, CM. Rightfully we should fully relate all the miracles each saint performs because through these miracles God honors his loyal servants and handmaids. Miracles also inspire the hearts of all, leaving a deep impression on the readers. For example, after Saint John Perboyre was martyred, the son of a high-ranking Mongolian officer was seriously wounded in an explosion at an armory. No medical aid could help him. The boy was carried to the door of the church to make a nine-day novena, asking for Fr. Perboyre's intercession. The youth, completely covered with wounds, at the point of death and beyond all hope of recovery, was suddenly cured. His father then sent many gifts to the church. He had a military band line up in formation and, with bugles blaring, brought the gifts to the Church. This incident is recorded in a book of poems published not long after Perboyre's martyrdom. Fortunately, I still have a few copies left of this poem.

In the collection of the *Biographies of the Chinese Martyr Saints*, the editor, Liu Yisheng, writes in his book entitled *Chinese Martyrs*:

The causes for the persecution of the Church in China are very complex. At the beginning of the Qing Dynasty, the main source

of trouble was the Chinese Rites Controversy. Towards the end of the Qing Dynasty the problem arose from the Unequal Treaties...

He continues enumerating the following incidents: the Opium Wars, the Nanjing Treaty, the Sino-American Treaty, the Sino-Franco Treaty, the French Protectorate, the Taiping Rebellion, the allied Franco-British incursion against Tianjin, the Tianjin Treaty, the burning of the Summer Palace, and the Sino-Russian Treaty.

It is my opinion that the reason for the persecution of the Church is simple: all that the priests and laity had to do was to deny their Catholic faith in order to save their lives. Therefore the purpose of the persecution was to destroy the Catholic faith. This fact is clearly stated in government judicial records and in the defamatory records of non-Christians. To state that the Chinese Rites Controversy and Unequal Treaties were causes for the persecution only shows Fr. Liu's biased opinion.

The historical incidents that Fr. Liu enumerates do not include the historical background and origins for the Boxer Rebellion. These are: the Sino-Japanese Sea War of 1894-1895, the Treaty of Shimonoseki, the legal changes introduced at the end of the Qing Dynasty, the 100 Days of Reform in 1898, the Six Government Officials of Moral Integrity who sacrificed their lives for their country, and the Flight of Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao, who had attempted political reform. Impartial non-Christian historians never link the Unequal Treaties to the Boxer persecution. Rather they state that the Japanese War of 1894-95, the Treaty of Shimonoseki, a treaty of national betrayal and humiliation, the legal reforms of Kang and Liang, the 100 Days Reform, the intransigence of the Empress Dowager Cixi in clinging to the old ways, her deposing of Emperor Guangxu, and her walling in of the foreign legations, along with the Boxer Rebellion: these three periods of China's history were in fact all one event or one event that unfolded in three periods of time. It was the clash of the old with the new. The stubborn and conservative Empress Dowager thought that the Church stood with the new changes, and so she leveled her wrath on Christians and tarried to destroy them. Fr. Liu's preface does not even mention the direct cause of the Boxer persecution: the 100-Days Reform. Therefore, it does not even mention the more recent

incident of the Treaty of Shimonoseki. This treaty contained no clauses that gave protection to the Church. At the end of the Qing dynasty all were speaking of national humiliation; none could forget that it was this treaty that ceded Korea, Okinawa, and Taiwan to Japan thereby causing a backlash of seething anger throughout the entire country. Then followed the 100 days Reform, after which the old clique regained its power. Emperor Guangxu was incarcerated at Yingtai. Facing the united opposition of all the foreign powers, the Qing Court then called upon "Big Brother" to come to the rescue. The Boxers, upon receiving their orders, entered the capital unleashing a persecution of the Church. Since Fr. Liu has mentioned several Unequal Treaties, and we have been defending the position of the Church, we must see what came first. The persecution of the Church happened first, and it was only afterwards that clauses protecting the Church were inserted into these Unequal Treaties. Fr. Liu earned a great deal of public esteem in writing the *Biographies of the Chinese Martyrs*. Nevertheless he has stated that the cause of the persecution of the Church was due to the Rites Controversy and the Unequal Treaties. This has been the malicious interpretation of the Church's enemies, and today many who hate the Church still take this position. But for a fellow Catholic, not having carefully read the history of the late Qing Dynasty, to say the same thing is very hard to understand.

The reformers at the end of the Qing Dynasty called the Boxers bandits. Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao and others in their writings likewise called them bandits. It is the same with the Cultural Revolution. We do not call it a revolution, but a catastrophe. Therefore the history of the last years of the Qing Dynasty must also be written in the same forthright and unequivocal manner. Upon re-reading Fr. Liu's preface we find no censure of the Treaty of Shimonoseki. This treaty did not give any protection to the Catholic Church, yet it was the most unequal of the treaties, and it united the whole nation of China to work for reform.

During the following years, and up to the Revolution of 1911, the Church enjoyed peace. After the new China was established the government abrogated these Unequal Treaties, but did not abolish the clauses on freedom of religious belief. Each nation's constitution, even the one of the United Nations has

clauses that safeguard the freedom of religion. To say, therefore, that the Catholic Church was persecuted because the Unequal Treaties had clauses protecting its freedom is certainly a mistaken viewpoint. Indeed it is an historical fact that the Unequal Treaties had clauses protecting the Catholic Church, and restricting the violent actions of local officials against it. It is also true that French officials in Beijing did, in fact, protect missionaries throughout the country, otherwise the persecution of the Church would have been prolonged and even more tragic.

Today some of those who completely detest the French Protectorate criticize France for using its protectorate to extend its power. But there are many aspects to power: there is political power and economic power. The French Revolution had wanted to eradicate the Catholic Church but it was unable to do so. The power of religion had deeply penetrated the heart of French Catholics, and they were very much concerned with the rights of their Church throughout the world. French foreign officials in so far as they were able, protected missionaries and their faithful from harm. For them, this protectorate was adopting measures for the sake of a just cause, and as such should be commended. Fr. Vincent Lebbe criticized France but his criticism was directed against some French high officials who hurt the Church and tarnished its honor, or who put restraints on the Chinese clergy. (For details, see the autobiography of Fr. Lebbe.) Now some persons have even accused Fr. Lebbe himself of being an imperialist—he who was a great lover of China and who had opposed Japanese aggression. But I will not speak more of this.

Now, we see that many who accuse France of injustice, and who say that the persecution of the Church was due to the Rites Controversy and Unequal Treaties, are really exonerating an isolated and feudal tyranny of all the crimes that it committed. This was the falsehood stated by a certain bishop from the Patriotic Association at an international meeting on religion, who said that the Rites Controversy was a cause of the Church's persecution. He let himself be used by others, and did not speak out his own mind. Furthermore, even Communist historians do not agree with the statement that the persecution of the Church was due to the Unequal Treaties. For example, there is Mao Zedong's very close associate at the time of the Cultural Revolution, Chen Boda. In his *A Modern*

History of the Revolution, he wrote that the peasants, who had long suffered oppression under the feudal gentry, entered the Catholic Church in order to escape their persecution, for it was the missionaries who fought to defend them, and won court cases against the landlords. As a result the landed classes hated the Church, and roused the Boxers who were under their power to attack and kill Catholics. (My recollections are taken from memory from his book.) This short passage shows clearly the cause behind the Boxer Rebellion. Note also that this is the testimony of an atheist, which only gives more credence to the facts narrated.

Furthermore, the French Protectorate was set up to protect the Church. Later, the Vatican withdrew this protectorate. During the past 50 years the whole Church in China has lived through unprecedented difficulties, but no one has heard a sound of protest coming from the French government. It was as though it was only sitting on the sidelines observing. It was the Church in China that suffered. What had this to do with France? If governments would only have spoken out a little, perhaps our Church's sufferings would have been somewhat mitigated. Of course, we turn to God and ask Him to grant his Church peace. World leaders should openly promote justice and protest the injustice done to the Church in China. The United Nations has the duty of protecting religious freedom, and there is a clause in each country's constitution that states this duty. Nevertheless, twenty years after the tragedy of the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese government tore down more than ten churches in August of 1999, in the city of Changle in Fujian Province. It imprisoned the Bishop of Wenzhou and all his priests. But we did not hear of any investigation undertaken by the United Nations, nor did they send an investigating team to ascertain the facts. It is as if each country forgot its own constitutions. The destruction of these churches did not raise any cry of injustice. We heard that the Pope did mention this fact in one of his radio broadcasts, but no document was forthcoming. As for the French Protectorate—it has long been abrogated. However, all should express their opinion on truth and justice, since truth is not bound by national borders.

In any country, to oppress religion and destroy churches is unjust, and China cannot be an exception to this rule. Protecting the Church is not the sole duty of the Pope, bishops and priests, but it is

certainly also the common duty of all Catholics. And Catholics who hold public office or are heads of state have an even greater responsibility to protect the Church and the clergy. This is but a normal and natural obligation. The French, acting out of motives of pure self-interest, used their protectorate to make sure that the bishops they wanted were appointed. Some French bishops and priests also looked down upon the Chinese cardinal, other Chinese bishops and priests. But this was something personal to them; we cannot say that it was true of everyone. The educational system created by French priests for training Chinese priests was of great merit. The virtues of the missionaries outshone their defects. That the Pope eventually suppressed the Protectorate was the right thing to do. However, we must be fair in our appraisal of this Protectorate. If, for example, France had still held on to it, perhaps Bishop Kung Pinmei would not have been reviled and imprisoned.

Chinese Muslims have had their mosques and properties fully returned to them, and no mosque or prayer place of theirs was ever torn down. This is due to their very strong internal unity. If there is some difficulty somewhere, the whole Muslim body reacts. Several years ago a Catholic church, under construction in Inner Mongolia, was torn down, but no one raised a cry of protest anywhere in the entire country. Last year more than ten churches were razed in Fuzhou, and not a voice was raised. Is it that each individual is only looking after his or her own security with no regard for what happens to others? The silent Church hasn't the right to speak, the Patriotic Association doesn't dare to speak, and the Church outside China doesn't want to speak. Christ spoke to Saul on the road to Damascus: "Why are you persecuting me?" This voice resounds throughout the world in all its splendor.

Many people in Taiwan and Hong Kong have on frequent occasions eagerly acknowledged the Patriotic Association. But during the past several years no mention has been made of the persecution that the loyal Church has been facing. In Luke's Gospel Jesus tells the story of a man attacked and injured by bandits. The Levite and priest pretended they did not see him and, passing around him, went on their way. It was a stranger, a Samaritan that lifted the wounded man on to his donkey, took him to an inn and paid for his care. The church of Chengquan in Inner Mongolia was being torn down. No voice was raised in protest; no voice

expressing sympathy or support was heard. It was the non-Christian Mongolian people themselves, acting in unison, who took action. They surrounded the county chief, who was at the head of those razing the church. These non-Christians kept raining down squash and bunches of other vegetables on those pulling down the church. The result was that the county head could no longer stay in office there. He had to be sent to another place farther away. It seems that only this non-Christian group had a sense of justice.

I say again that Fr. Liu's account of the Chinese martyrs is a work of great merit, and the Church in the mainland owes him a debt of gratitude. However, I cannot agree with him that the Rites Controversy and the Unequal Treaties were the cause of the persecution. This type of argument is a great insult to the martyrs. Furthermore, it goes against historical facts. Taking a close look at the accounts of their martyrdom will show this very clearly. These martyrs sacrificed their lives because they stuck to their faith in Jesus Christ. They shed their blood and died for Christ, and not for the Rites Controversy or the Unequal Treaties. God has glorified them and will continue to glorify them. I ask Fr. Liu's pardon for my frankness.

Fr. Liu in his preface states that the Chinese people are a peace loving people, who will not reject a foreign religion so long as they see that it has some meaning for them. They will do their best to assimilate it. Islam and Buddhism, according to Fr. Liu were so assimilated because they did not clash with Chinese culture nor bring in foreign elements. In that way, they became inculturated without any aggression. I take strong exception to this. His statement cannot be verified in history.

The King Chu rebellion occurred as soon as Buddhism entered China. This rebellion was undertaken in the name of Buddhism. The Han emperor of the time immediately suppressed it. Continual wars, fought under the banner of Buddhism, followed. You can read this in Fan Wenlan's *General History* in the section dealing with the Sui and Tang dynasties. The crimes committed at this time were even more widespread than those of the religious wars that took place in Europe, even as written up by enemies of the Church. Historically, there were many attempts made to wipe out Buddhism.

Islamic history shows Muslims holding the Koran in one hand and a sword in the other, compelling people to change their religion. The fact that Constantinople, a center of Christianity has become Istanbul, a center of Islam, was not due to any successful conversion program, but to the power of the sword. This can by no means be called inculturation; it was pure aggression. Professor Fan Wenlan's *General History* calls it Arabic aggression. Moreover during the Sui and Tang dynasties these plunderers headed East. The Tang Dynasty suffered a tragic defeat at Samarkand (坦羅斯). Tens of thousands were killed and the Tang lost the Western Regions (Xinjiang and parts of Western Asia). They even lost Persia. The old people could still recall that not long before the Western campaign of the Zuo Zongtang of the Qing Dynasty that, wherever the Muslim troops arrived, all the temples were destroyed. Only the Catholic churches were left standing owing to their connection with the Old Testament. Historians are of the opinion that after the Tang lost the Western Regions; the Song and Yuan dynasties were able to exist because of the intervention of the Crusades in the West. Otherwise the history of modern China would have taken a different turn. Therefore what Fr. Liu wrote in his preface is but empty words devoid of accuracy. To maintain that Buddhism and Islamism adapted easily to Chinese culture without any aggressive intent is not based on fact. Up to the present day Buddhists still recite prayers in Sanskrit and Moslems in Arabic. Where is the adaptation here? The Dalai Lama is still sounding the call for Tibetan independence. Tibet is a very backward country. Where can we even begin to speak of any assimilation?

Fr. Liu also writes that the Catholic Church is not looked upon with favor in Chinese eyes. It was only for a short period during the Ming dynasty that Catholicism made any effort to assimilate itself into Chinese culture. After that period, it not only wanted to Westernize China, but it was also highly suspected of directly cooperating with imperialists. This brought about the great tragedy of the Boxer Rebellion.

Fr. Liu compares our Church with Buddhism and Islamism saying that in the eyes of our fellow countrymen the Church appears very different from them. Bookstores are now filled with books on the Ming Dynasty that expose the face of Buddhism. In

reality our countrymen look upon the Catholic Church with respect seeing that it has been under attack for these many years. The number of Catholics in Fr. Liu's Taiwan is falling whereas throughout all Mainland China non-Christian people hold the Church in high esteem. Proof of this lies in the number of baptisms that take place every year. The persecutions of the Ming and Qing dynasties as well as more recent ones are also a very important proof. Without persecution the Church would perhaps be wallowing in the mire along with everybody else. Now the entire Mainland is developing. Witness the tall buildings, railroads and super highways. Must we return to the age of donkey drawn carts to recapture the true culture of China? Is it not strange that Fr. Liu does not want imposing churches that reach up into the sky, but would rather have small temples alongside winding and secluded paths? His churches would be small temples from ancient times; his vestments would be quaint and old-fashioned; his small churches would not use thuribles burning aromatic incense with smoke billowing into the air, but one thin joss stick made of bark stripped from a tree reeking of sheep smell and lacking all the sweetness of incense. No wonder there are no conversions in Taiwan, since churches would be made in the likeness of temples, and priests would become like Buddhist monks. Matteo Ricci would have had none of this!

Fr. Liu's conclusions then are wrong because the 100 Days Reform was aimed against Japan's imperialism, whereas the Church was seen to be standing on the side of this reform. To attack this reform is also to implicate the Church. This is a historical fact that cannot be overturned.