

Cardinal Celso Costantini and the Chinese Catholic Church

Francis Chong, CDD

Translated by Peter Barry, M.M.

A large part of the credit for the establishment of the hierarchy in the Chinese Catholic Church must go to efforts of Cardinal Celso Costantini. Some people say that he was a prophetic personality, and that he was a pioneer of inculturation before Vatican Council II (1961-1965) promoted it. But I think he was just being God's loyal servant. Before becoming the Holy See's Apostolic Delegate to China, Cardinal Costantini had no diplomatic experience. However, with a spirit of service he willingly accepted the Holy Father's assignment, and he faithfully carried out the mission the Holy Father had given him. On October 17th this year, we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the death of Cardinal Costantini (1876-1958). I take this opportunity to review for everyone his views regarding the Chinese Church. I hope that from a review of past events, we can learn new things, which will be helpful to today's Chinese Church.

Assignment as the Holy See's Apostolic Delegate to China

Before sending Cardinal Costantini to China as Apostolic Delegate, the Holy See had tried to send a representative to China to solve certain problems related to missionary activity. At that time France had a lot of power regarding the Catholic missions because it possessed the "the protectorate" over them. So when the Holy See assigned Cardinal Costantini to China, it took special care to request that he maintain absolute secrecy about his assignment.

Before arriving in China, he was not to reveal his identity. He could not even tell his own mother. In fact, when he was leaving home, he could only tell her that he was going to a far off place to preach the Gospel.

On August 12, 1922, Pope Pius XI assigned Cardinal Costantini as the first Apostolic Delegate to China. Before setting out for China, he said goodbye to the Holy Father, the Secretary of State, and the Prefect of Propaganda Fide (now called the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples). Cardinal Von Rossum, the Prefect of Propaganda Fide at that time sincerely exhorted him: "Make every effort to implement the thought of the encyclical *Maximum Illud*. The most urgent matter is to hold the national council of bishops meeting as soon as possible."

In order to implement the thinking of *Maximum Illud*, Costantini condensed the contents of the encyclical into five principles. These became the ideals for the direction of his later actions. These principles were:

1. The representative of the Holy See is purely a religious person. His position should have no political flavor.
2. Be friendly and nice with everyone, no matter if they are Chinese officials or foreign diplomats. Preserve one's own independence. Do not concern oneself with the advantages of the foreign powers. I am under the Pope, and serve only the Pope.
3. The Holy See does not get involved in politics. Sometimes politics enters religious circles, but that is only temporarily.
4. The Holy See has no imperial ambitions in China. There is no connection between the politics of the foreign powers and the Holy See. The Holy See is concerned about China, and hopes China will become strong. It advocates China belonging to the Chinese.
5. The church is universal because its work is service. The Church has as a principle that local priests should be made bishops. After the establishment of the local hierarchy, the

responsibilities of the missionaries can be considered completed. They should go as soon as possible to another place, and open up new fields for mission.

Opening a Way for the Chinese Catholic Church

On November 8, 1922, Cardinal Costantini arrived in Hong Kong, and revealed his identity as the representative of the Holy See. He then embarked on a quick familiarization tour of the whole Chinese Catholic Church. At the same time, he promoted the convening of a synod of the whole Church. During his tour, the ambassadors of each foreign power offered to accompany him to visit ministers in the Chinese government. However, Cardinal Costantini respectfully declined their well-meaning gesture.

Cardinal Costantini clearly told them: "Evangelization is purely a supernatural matter. Jesus founded a universal Church. In France, it belongs to the French. In America, it belongs to the Americans. In China it should belong to the Chinese people. I do not seek any special privileges from the Chinese people. It is only enough that we have freedom to preach the Gospel and to open schools, and protection for church property." In order to avoid having any connection with the foreign powers, he did put the office of the Apostolic Delegation in the Legation Quarter. When he went to visit the Chinese Foreign Minister, Gu Weijun, he also explained how the stand of the Church was different from that of the foreign powers. The Church points out to people the real meaning of life and the moral power of faith. She does not bother with other things.

The Council on Chinese Church Affairs

On May 15, 1924, after two years of preparation, Cardinal Costantini opened the first synod of the Chinese Catholic Church (also called the Council of Shanghai). 42 bishops, and 5 Prefects Apostolic were present at the Council. Among the Prefects

Apostolic were two Chinese, Odoricus Cheng Hede and Melchior Sun Dezhen. Among the other participants were the Abbot of the Trappists, 13 representatives of dioceses, and several representatives of religious Orders and of the Chinese diocesan clergy. After meeting for over a month, the closing ceremony took place at Shanghai's Xujiahui Cathedral on June 12, 1926.

In accordance with the ideas presented in the papal encyclical, *Maximum Illud*, the Council Fathers discussed a unified missionary direction, adapted to the Chinese nation and people. They also formulated a complete set of canons concerning missionary work in China. The delegates also passed motions concerning the training of local clergy, and the ordination of Chinese bishops. Cardinal Costantini said that every time he recalled the Council of Shanghai his heart was filled with joy. This was because it not only established a new milestone in Chinese Church affairs, but also because it was not subject to any foreign influence.

The Establishment of the Chinese Hierarchy

Even before the first Chinese synod started, Cardinal Costantini had suggested to the Holy See that the time was ripe to set up one or two Chinese prefectures. His purpose was to create the Chinese districts before the synod started, so that the two Chinese leaders could attend the synod. Accordingly, Costantini succeeded in establishing the two local Chinese prefectures of Puqi and Lixian, with Monsignors Odoricus Cheng Hede and Melchoir Sun Dezhen in charge as prefects. The establishment of these two local Chinese prefectures was the first step in the localization of the Chinese Church. Before 1924 all the ecclesiastical territories were under the supervision of foreign vicars and prefects. There was not even the shadow of a Chinese prelate on the scene. Although there was a Chinese bishop, Luo Wenzao (ordained in 1685), during the time of the Kangxi Emperor, this was only a one-off event.

On March 30, 1926, the Cardinal in charge of Propaganda

Fide, Van Rossum, wrote a letter in this vein to Costantini: "I have been thinking about this for a long time. If we set up a vicariate apostolic in Xuanhua, and bring the vicar to Rome to be consecrated, it would be of great benefit to the development of the Church in China. I will present this suggestion to the Curia, and when I have gotten their complete agreement, I think the Holy Father himself will want to perform the ordination ceremony. If the Holy Father consecrates a Chinese bishop in Rome, this would be a great event in the Church in China. We might as well select a few more bishops, and while we are at it, we can make the two prefectures of Puqi and Lixian into vicariates and raise the two prefects to the episcopacy. Therefore, Cardinal Costantini, following the instructions of the Holy See, found the following six candidates to be the first group of local bishops in the Chinese Catholic Church:

- ✧ Hebei Province, Xuanhua Vicariate, Bishop Zhao Huaiyi (Beijing diocesan priest).
- ✧ Shanxi Province, Fenyang Vicariate, Bishop Chen Guozhi, (Franciscan).
- ✧ Zhejiang Province, Taizhou Vicariate, Bishop Hu Ruoshan (Vincentian).
- ✧ Jiangsu Province, Haimen Vicariate, Bishop Zhu Kaimin (Jesuit).
- ✧ Hubei Province, Puqi Vicariate, Bishop Cheng Hede (Franciscan).
- ✧ Hebei Province, Lixian (Anguo) Vicariate Bishop Sun Dezhen (Vincentian).

On September 10, 1926, the six Episcopal candidates, accompanied by Cardinal Costantini, left Shanghai for Rome. On October 28, 1926, Pope Pius XI consecrated this first group of local Chinese bishops to the episcopacy in St. Peter's Basilica. With the Holy Father himself conducting the ordination of the first group of Chinese bishops, the foundation for the future development of the indigenization of the Church was established.

On April 11, 1946, when the Chinese hierarchy was established, the Chinese Church had developed to the point that 137 mission territories had been set up. Of these, 99 were raised to vicariates apostolic (actually, dioceses), and the rest to prefectures apostolic. Chinese priests headed 28 of these ecclesiastical divisions. Of these 28, 21 were ordained bishops and headed vicariates. Moreover, Pope Pius XI appointed the Vicar Apostolic of Qingdao, Tian Gengxin, to be the first Chinese (and first Asian) Cardinal.

The Formation of Local Clergy

There is a Chinese proverb, which says: "Good tools are necessary to successfully carry out a job." In a like manner, if you really want to establish a local Church, you must start with education. In other words, only if the local clergy receive a better formation will a substantial contribution be made to the development of the local Church.

Cardinal Costantini was a far-sighted person. At the first synod of the Chinese Catholic Church in 1924, one decision taken was that in different areas of China, the Church would establish 14 regional seminaries. The purpose would be to offer a higher quality of education in philosophy and theology to youth seeking to follow the path to priesthood.

By 1936, 11 of these regional seminaries were already up and running, fully involved in the work of training clergy. They were located in the following places: Jilin (Manchuria), Shala (Beijing), Xuanhua (Hebei), Hankou (Hubei), Jinanfu (Shandong), Datongfu (Shanxi), Kaifeng (Henan), Chengdu (Sichuan), and Aberdeen (Hong Kong).

Cardinal Costantini also paid great attention to Chinese culture. He urged seminarians and young priests to conscientiously study Mandarin Chinese (*baihua*), so that later when they were preaching the Gospel, they would sound convincing. He also encouraged the bishops and heads of missions to send suitable seminarians and young priests to Beijing's Furen University,

Shanghai's Zhendan University, or any other university to study Chinese and the Humanities.

One time, Cardinal Costantini, after conducting a broad survey, formed a plan to send some seminarians to Rome's Urbanianum University. This would allow the seminarians to receive a more complete education, not only academically, but in the spirit of the Church. However, the foreign bishops in China did not give a very enthusiastic response to this suggestion. Nevertheless, up to 1933, the year Costantini left China, he had sent over 40 seminarians to Rome for further studies. Among them were Yu Bin, Fan Xueyan, Luo Guang, Du Baojin and others. Later, they all became outstanding leaders in the Catholic Church of China.

The Establishment of the Congregation of Discipuli Domini

In his writings Cardinal Costantini often mentioned the missionary thinking of St. Paul, the Apostle. St. Paul used an abundance of knowledge and an apostolic spirit to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ and to set up the local Church. Costantini thought that St. Paul was successful in converting the Athenians because of his grasp and understanding of Greek culture. Therefore he firmly believed that the localization of the Chinese Church should not just stop at the creation of the Chinese hierarchy, but should involve imitating St. Paul's missionary methods. Of course, in preaching the Gospel, we should absolutely not make a distinction between rich and poor, nor between peoples of higher or lower levels of education. However, in order to influence and convert Chinese intellectuals and the whole Chinese race of people, the Church needs a clergy which is rich in the knowledge of Chinese culture and literature.

Cardinal Costantini discovered that in their youth Chinese priests put a lot of energy into studying Latin. Upon ordination to the priesthood, they threw themselves completely into pastoral work. They had no time to study the human sciences and literature. It was extremely rare to find such a person. Observing this situation,

Costantini, on March, 1931, founded the Chinese Order of Discipuli Domini (Disciples of the Lord). He hoped that this Order could evangelize through culture, and thus be able to contribute to the conversion of the whole Chinese people.

Conclusion

During his years in China (1922-1933), Cardinal Costantini used the missionary thought contained in the two encyclicals, *Maximum Illud* and *Rerum Ecclesiae*, to complete his mission of localizing the Chinese Catholic Church. According to Cardinal Costantini's way of thinking, The Chinese Church belonged to the Chinese people. But at the same time, it was also in communion with the Holy Father. Proof of this was his carrying out the Pope's instructions, and accompanying the first group of six Chinese bishops to Rome to be consecrated. The two encyclicals, Pope Benedict XV's *Maximum Illud* (1919) and Pope Pius XI's *Rerum Ecclesiae* (1925) pointed out to the Chinese Catholic Church of that time basic missionary principles. Following the instructions of those two encyclicals, Cardinal Costantini broke through the barrier in the direction of localization for the Chinese Church. In accordance with the needs of today's Chinese Catholic Church, on May 27, 2007, the present Pope, Benedict XVI, published a pastoral letter entitled, "Letter of the Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI to the Bishops, Priests, Consecrated Persons, and Lay Faithful of the Catholic Church in the People's Republic of China." The holy Father again emphasizes that the Church is One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic, and he hopes that in the future the Church can be based on forgiveness and reconciliation. I hope that we can, like Cardinal Costantini in his day (and here follows a play on Costantini's Chinese name, *Gang Hengyi* (剛恆毅), which means firm, unwavering and persevering), overcome political attitudes, and firmly, unwaveringly and perseveringly implement the Holy Father's most recent instructions to the Catholic Church in China.