

# *Alessandro Valignano, Founder of the Church in China*

## *The 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death in Macao in 1606*

---

*Gianni Criveller, PIME*

*Translated from the Italian by Betty Ann Maheu, MM*

**O**n August 15, 1571, Matteo Ricci, 19, knocked at the door of the novitiate of St. Andrea at the Quirinale in Rome; Alessandro Valignano, 32, welcomed him, and the two future founders of the China mission now met for the first time. Valignano had just arrived at St. Andrea's to replace the master of novices, Fr. Fabio de Fabii, for one month only.

Alessandro Valignano (1539-1606), Visitor of the East Indies from 1573 to 1606 and, for a time, of the missions of China and Japan, played a decisive role in the founding, promoting and building up of the Jesuit mission in China. Ricci, himself considered by others as the founder, has described Valignano as "pre-eminent founder of the China enterprise" and "the father of this mission."

This last comment can be found in the letter Ricci wrote to the General of the Company of Jesus, Claudio Acquaviva, a few months after Valignano's death, which he recalled with the moving words:

This year, besides other trials, which are never lacking, we had this huge one of the death of Father Valignano, the father of the mission. His loss leaves us as orphans, and I don't know how, Holy Father, you can ever replace him.

## From Chieti to Macao

Alessandro Valignano played an essential role in the transformation of Macao, which was at that time a tiny fishermen's village, located at an altogether unique place in the world. It was to become the center of a great cultural and religious adventure. Valignano died there on January 20, 1606. His grave has been identified in Macao, near the ruins of the Church of St. Paul.

He came originally from the beautiful city of Chieti, which at the time was part of the Kingdom of Naples. He was a brilliant lawyer in Padua, but after an unfortunate court trial (he was imprisoned in Venice for more than one year), Valignano entered the Company of Jesus in 1566 at the novitiate of St. Andrea at the Quirinale in Rome. He studied at the Roman College and was later rector of the college of Macerata. Named Visitor to the East Indies in 1573, with the full powers of the Superior General, he traveled to Goa, Malacca, Japan and Macao. Valignano became one of the greatest and most influential missionaries in history. His preeminence lies in the fact that he realized Francis Xavier's unfulfilled dream: to open a mission in China and to bring about the inculturation of the Gospel in Asian culture. Valignano left a deep impression, above all in Japan, where he arrived in 1574. He did this through his directives promoting a revolutionary transformation in missiological methodology. These are contained in the book, *Il cerimoniale del missionario in Giappone* (1601). This book is considered ahead of its time even today.

In 1594 Valignano founded St. Paul's College in Macao, where the missionaries destined for China and Japan learned the languages and assimilated the culture of these countries. But even more importantly, St. Paul's College was the first university in East Asia, a place of "cultural interchange," where Japanese, Chinese, Portuguese, Italian, Spanish and persons of other nationalities, together generated new knowledge and experiences.

Next to the College, Valignano ordered the construction of the magnificent Church of St. Paul, which even today is considered East Asia's greatest Christian monument.

In 2006, on the occasion of the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Valignano's death, two conferences were dedicated to the great Jesuit missionary, one in Chieti where he was born, and the other in Macau, where he died.

### **Faith in Human Reason**

In Chieti, numerous scholars from various parts of the world presented in-depth studies on the origins, works, writings and patrimony of "Alessandro Valignano, a Renaissance man, a bridge between the East and the West." This meeting, held at the end of October 2006 and the first one ever completely dedicated to Valignano, was made possible through the auspices of the Caricheti Foundation and Doctor Marisa di Russo. It was truly a celebratory moment, given the solemnity of the occasion and the prestigious location (the Marrucino Theatre in Chieti). But it was also an occasion to make known to the people of that city and the many university students present, a person, unfortunately, still so little known. The contents of the meeting, that the organizers plan to publish soon, will reveal the quality and the quantity of the many presentations.

Archbishop Bruno Forte's opening challenging lecture deserves special mention. This famous theologian, a man sensitive to the themes of cultural and religious dialogue, very effectively demonstrated Valignano's current relevance by making an analogy between our times and his. Then as now, the challenge arises from the contact between cultures and religions, which in the past were quite distant from each other. There are two answers, now as then, to the contact between cultures and religions: clash and violence, or dialogue and encounter. Valignano chose the second one.

What ultimately holds the possibility of encounter with diversity is, according to Archbishop Forte, following the conviction recently expressed by Pope Benedict XVI, basic trust in human reason. Reason can know the truth and correspond with it. The recognition of the capacity of the Japanese culture to "submit itself to reason" is, Bruno Forte maintains, a key to all of

Valignano's action. Reality has an intelligent structure that reveals itself to the spirit of all who are honest and without prejudice. Since many Japanese masters appeared to him to be this kind of person, his conviction was firm that it was possible to reach their mind and heart with the light of the gospel through the way of dialogue, founded on the exercise of reason. "Only where reason is recognized as a common patrimony of every human being, and where reason is educated to responsibility that puts it in correspondence with the intelligent structures of reality, can diverse groups meet each other, and dialogue be truly liberating for all," Archbishop Forte said.

### **Macao: Laboratory for Japan and China**

The Macao conference, "Christianity and Culture: Japan and China in Comparison, (1543-1644)," held at the Institute for Tourism Studies November 30 to December 2, 2006, and organized by the Ricci Institutes of Macao and San Francisco, used the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Valignano's death as a point of departure only. As a result no specific contribution made by Valignano was ever mentioned.

The many scholars from various nations used a comparative and interdisciplinary approach, using short presentations and longer periods of interactive panel discussions.

They focused their attention on new interpretative models of Japanese and Chinese Christianity: rituals used by the Christian community, their local organization, interaction between the Christian communities and the reciprocal effect of the expressions of the faith carried out in Japan and those in China.

Attention focused on the adaptation and the transformation of European models (ritual, literary and organizational) in the context, now in Japan, now in China. Finally, they stressed the role of Macao, a laboratory that had a profound influence on the development of Japanese and Chinese Christianity.

Contemporary historiography makes it clear that the historical narrative cannot omit including the numerous connected



histories from which it is composed. It seems to me that we must, therefore, expand the role of other “geographical, cultural and religious” localities that have contributed to the configuration of East Asian Christianity. I note here only a few examples: Manila, Goa, Cochin (India), New Spain (Mexico), Taiwan, the maritime routes, the role of the indigenous religious, the network offered by the Chinese diaspora, a renewed study of the role of religious orders: Dominicans, Augustinians and Franciscans, with their respective political supporters and especially their theological outlooks.

### **Valignano, Ricci and Accommodation**

The method of accommodation adopted by Valignano in Japan, and under his direction also by Ricci in China, is the Visitor’s most precious legacy. Later other missionaries such as Robert de Nobili in India, Alexander Rhodes in Vietnam, were influenced by this evangelical method. This method offers cultural dialogue as the most significant alternative to the colonial and economic dealings of the European powers in East Asia.

From 1552, the year of the death of St. Francis Xavier on Shangchuan Island (along the southern coast of Guangdong Province), to 1583, the year that Matteo Ricci and Michael Ruggieri successfully entered China, some 50 Jesuits, Franciscans, Augustinians and Dominicans tried unsuccessfully to settle there. Among the religious in Macao, the China mission was a lost cause, and those who committed themselves to it were considered foolish. Valignano, who arrived in Macao in 1578, contended that the cause of failure should not be imputed to the Chinese, but to the missionaries’ lack of preparation and their traditional, absolutely inadequate methods. The few converts in Macao, in fact, actually had to become Portuguese even in name.

Valignano initiated a radical new thrust by imposing the way of accommodation as he had already done in Japan from where, in November 1595, he wrote: “It seems to me irrational that the priests living in the country have not been concerned about conforming to the refined customs and the gentle behavior of the

Japanese. Not a day has gone by without my meeting up with some transgression in good manners and tactlessness in encounters even with the Samurai and the feudatory lords themselves. Often Christians coming into the houses of the missionaries feel uncomfortable and even offended. This was all the more important since their bonzes knew how to act with exquisite gentility.”

Ricci and Ruggieri were set apart from the other missionaries by an experiment based on a new rationale: an in-depth knowledge of the written and spoken language, clothing similar to that of the Buddhist monks, and adaptation to the life of the Chinese. By a singular coincidence, even Wang Pan, the governor of Guangdong, who originally had permitted the two Italian Jesuits to live in China, wanted them to wear Buddhist robes. In fact, in traditional society there was no such thing as casual clothing: everyone had to be identified according to his role in society.

Both Valignano and Ricci were of the same opinion: the Chinese were very suspect of the relations between the missionaries and the Portuguese. Valignano strove to give the Chinese mission juridical and financial autonomy. Both Valignano and Ricci ardently supported the admission of Chinese candidates to the religious and priestly life. Ricci prepared eight Chinese Jesuits, but none of them was ever admitted to Holy Orders. This was because the Master General, Acquaviva, maintained that the Chinese Church was too young for such a step. Among these eight was Huang Mingsha (Francisco Martines) who died, the first among the Catholics of the modern era, from mistreatment he suffered in a prison in Canton. He had gone there to accompany Valignano on a visit to China.

Besides Ricci and Ruggieri, Valignano sent about 20 other missionaries to China. Many of these distinguished themselves by their personal quality and their works. Ricci and Valignano met for the last time in Macao in 1593, where they made a thorough revision of missionary activity in China. They made a sensational and daring change: take off the robes of the bonzes and put on the dress of the Confucian scholars. Valignano ordered Ricci: “Set your sites on Peking.” Ricci’s strategy in China, was, in fact, “an

ascent towards Peking," which the Marcerata missionary reached in 1601, the fifth and last leg on his journey to the capital of the Middle Kingdom.

Valignano, the Visitor, intended to visit Ricci in Peking, in 1606. This would crown a life of great fatigue and conflict, but also one of undoubted successes. The plan for this visit, which Ricci very much desired, was already at an advanced stage, when the Visitor died in Macao on January 20, 1606, preventing the visit from ever taking place.

Ricci likened Valignano to Francis Xavier: both died on the threshold or the vigil of their entrance into China.

Everyone noted that God did not permit China to profit from the help that these two great servants of God, Saint Francis Xavier and Father Alessandro Valignano, could provide. They ardently desired to enter into this kingdom for the good of souls, and both died at China's door without being able to realize their dream.

Valignano and Ricci's mutual esteem, friendship and solidarity, and their common vision and plan, make their human, religious and intellectual venture something quite uncommon in modern missionary history. To them we owe the definitive foundation of the Church in China.