

Celso Costantini's Contribution to the Localization and Inculturation of the Church in China

Sergio Ticozzi, PIME

“When, in 1922, I arrived in China as the Apostolic Delegate, wrote Archbishop Celso Costantini (later Cardinal, 1876-1958), my impression was that the ancient Chinese world had collapsed together with the empire, but, through the struggle of a strong and painful commitment of its people, a new China was rising up. I also felt that the recent Encyclical Letter Maximum Illud (1919) had turned over the last page on the history of the missionary enterprise, and had opened a new era, rich in historical experience and full of new energy. Only after the Missions in China get rid of their static and temporary nature, can the Chinese hierarchy be established, and the painful and lengthy apostolic enterprise achieve mature results. During such a period of change and revolutionary growth, I thought that in a country that has a very ancient art and cherishes true artistic values, Catholic art should adjust itself to the new trends in evangelization.”¹

For Mgr Costantini, the issues of the localization and inculturation of the Church in China, although he was unfamiliar with the terms, were clear and related to each other. Nowadays, on the contrary, the terms have become quite common, but for many they have become two separate issues.

Localization indicates the process of making a Church truly

¹ C. Costantini at alii, *Zhongguo Tianzhujiao Meishu* (Catholic Art in China) (Taizhong: Guangqi Press, 1968), p.12.

local, with its basic structures and institutions, run mainly by local personnel in a rather autonomous way, able to take initiatives to meet the needs of the local community, both Catholic and non-Catholic.

Inculturation is the double process of the Christian faith taking roots into a local culture and being expressed in local forms and ways, while the values of this local culture enter into the Catholic faith to enrich it. In the words of John Paul II, it is “the incarnation of the Gospel in the hereditary cultures and, at the same time, the introduction of these cultures into the life of the Church.” Simply put, it is the rooting and the integration of the Christian faith in a given culture.

Mgr. Costantini, without making use of the terms, has been a good pioneer in both localization and inculturation, and kept this double process daily before his mind.

Localization of the Church in China

Mgr. Costantini’s role in the process of the localization of the Church in China must be put in the historical context of his time. Due primarily to the influence of the Apostolic Letter, *Maximum Illud* of Pope Benedict XV (1919), while still in Italy, he became deeply concerned about the question of indigenous clergy and the issue of the localization of the Church. The document marked the beginning of a new era for the Missions, namely the localization of them on all levels. The Pope, after having emphasized the need for giving the clergy a solid formation, complains, most probably with the situation of the Church in China in mind:

Yet in spite of this urging on the part of the Pontiffs, it is to be deplored that there are regions where the Catholic faith has been introduced for centuries, which are still without any indigenous clergy, except of a lower class. There are nations, which have long been illuminated by the light of the faith, and have developed to such a degree of civilization

that they possess men who excel in all varieties of the civil arts, and yet, after many centuries of the beneficial influence of the Gospel and of the Church, can show no bishops to govern, nor priests to teach their own countrymen. It is clear, therefore, that there has been something lacking and unsuitable in the methods employed up to now for the education of the indigenous clergy (n. 38).

Mgr. Costantini was in full agreement with this judgment. In those years in China, the Tianjin Movement, led by the Lazarist missionaries, Frs. Vincent Lebbe and Anthony Cotta,² created a hot climate around the topic of the situation of the Church in China. Since 1914, Fr. Lebbe had started raising questions about missionary methods in China. These included such topics as why the Chinese clergy did not enjoy the same privileges as the foreign missionaries and why bishops were not chosen from among the Chinese clergy to be in charge of a Mission territory; why Chinese Catholics could not show their patriotism and strive for the full independence of their country; why the Catholic Missions should receive the patronage of foreign governments (of France, in particular); why the missionary congregations were building up their own religious 'colonies' instead of building the Church, etc.

These questions provoked strong reactions both in China and in Europe. Rome was fully aware of the issues. In 1919, the Holy See appointed the Vicar apostolic of Guangzhou, Mgr. John Baptist De Guébriant, as Apostolic Visitor for all the Missions in China, in order to collect objective data on their status. Mgr. De Guébriant pursued his enquiries on a large scale, traveling and interviewing a great number of people. The results of his enquiries were submitted to the Holy See in June 1920. The bishop accepted the meaningful observations of Fr. Lebbe. These included the danger of division among missionary orders and congregations, each employing their

² See more details on this matter, in Jacques Leclercq, *Thunder in the Distance* (Burlington: Sheed & Ward, 1958).

own methods of evangelization and catechetical texts, the need for a more adequate formation of the Chinese clergy, and the gradual appointment of local bishops. However, he did suggest that the Holy See show a greater flexibility towards the French patronage and Western culture.

Mgr. Costantini was appointed Apostolic Delegate in 1922 specifically for the purpose of fostering the localization of the Chinese Church. He was fully aware of the general situation of the Church in China: Reflecting on his upcoming trip to China, he wrote: "I can imagine before my eyes, in a panoramic view, about fifty bishops spread all over China. All are foreigners, all of them are members of religious congregations. Is this the Church wanted by Christ? If the Catholic religion has appeared to the Chinese as a foreign import, connected with foreign political interests, is it really the fault of the Chinese?..."³

Later, he wrote about past evangelization in China: "An apostolic method was missing; missions were planted, but not the Church. Missions were confused with the Church. What was missing was not an indigenous clergy, but a local hierarchy arising out of an indigenous clergy."⁴

Having arrived in Beijing on July 18, 1923, Mgr. Costantini "soon realized that the memory of Mgr. De Guébriant's visit was still very much alive. He had especially emphasized the urgency to carry out the recent missionary directives of the Holy See."⁵ Along this line, he encouraged the periodic episcopal meetings then taking place in the five ecclesiastical regions of China that had been going on for some time, and engaged them in the preparation and organization of the First National Council of the Catholic Church in China in Shanghai in 1924 (May 14 – June 12). This was an important and solemn event. The closing ceremony, with a long procession of about

³ C. Costantini, *Con i missionari in Cina* (Roma: Unione Missionaria del Clero, 1946), vol. I, p. 47.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 275, 484.

⁵ C. Costantini, "Monseigneur J. Bude de Guebriant", in *Dossiers de al Commission Synodale*, April 1935, reported in *Bullettin de la Societe des Missions-Etrangeres de Paris*, N. 163, Juillet 1935.p. 461.

fifty bishops and hundreds of priests attracted thousands of spectators, and marked a memorable day for the Church. The Council introduced in its Acts a few canons that underlined several positive aspects of the Chinese people, and of their patriotism and culture. Its Commissions started to carry out the new strategy with the view of renewing missionary methods. The majority of Chinese Catholics accepted the new attitudes with joy. But, unfortunately, they met with rather strong opposition from a few of the highly conservative leaders among the foreign clergy. At the same time, most of the missionaries almost completely ignored them, and kept on working along more traditional lines.

However, Mgr. Costantini did not lose heart. On July 25, 1926, after receiving two more important documents, the Encyclical Letter "*Rerum Ecclesiae*" and the Apostolic Letter *Ab Ipsis Pontificatus Primordis* of Pius XI, he wrote:

It is necessary, to have the courage to revise missionary methods, and to especially put great effort into achieving the Papal program, which is to 'plant the Church,' and to achieve what the Apostles had achieved in the West. They 'should not seek their own things, but those of Jesus Christ.' (Phil 2:21). Our demonstration of the universality of the Catholic faith before the pagan masses is meaningless unless the pagans see that the administration of the Church is handed over to the Chinese clergy. To accomplish this purpose, it would be convenient if, at the start, some large Vicariates could be handed over to them...⁶

One important result of all Costantini's efforts was that finally, in 1926, he could bring six Chinese priests to Rome to be ordained bishops by Pope Pius XI (on October 28), as the first step towards a establishing a local Catholic hierarchy. According to him,

⁶ C. Costantini, *Con i missionari in Cina, op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 334.

“It opened a new era in the history of the Missions in China”.⁷ Back in China, Mgr. Costantini continued to be concerned about ordaining new Chinese bishops. On July 2, 1928, he ordained Mgr. Peter Cheng of Xuanhua, Hebei. On February 24, 1930, he went to Chongqing to ordain two bishops for Sichuan province, namely Mgr. Francis Xavier Wang for Wanxian and Mgr. Paul Wang for Shunqing (Nanchong). On October 12, 1930, he ordained Mgr. Francis Liu of Fenyang, Shanxi. Meanwhile, other Chinese bishops were ordained both in Rome and in China.

Mgr. Costantini also put a lot of effort into improving the formation of the local clergy. Therefore, following the decision of the Shanghai National Council of 1924, he pushed for the establishment of regional major seminaries. Regions (encompassing several dioceses) could better pool their resources and staffs for the better training of Chinese priests all over China.

On March 26, 1925, the Delegate went to Kaifeng to meet all the ordinaries of Henan province to discuss the issue of the Regional Seminary. On the following May 29, he wrote to them about the need to submit an official request for aid to the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda, emphasizing: “Differences about time, methods and personal views are not very important compared to the great responsibilities the Vicars Apostolic have for the vital issue of the formation of an indigenous clergy.”

He was of the opinion that it was not enough that professors in the Seminary had a mastery of the Latin language, especially for teaching philosophy, but they should also have quite a good mastery of the Chinese language in order to better explain difficult terms and concepts.⁸

In January 1927, Mgr. Costantini founded the local “Congregation of the Disciples of the Lord” with the objective of

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 462. The new bishops were: Aloysius Chen of Fenyang, Shanxi, Odoric Cheng of Puqi, Hubei, Joseph Hu of Taizhou, Zhejiang, Melchior Sun of Lixian, Hebei, Philip Zhao of Xuanhua, Hebei, and Simon Zhu of Haimen, Jiangsu.

⁸ See *His Letters in PIME General Archives*, vol. XXY, pp. 7-8.

providing a better education to Chinese priests to equip them for an apostolate among intellectuals.

As I have already hinted, two principles persuaded me to start this foundation: the widely held belief in China that the Catholic religion is a foreign religion, and the necessity to have clergy, well acquainted with, and versed in Chinese literature... For spreading the Catholic religion the prestige of the culture must be taken into account. It is indispensable that a certain number of priests stand on the same level of intellectual scholarship as their educated compatriots...⁹

All Mgr. Costantini's efforts, both in China (from 1922 to 1933) and in Rome (his work with the Congregation for the Propagation of Faith, now the Evangelization of Peoples) reached their climax with the establishment of the Catholic Hierarchy in China on April 11, 1946. About 20 of the 106 ecclesiastical territories then were assigned to the care of Chinese bishops. Moreover, Mgr. Costantini also contributed to Pope Pius XI's abolition of foreign patronage over Catholic Missions in China (June 15, 1926), as well as to reaching a solution to the Rites Controversy (December 8, 1939).

The Chinese Inculturation of the Christian faith

The other great concern of Mgr. Costantini was what is now called 'inculturation'. Regarding this concern, we should consider the important factor of Mgr. Costantini's own artistic talent and expertise in the fields of sculpture and architecture. His own sensitivity for culture and art greatly contributed to his efforts to inculturate the Christian faith. He was a trained artist himself. His father ran a construction business, and young Costantini worked with him. During his 14 years (1901-1915) in Concordia as Vicar Capitular, he studied and worked as sculptor and restorer. In 1911

⁹ C. Costantini, *Con i missionari in Cina*, op. cit., vol. II, pp. 175-177.

he founded the Society of Friends of Christian Art, and in 1913 he launched the periodical “Arte Sacra” (Sacred Art). From 1915 to 1918 he was in charge of a parish in Aquileia and in charge of restoration work on the basilica. Therefore, he had very good theoretical and practical artistic experience.

In China, Mgr. Costantini was deeply aware of the importance of art in determining the human response to the Christian Faith; and he was determined to implement a policy of adaptation in artistic missionary activity. Already in 1923, one year after his arrival in China, he had encouraged the development of a distinctive Chinese Christian art. The opportunity arose when two Prefects Apostolic, Mgr. E. J. Galvin of Hanyang, Hubei, and Mgr. J.E. Walsh of Jiangmen, Guangdong, sent him a letter with information and queries about their intentions in the areas of Chinese Christian art. Instead of a formal comment, Costantini answered with a rather long essay on the history and principles of adaptation, and on the urgent need for it in China. Later he recalled:

In 1923 I had already written a letter to two Prefects Apostolic, dealing in detail with such evangelization questions on the Missions. I made these points:

1. *It is wrong to make use of Western art in China.*
2. *Keeping the styles of foreign art will doubtlessly fuel the persistence of the prejudice that the Catholic Church is something foreign.*
3. *Actually, the tradition of the Church tells us that we should make use of the art of a given people and of a given time, since throughout her history, the Church has adopted and adapted to local art forms.*
4. *Not only is it possible to make use of Chinese art, but it can produce great and beautiful results...¹⁰*

Thus, Mgr. Costantini’s principles and convictions regarding

¹⁰ C. Costantini at alii, *Zhongguo Tianzhujiào Meishu*, op.cit., p.12.

artistic inculturation were stated very clearly: Western style art is unsuited to China; Western Christian art used in China gives the impression that Christianity is a western, not an universal religion; the Church throughout its history has adopted and adapted to local art forms; Chinese art and culture provide many opportunities for adoption and adaptation.¹¹

In order to push the Church in this direction, Mgr. Costantini encouraged the Shanghai National Council to state it as one of its proposals:

In constructing and decorating the sacred buildings and residences of the missionaries, styles of foreign art should not be employed, but, as far as possible and according to the opportunity, forms of the native art of the Chinese people should be used. (n. 453).

Consequently, when Mgr. Costantini dealt with the practical decision of the National Council to build major seminaries, his artistic sensitivity and acquaintance with specialists came into play. He invited a Dutch Benedictine, Dom Adelbert Gresnigt, an architect whom he had met in Montecassino, to China, and asked him to become familiar with Chinese architectural styles in order to design buildings in the local style. The Delegate wrote:

In 1925 the Benedictine architect Dom Adelbert Gresnigt arrived in China. He soon mastered the spirit of Chinese art, provided the drawings and supervised the construction of the beautiful Catholic University in Beijing, the drawing of the regional seminaries in Hong Kong and Kaifeng, and of the quarters of the Disciples of the Lord in Xuanhua, as well as taking care of other minor works. In his buildings he made use of elements of traditional Chinese art, but infused them

¹¹ This text was published in several languages, as the basis for a long campaign the climax of which was the Vatican Exhibition of Missionary Art, planned for 1940, but postponed, because of the war, until 1950.

*with a new Christian soul.*¹²

Regarding the headquarters of his Congregation of the Disciples of the Lord, mentioned above, Mgr. Costantini reported:

*Fr. Adelbert Gresnigt drew up the plan and the drawing for the new Seminary, which is like a beautiful architectural flower blossoming in an airy and silent valley, bringing in a new fresh and harmonious note to the surrounding scenery, made more noble by relics of ancient art forms.*¹³

The first of the regional seminaries was for South China and the chosen location was Hong Kong. Mgr. Costantini got the Vicar apostolic of Hong Kong, Bishop Henry Valtorta, PIME, involved in finding and buying a suitable piece of land in Aberdeen, and he kept up a frequent correspondence with the Vicar. On October 11, 1927, from Beijing he wrote:

*Today I posted in a registered parcel the drawings of the Regional Seminary. It will turn out to be a solid and imposing structure, costing nothing more than any constructions in a foreign style... In the future, while the work proceeds, I will send the architect, the Benedictine Dom Adelbert Gresnigt, to give appropriate instructions. It is the first outstanding example of the application of Chinese art to a Catholic institution. The results must be perfect, in order to close all discussion with a concrete demonstration. The Protestants have preceded us with the great buildings of their University in Peking, which are really imposing, but our building seems more refined...*¹⁴

¹² C. Costantini, Cina, "Arte Cristiana", in the Enciclopedia Cattolica, Cina, col. 1670-71.

¹³ C. Costantini, *Con i Missionari in Cina*, op.cit. vol. II, pp. 175-177.

¹⁴ HK Catholic Diocesan Archives, S.V, B.50, F. 01, the original is in Italian.

Fr. Michael McLoughlin S.J. gives further details about construction problems, required adaptations to the original drawing and the final results:

To design the Seminary building, an architect long famous for his grasp of the traditional Chinese style, Dom Adelbert Gresnigt O.S.B., was chosen. The original plan provided for a great quadrangular building, stepped down the hill towards the sea. Later on it was decided to reverse the plan, so that the whole grandiose structure might face the busy road rather than the lonely sea. The economic blizzard of the thirties shrivelled these high ambitions. One side of the proposed quadrangle was indeed built according to Dom Gresnigt's plan; but the connecting wings, the great facade, and the Chapel itself had to be reluctantly redesigned. Yet, incomplete though it is, the portion that was erected bears evident testimony to the wisdom of the choice of architect. For all its elaboration of colour and detail, the present Seminary is pre-eminently a building of stately unity.¹⁵

During the opening ceremony of the new building at the Furen Catholic University (November 14, 1929), Mgr. Costantini reported:

Dom Adelbert Gresnigt, OSB, of Maredesous Abbey designed this new construction. The grandiose building was conceived in modern Chinese style, and it magnificently fits in with the austere and noble context of Beijing City. The Chinese people feel that the Catholic University does not want to impose itself on the city as something strange or hostile, but to rise, and to grow naturally as one of the beautiful flowers of Chinese culture.¹⁶

¹⁵ Michael McLoughlin, "The Regional Seminary (1931-1964)", in *Theology Annual*, vol. 4, 1980, pp. 83-99.

¹⁶ C. Costantini, *Con i Missionari in Cina*, op.cit., vol. II, p. 128.

Mgr. Costantini also wanted some churches to be built in the Chinese style, but frequently he did not meet with success. One example was St Teresa's Church in Kowloon. He asked Dom Gresnigt to draw up the plans for it. Dom Gresnigt submitted two sets of drawings to Mgr. Valtorta, who liked both of them. Unfortunately, the construction committee, led by Portuguese Catholics, did not appreciate the idea of a Chinese style church, and they asked a local architect to change the drawings.

However, Mgr. Costantini was not fully satisfied with the productions of foreign artists inspired by local styles. His ideal and policy was to create a truly indigenous Christian art.

In 1957, he published an article, under the title "We do not want hybrid missionary art".¹⁷ In it he distinguished four types of missionary art, namely imported art, imitation of European art, art by foreign artists inspired by local styles, and real indigenous art produced by local artists.

About the productions of foreign artists inspired by local styles, he wrote:

We appreciate these attempts at the indigenization of Christian art. They serve mainly as ways to explain the catechetical contents of the Christian faith, speaking a language easier to understand for the local people. But this form of art remains a marginal attempt and does not solve the problem of indigenous art. Our program is to Christianize true indigenous art itself, that is, the natural productions of the genius of the various peoples... Obviously, the local artist should know the great artistic tradition of the Catholic Church. But he should not blindly copy figures, backgrounds, forms, etc. He must understand the spirit of Christian iconography, assimilate the sensitivity of the

¹⁷ C. Costantini, "Non vogliamo meticci nell'arte missionaria", in *Le Missioni cattoliche*, 1957, pp 25-26.

Church, and express it in his figurative language. We desire originality, sincerity, and a genuine expression of the genius of the indigenous people. The religious and artistic culture of the great Christian tradition will not impede in any way the authentic and original expression of the local artists.

Native artists must be legitimate children of the art of their own nation, though renewing their set of artistic forms under the influence of a Christian sensitivity. Christian faith does not de-nationalize peoples, but enriches them with new gifts. Truly the new schools of Christian painting in China, Japan, Korea, Indochina, Indonesia and India have succeeded in translating with the brush all the poetry of their art, so spiritual, and celebratory of the Christian mysteries. Theirs is an art perfectly Christian and deeply indigenous!
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Mgr. Costantini, at first, was disappointed at not being able to find Catholic Christian artists and their works. He had to wait few years before he could start to implement his ideals and plans.

One day, in 1929¹⁹, I went to visit in Peiping (now Beijing) the personal exhibition of the painter Chen Yuandu. I noticed that this young artist showed a special mastery of his craft, good talent, together with a very solid background in the

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ The date '1929' creates some problems, since other sources say 1928 and, according to the research of Dr Anthony Lam in "Who inspired Luke Chen, the Pioneer Chinese Christian Artist?" (paper given at the 8th International Symposium of the Verbiest Foundation, Louven, 2004), the Hong Kong Catholic periodical *Kung Kao Po* published a painting attributed to Chen Xu (another name for Luke Chen) in its first issue on August 4, 1928, followed by the publication of other paintings of his. Luke Chen has been painting Christian subjects at since least 1928. Therefore, there are two possible solutions about the date; the first is that 1929 is the wrong date; the second is that Luke Chen was influenced first in his Christian Chinese art, not by Mgr Costantini, but by someone else, namely, according to Anthony Lam, by his master Chin Bo Lu (1877-1926), who had visited America and France, and was acquainted with Western art.

national style of painting. What I enjoyed most was the spirit and poetry that his paintings expressed. It could be said that he turned lines into scale and the colors into music. I invited him to come to the Delegation's quarters, and I talked to him about the Virgin Mary and the Bible. I showed him several pictures of the early Italian painters and handed him religious works of art for study. After a few days, he painted a picture of the Virgin Mary adoring the Child Jesus, and showed it to me. This beautiful picture in the Chinese style, which has been published in almost all the missionary magazines, became the first symbol of the new Chinese Catholic painting. At Pentecost in 1932, Mr. Chen received baptism and joined the Catholic Church, taking the name of Luke.²⁰

Luke Chen Yuandu (Chen Xu, 1902/03–1967) was later invited to teach in the Art Department of Furen Catholic University in Beijing. He formed a group of Catholic artists. Their work has enjoyed considerable success, both in Beijing and in the West. Among his students were Lu Hong Nian, Wang Su Da, Zeng San, Xu Qi Hua, Monica Liu, and other artists. The Art Department of Furen Catholic University produced more than 180 works of Christian art. From 1935 to 1938, the Art Department organized three exhibitions each year for consecutive years. In 1938, at the instigation of Mgr. Costantini, it also organized and conducted a series of itinerary exhibitions in Budapest, Vienna and the Vatican (Rome).

According to Dr. Anthony Lam, Luke Chen's own works, besides being published in Hong Kong by the Kung Kao Po since 1928, were also introduced overseas. *The Field Afar*, a magazine of the Maryknoll Fathers in the USA, had published his paintings since 1929.²¹ In the 1930s, an American journal, "*Life Weekly*,"

²⁰ C. Costantini, *Con I Missionari in Cina*, op.cit., II, p. 340.

²¹ A. Lam, "Who Inspired Luke Chen...", art.cit., p.13.

introduced his works in a special column.

Following the communist revolution and the founding of the People's Republic of China, the Christian painting class at Furen University closed, and the artists dispersed. However, on October 17, 1956, Cardinal Costantini presided at an exhibition in Rome of religious paintings by Monica Liu Hopeh. Magdalena Liu survived the Cultural Revolution and later went to Canada. At the present time some young Catholic artists are trying to restart the Catholic art enterprise all over again.

Another concern of Mgr. Costantini in the field of inculturation was the Chinese language. On August 1, 1930, he sent a circular letter to all the heads of ecclesiastical territories, giving guidelines about the usage of the colloquial language called "*baihua*," following calls for its promotion by the Chinese authorities. He gave the following guidelines:

- In each Vicariate or Mission, if there are some Chinese priests much inclined to the study of classical literature, they should be given the opportunity to get fully acquainted with it.
- All the other Chinese priests should get a good mastery of the common language, "*baihua*," in order to use it correctly both in speaking and in writing.
- The foreign missionaries should try their best to master the new language, "carrying on the fine tradition of the older missionaries, who, first among foreigners, published beautiful works, translating into Chinese books written in foreign languages. I like to recall here that the clergy, both local and foreign, has played, and still does play, a great role in China in the study of literature. Through their deep acquaintance with the Chinese language, they were able to write works of piety and hagiographies."²²

Evaluation of the results

The efforts of Mgr. Costantini in the area of localization of the

²² Ibid., pp. 184-185.

Church enjoyed a certain amount of success, but met with strong opposition in the area of inculturation. The Delegate was fully aware how difficult it was to root the Christian faith in Chinese culture due to the dominant conservative mentality among the foreign missionaries and the westernized way of training both the local clergy and the ordinary faithful. To these causes, other external factors were added, which contributed to the failure of Costantini's efforts at inculturation of the faith, namely political upheavals, which lasted several decades. These were followed by the change of the government, which brought religious restrictions. However some results were achieved. Gu Weiming, a Chinese scholar, writes:

For several reasons, the effects of the inculturation carried out at the beginning of the 20th century by wise personalities like Costantini were limited. But compared with the previous century, they minimized the 'colonial' character of the Church. At the same time, they facilitated precious results. I list here some of these: separation of the Church from colonial politics; separation of the faith from its external expressions, so that every country can express its faith in its own forms; the cultures of all nations enjoy the same dignity; good faithful should also be good citizens who love their country; after the establishment of the local Church, missionaries should withdraw, letting the local clergy take up the responsibility for its administration so that the Church take root in local society.²³

At present, both in mainland China and in the Chinese diaspora, a conservative attitude is still quite prevalent. It often happens that a Chinese artist who is invited to make a painting for a church, is told upon showing his work: "This picture... is too Chinese. Church members prefer something more like Leonardo da

²³ Gu Wei-ming, *Celso Costantini e la Sua Cina* (Concordia-Pordenone: Centro Missionario Diocesano, 1998), p. 11.

Vinci's 'Last Supper.'" Although Christianity is an officially recognized religion in China, foreign models are still given the priority. Therefore, Chinese Christian art is trapped in a conflict between inculturation and imitation of classical European Christian art. On the one hand, there is a will to indigenize Christianity by using indigenous art forms in order to access a broader public. On the other hand, many Chinese Christians are looking for the "different", "foreign" aspect in the Christian religion. The integration of Christian themes into traditional Chinese painting thus becomes a long procedure, which still needs time to develop. Inculturation continues to be a great challenge for Chinese Catholics, even today.

Conclusions

In Mgr. Costantini's opinion, the first responsibility for a true inculturation of the faith lies squarely upon the shoulders of the local believers. Much is expected of them, especially from those endowed with artistic talent in any field, from painting to architecture, from music to liturgy, from catechesis to theological speculation. It is not an easy task. The difficulties come not only from the field of art itself, as Monica Liu confessed one day to Mgr. Costantini:

You and many others encourage me to keep my Chinese style of art, and not mix it with a Western one. I try my best to always be myself. But the work is not easy, unless I use of some technical expedient. I am truly convinced that it is difficult for East and West to meet in the artistic field, since in the Orient art arises from a spiritual vision, which transforms the physical reality, while in the West, art strives to adhere in a more realistic style to physical beauty.²⁴

Difficulties for true inculturation also arise from the

²⁴ C. Costantini, "Non vogliamo meticci nell'arte missionaria", p. 26.

harmonizing process individual believers go through of all the values they have received from various sources, from their past and present culture, from their experience and way of living the Christian faith, absorbing them onto their own flesh and blood, and turning them into a harmonious unity. Mgr. Costantini saw this happening in Luke Chen, who, after receiving baptism told him:

Up to now, when I was painting some Christian subject, I felt a certain uneasiness. It seemed as if I were a stranger in another person's home. Now, it is no more like this. I am a son of the Church now, and I enter into dialogue with the subjects of my paintings. I pray and paint at the same time, and the Saints answer me. I feel the joy of sincerity, which becomes a source of new strength. Prayer is raising one's heart to the Lord and having a dialogue with Him, with the Virgin Mary and with the Saints. Sacred art truly has dimensions, which bring it closer to prayer, and it can be considered a figurative prayer. In fact, prayer is an acknowledgment of God and a giving of homage to Him; it is an act of adoration and of veneration; it is a vocation. Such is the spirit of sacred art, which the Pope has defined as a maid of the liturgy. As prayer should be sincere and clear, so sacred art must be sincere and clear, without any arbitrary, false or abstruse show.²⁵

Inculturation, indeed, is truly a challenge that all Christians, whatever their culture, have to face in order to grow and to show maturity in their faith. The challenge is all the more critical in Eastern countries, since, at present, not a few people, due to the ongoing process of globalization, doubt that a true incarnation of Christianity can take place in Eastern cultures.

²⁵ C. Costantini, *L'Arte Cristiana nelle Missioni* (Roma: Unione Missionaria del Clero, 1940), p. 193.