

## *The Endeavors of Celso Costantini towards the Establishment of Sino-Vatican Relations*

---

---

*Liu Guopeng*

*Translated and Summarized by Patrick Taveirne, CICM*

In 1922, the Holy See used different means “to cloud issues” in order to circumvent the real obstacle of the French Protectorate. It successfully dispatched Archbishop Celso Benigno Luigi Costantini to China. He became the first Apostolic Delegate to deal with the ecclesiastical affairs of the Catholic Church in China. The representative of the Holy See was able to come to China, but he could not avoid the difficulties of the abnormal Sino-Vatican relations. At the same time, he was not able to remove the real effects of the French Protectorate and their negative influences.

Celso Costantini, during his term of office (1922-1933), always hoped to establish direct diplomatic relations between China and the Vatican. From 1886 until 1917, due to obstructions placed by France, attempts to establish Sino-Vatican bilateral relations failed twice. At the beginning of 1926, Celso Costantini suggested to the Holy See to sign a new Convention between the Holy See and China. This Convention was neither directed towards the establishment of formal diplomatic relations, nor aimed at confronting the French Protectorate. Rather it addressed the problem of how to remove the indigenous Catholic dioceses and faithful from the foreign, in particular the French Protectorate sphere of influence, and bring them into the framework of a bilateral Sino-Vatican agreement. Because of the special nature of this convention, Celso Costantini called it an “Intermediary Solution” (*Soluzione intermedia*).

In January and June 1926, prompted and supported by the Holy See, Celso Costantini tried to implement this proposal twice.

But because of French interference and threats, the Holy See and the Chinese government in the end yielded to French pressure, resulting in the cancellation of a creative and insightful proposal, which had no apparent defect.

PRC scholars in the fields of religion and history all agree that following the successful arrival of Celso Costantini as the Apostolic Delegate of the Holy See to China, the French Protectorate not only did not disappear, but in fact it continued to exert its harmful and stubborn effect on relations between the Catholic Church and China. This view is also confirmed by the contents of new documents, which this author found in the Vatican Secret Archives.

### **The 1926 attempt to establish relations**

Celso Costantini in his report N. 291/26 of January 12, 1926 to the Commission for Extraordinary Ecclesiastical Affairs continues to deplore the unfavorable conditions and the anxious situation that the Church faced at that time. These included:

1. the superficial level of indigenization of the Church in China. Among 70 foreign vicars apostolic, there were only 2 Chinese bishops, although in each apostolic vicariate the indigenous priests were in the majority.
2. the worrisome situation in China which could result in even greater chaos for the Church than that experienced during the Boxer Uprising. Under such circumstances, if the Protectorate is not carefully dissolved, then the missions will face extreme calamity again.

These worries matched very closely the views of Hu Shi at that time on the challenges facing the Church. On November 18, 1924, Hu Shi gave a lecture at Yanjing University in which he pointed out the three difficulties missionary work faced: 1. the rise of nationalism; 2. the rise of rationalism; and 3. the internal weaknesses of the missionary enterprise. This analysis applied both

to Catholicism and Protestantism.

Furthermore, since the outbreak in August 1924 of the Second Anti-Christian Movement, Catholics faced the enormous pressure of the revocation of the right to run schools (education).

The Second Anti-Christian Movement in terms of scope and intensity greatly surpassed the first one. The tense situation forced the French representative, Count de Martel, to write several times to the Chinese Foreign Ministry asking them to suppress the Anti-Christian movement. Up to February 1926 the supporters of the Anti-Christian Movement had staged more than 150 demonstrations in front of the foreign embassies. Moreover, on January 14, 1926, the French ambassador invited Celso Costantini to the French embassy to discuss with him how to deal with the Anti-Christian Movement. The latter told him bluntly that the aim of this strong movement was to change the Unequal Treaties. The movement had created great anxiety among the vicars apostolic. At the same time, Celso Costantini clearly stated that regarding the French Protectorate, which the Chinese people utterly detested, the vicars apostolic did not expect to enjoy special privileges. The Chinese people resented these bitterly. However, regarding the missionary work, there were three bottom lines which must be preserved: 1. freedom of religion; 2. the freedom to run schools; and 3. the right of the missions to control their own properties. This shows that, on the one hand, regarding Costantini's emphasis on the three bottom lines, the Chinese government was not able at that time to make a formal promise and guarantee. But on the other hand, under the circumstances of the difficulties facing the Church, Celso Costantini also realized the need to keep his distance from the French Protectorate, in order to avoid a further deepening of the misunderstanding with the Chinese people, or the fear of falling back to the former ways of relying on the French Protectorate.

It is quite evident, that Celso Costantini at this moment felt that the conditions to establish diplomatic relations with China were not yet ripe.

The positive change of attitude first came from Rome. On

February 28, 1926, Pius XI issued his encyclical letter *Rerum Ecclesiae*. In it he reiterated the spirit of Benedict XV's Apostolic Letter *Maximum Illud* (November 1919), emphasizing the importance of training a native clergy, and criticizing the slow pace of indigenization in the apostolic vicariates.

In March 1926 the Commission for Extraordinary Ecclesiastical Affairs together with the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of Faith drafted another secret document "Concerning the Situation of the Church in China (Relazione cum Sommario)." The report of Costantini of 12/01/1926 was the core of this document. It discussed several problems of the Chinese situation, the French Protectorate, and the indigenous priests. Costantini in the 8<sup>th</sup> item of this report proposed a kind of "Intermediary Solution". With this proposal he tried to deal with the French Protectorate in an effective way. This proposal had as its aim not to change the French Protectorate, but within its framework to reduce its negative influences to an absolute minimum; and under a compromise reached between the Holy See and China, to solve the problems of the indigenous Catholic priests and faithful exclusively. However, the discussions at that time resulted in no manifest resolution. Apparently the Holy See had gained experience from its two failures in establishing direct diplomatic relations. Regarding the issue of the French Protectorate, it was still extremely careful.

Originating from an extreme urge and support for indigenization, Pope Pius XI on June 15 of the same year, issued the encyclical letter *Rerum Ecclesia*. In this letter the Pope to a certain extent laid the basis for solving the problem of the French Protectorate. He wrote: "Obviously, each government out of consideration of its own interests can and should protect its own nationals residing abroad and its properties. Therefore, foreign missionaries and their agencies have these kinds of rights, especially in times of persecution and hardship. The Holy See accepts this kind of supervision in order to protect missionary territories from unjust harassment. But if the protecting nation takes advantage of this right to protect in order to obtain political

advantages, the Church strongly disagrees.” The encyclical letter was translated and published in the “Yishibao.” This shows that the Vatican was determined to break through the obstacles engendered by the French Protectorate.

These two ecclesiastical documents were meant not only to be an encouragement to indigenizing missionary efforts but to help lead the Church out of the morass and uncertainty of the worrisome political situation in China at the time.

These events and the bold attitude of the Holy See gave Costantini positive signs and encouragement. Under these circumstances, Costantini felt it worthwhile to reconsider his earlier proposal to establish limited diplomatic relations as an “Intermediary Solution”. On June 16, 1926, attached to the report, which Costantini submitted to the Commission for Extraordinary Ecclesiastical Affairs, was a document drafted in French “A Project of a Convention between the Holy See and the Chinese Government.” Costantini had analyzed and discussed this draft in detail with the French Vicar Apostolic of Canton, Msgr Antoine Fourquet. This Convention and his report N. 291/26 dated 12/01/1926 can be traced to the same theme; that is “it only involves the Chinese indigenous clergy, and will not be in conflict with the French Protectorate.”

This was an extremely sensitive matter, not easy to handle. After due reflection, Costantini drafted a proposal to the Holy See in order not to miss this unique opportunity, though some items still needed further polishing. The Convention included 21 stipulations, of which 11 stipulations were related to the indigenous clergy and faithful.

On 21 August, Celso Costantini sent a report 373/26 to Propaganda Fide. It is not difficult to point out the items which Costantini considered in drafting the convention between the Holy See and the Chinese Government. Strictly speaking, this Convention can be summarized in the following five points:

1. This convention was conceived under the present favorable

circumstances. It does not, nor will it harm France or any other nations' privileges. On the legal level, it does not affect previous treaties. Moreover it is only applicable to Sino-Vatican bilateral relations.

2. We have already trained 6 indigenous bishops. In the next two to three years, another 10 will be ready to be ordained. The urgency of this is due to the need for providing the indigenous priests with a legal status. This point was already voted upon and approved at the First Council of the Chinese Catholic Church (Shanghai, 1924).
3. If there is a lack of boldness regarding this situation, the Church will undoubtedly face a similar predicament as in Turkey.
4. The Chinese Constitution protects freedom of religious belief and of its propagation. However, there is a need for special protection for the Church's properties and the right to provide education. Of course the authorities must recognize the Catholic hierarchy. This recognition is not a special privilege.
5. This plan is difficult to implement at this time, when there is not yet a constitutional government. The present government is only a *de facto* government. Warlords control it, and it is not the expression of the will of the people.

At the time, the legal status of the indigenous priests still remained under the influence of the French Protectorate. Costantini proposed the Sino-Vatican Convention in order to remove the protection of the freedom of belief of the indigenous priests and faithful from the French Protectorate, and bring it within the sphere of Chinese law. This would return it again to a normal situation.

The Holy See praised the proposal of Costantini. In a confidential telegram (Cifrato N. 20), it allowed the Apostolic Delegate to further implement the Convention.

The Chinese side reacted positively to the ordination of the six bishops, and to the secret negotiations on the Sino-Vatican Convention. At the time, the foreign minister of the Beiyang government intended to dispatch the Chinese ambassador Lu

Zhengxiang in Bern (Switzerland) to be the Chinese representative at the ordination of the six bishops, and to make use of this opportunity to conduct secret negotiations in Rome.

It is a pity that the Holy See was the first to hesitate. Perhaps the reason was that it wanted the ordination of the six Chinese bishops to go ahead smoothly. It was afraid that the news about the secret negotiations would leak out, and jeopardize the ordination. Therefore, it refused to allow Lu Zhengxiang to be present at the ordination.

From the confidential telegram of the Secretary of State Cardinal Gasparri to Costantini on 19 August [1926], one notices that Rome in principle accepted the representative of the Chinese government, but it did not want the ordination of the bishops to be adversely affected by party or military politics. Moreover it publicly denied that any negotiations would take place in Rome about a mutual agreement.

### **The 1929 attempt to establish diplomatic relations**

The first failure to establish a Sino-Vatican Convention did not discourage Costantini completely. He was still waiting for new opportunities. After the successful Northern Expedition of the Nationalist Army in 1928, on August 1, the Pope sent a telegram with good wishes of peace to the new government, and congratulating it on the successful unification of China. Costantini felt that the successful unification of the country would create a new opportunity to establish direct diplomatic relations between the Vatican and the Chinese government.

First, from the point of view of the internal Chinese situation, following the success of the Northern Expedition, China completed its formal unification. The situation inside China created the effect of a mutual movement on the international diplomatic level. By January 1929, 12 countries had signed new treaties with the KMT government.

Secondly, regarding the Church, ecclesiastical affairs flourished: the number of faithful increased daily, reaching about 3

million, indigenous bishops increased to more than 10 (1/8 of the total number of bishops), indigenous priests and Sisters numbered more than 1,000. The indigenization trend showed effective results, and the situation was ripe for establishing diplomatic relations.

On 21 January 1929, Costantini together with the coadjutor of the Shanghai Apostolic Vicariate Msgr Auguste Haouisée, the Chinese Jesuit priest Zhu Kaimin, Luke Zhang and Lu Bohong (Lo Pahong) had an audience with Chiang Kai-shek (Jiang Jieshi).

Because of the new atmosphere of revolutionary reform with the establishment of the new government, and the common understanding between both parties, on 26 January 1929, Wang Zhengting, during his discussion with Costantini, actively proposed to reach an agreement with the Holy See on missionary matters. Both men agreed upon three basic principles:

1. To ensure freedom of religious belief;
2. To recognize the right of the Catholic Church to own property, and to devise new rules for dealing with the properties of the Church;
3. To recognize the right of the Catholic Church to establish schools. While the Church has to obey the laws and regulations of the government; the latter is not allowed to interfere in the curriculum of seminaries and religious houses.

Although the time of discussion between the two parties was very short, the archives of the KMT government's foreign ministry contain even today the secret draft of a Sino-Vatican agreement on the establishment of diplomatic relations (Nanjing 1929), containing five stipulations.

One can see from this agreement, that the KMT government's attitude was positive and active. Although this document carried the title of Convention, its contents had undergone some qualitative change. This time the relation between the Chinese government and the Vatican not only aimed at bringing the local clergy and faithful under the protection of Chinese law, but also aimed at weakening and breaking up the French Protectorate. Moreover it aimed at



establishing direct diplomatic relations between the Vatican and the Chinese government.

But this draft was not yet discussed in detail, and the contents were leaked out, resulting in the veto of France. At the time the Chinese government was also at loggerheads with France over the issue of Vietnam. France used pressure, and made China choose between the two issues. The result was that once again the Chinese government renounced the project of establishing direct relations with the Vatican.

The attempt to establish direct relations in 1929 again shows that although the French-Chinese Unequal Treaty was a thing of the past, and France herself suggested establishing a new Treaty with China, but regarding the French Protectorate, it did not allow the Vatican to interfere, and she insisted on using the Protectorate of the Church to her own advantage.

At the time, to support the French government in its attack on Costantini, the French bishops and clergy of the Third Ecclesiastical Region publicly supported the French Protectorate, especially the coadjutor bishops Msgr Joseph Fabrègues of Beijing, Msgr Jean de Vienne of Tianjin, and Msgr André Defebvre of Ningbo.

This failure of establishing direct relations was only remedied in June 1942 when France was attacked and occupied by Germany during the Second World War. Since that time, it did not again use its religious protectorate to block the establishment of direct relations.

### **The reason and relevance of the failed attempt to establish relations**

Because of Costantini's special status, he always expressed an interconnected, broad and long-term view regarding the Chinese situation, the missionary problems, the relationship with the Chinese government and relations with other Western countries. He hoped to solve past litigations and still existing problems on an institutional and legal level. He wanted to avoid becoming entangled in solving concrete and routine conflicts with temporary

and short-lived solutions. Rather he looked for solutions, which would have long-term benefits.

All along, Costantini dreamt of establishing direct relations through a religious-political concordat, and thereby avoid the problem of the French Protectorate. This he hoped would alleviate the bad impression the Catholic Church had among officials and people. Although Chinese society at the time was in turmoil, and the Chinese government displayed temporary and weak characteristics, Costantini cherished the fervent hope that direct diplomatic relations could be established, and relations with China be normalized. Rather than just a legal guideline or permit, he valued the concordat as a formal certificate according to which he could help the Church avoid the shackles of the French Protectorate and clear the road so that in the end the Church could obtain a normal status in Chinese society.

However, because of the French government's resistance and the internal turmoil of Chinese society, the KMT government grew suspicious, and did not trust the Holy See. Shortly afterwards, Japan's military aggression in Manchuria (sometimes one element dominated, sometimes several elements reinforced each other), resulted in the original vague and weak relations between the Holy See and the Chinese government, becoming even more adversely affected, and in the end, this led to the failure of Costantini's sound proposal. Notwithstanding his sincere wishes and outstanding ability, it was the realities and circumstances of the time, which decided the outcome and ultimate limits of it.