

The Official End of the Chinese Rites Controversy

Sergio Ticozzi, PIME

On December 8, 1939, the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of Faith (SCPF, now the Sacred Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples) issued the Instruction on Chinese Rites, *Plane Compertum Est*. Pope Pius XII (1876-1958) approved it a few months after his election as Pope, and the Prefect and secretary of the same Congregation, Cardinal Pietro Fumasoni Biondi (1872-1960) and Mgr. Celso Costantini (1876-1958) respectively, signed it. *L'Osservatore Romano*¹ published the Instruction on December 18-19, which emphasized the important purpose and the novelty of the document:

It concludes the historical period, that had its clearest expression in the Constitution of Benedict XIV, *Ex quo singulari*, of July 11, 1742, and opens up a new period. The Instruction neither judges nor denies the past: it simply points out which are the present conditions existing in China and draws the legitimate consequences...

The decisions of the Instruction

The main content of the Instruction focuses on the innovations.

...These Eminent Fathers decided upon the following declarations:

1. Since the Chinese Government has repeatedly and openly proclaimed that all are free to profess the religion they prefer, and that it is out of their intentions to legislate or issue decrees concerning religious matters, and that ceremonies performed or ordered by the public

¹ The Latin text was published by the *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* (AAS), 32 (1940), pp. 24-26.

authorities in honor of Confucius do not take place with the intent to offer religious worship but only for the purpose of promoting and expressing the honor due to a great man and proper esteem for tradition, consequently, it is licit for Catholics to be present at commemorative functions held before an image or tablet of Confucius in Confucian monuments or schools.

2. It is not to be considered illicit, particularly if the civil authorities order it, to place in Catholic schools an image of Confucius or even a tablet inscribed with his name, or to bow before it. Where scandal may be feared, the right intention of Catholics should be made clear.
3. It must be tolerated that Catholic officials and students assist, if ordered to do so, at public ceremonies which bear some semblance of superstition, provided that, in accordance with Canon 1258, they remain passive and participate only in such outward marks of respect since they may be regarded as purely civil in character, after declaring their intention, as stated above, whenever this may seem necessary in order to avoid misinterpretation of their actions.
4. Bowings of the head and other signs of civil respect in presence of the dead person, or before their images, or even before a tablet inscribed simply with the name of the deceased are also to be regarded as licit and proper..."

As a consequence, the Instruction decided that the obligation of taking the oath against the Chinese Rites, requested by Pope Gregory XVI, from all the clergy in China and in neighboring countries, should be dispensed with, although all the other previous prescriptions, in so far as they have not been changed by the present Instructions, are to remain in force, notably the prohibition to hold discussions on the Chinese Rites.²

In summary, the Instruction allowed Chinese Catholics to be

² See an English translation from the Latin text in *The Rock*, March 1940, "Instruction Regarding Certain Ceremonies and the Oath on Chinese Rites," p. 112.

present at ceremonies in honor of Confucius in Confucian temples or in schools, as well as to set up in Catholic schools images, statues of Confucius, or a tablet with his name on it. Catholic officials, school staff and students were permitted to passively attend public ceremonies, which seem to contain superstitious elements, by explaining their intention to avoid scandal. It was licit for them to perform head bows and other manifestations of civil observance before the deceased person during funerals, or before their images. And finally, the oath against participating in the Chinese rites, required from the clergy, became superfluous and was no longer necessary.

Context and motivation of the Instruction

Both the Chinese authorities, through public declarations, and the Holy See, through certain initiatives, took steps to prepare for the issuance of the Instruction. In fact, before making the final decision, the Holy See considered it advisable to seek from the Chinese civil authorities their official interpretation of the rites.

a) The declarations of the Chinese authorities

The attitude and the interpretation of the Chinese authorities about the rites in honor of Confucius and the ancestors as being simply civil ceremonies had been expressed on several occasions and was, therefore, already abundantly clear.

In 1914, a few Chinese Muslim leaders requested that the government insert in school handbooks, together with Confucian doctrine, some sentences taken from the Koran. On September 15, the government rejected their request on the principle that "although religion is useful both to society and to the individuals, yet it is not convenient to let it enter into official education." In order to answer to the eventual objection that the Chinese schools taught and propagated *Kongjiao* (孔教, Confucianism), the official decree carefully explained:

For centuries China has honored Confucius, but in fact what is honored is his doctrine, and his teaching method:

these are quite different from the religious dimension. *Jiao* (教) in *Kongjiao* (孔教) means *jiaoyu* (教育), that is education; it does not mean *zongjiao* (宗教), which is religion³. Consequently, the teaching and the ceremonies, handed down from generation to generation in honor of Confucius, do not have a religious meaning.⁴

³ This was the general interpretation of Confucianism that prevailed in those days, although at the same time there were efforts to declare Confucianism as a "State religion." This interpretation is still quite common at present, especially in Communist China. However most recent studies of contemporary Confucian scholars, who start from a larger definition of religion and a vaster sociological and functional analysis, emphasize the religious dimension of Confucianism and consider it as a "civil religion," or as "a sociopolitical doctrine having religious qualities." (C.K. Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960, p. 27.)

"The relationship between Confucianism and religion, and the broader problem of the place of religion in Chinese society, have long claimed the attention of scholars of Chinese culture. In the spectrum of opinions already expressed on the matter, one may discern one leading view, which dwells upon the rationalistic and agnostic nature of Confucianism. This has been maintained by a long line of Western scholars from Voltaire to James Legge, as well as by modern oriental scholars such as Suzuki in Japan and Liang Ch'i-ch'ao and Hu Shih in China... Though supported by an impressive array of scholarly names, this view cannot easily be reconciled with the social facts." (C.K. Yang, "The Functional Relationship between Confucian Thought and Chinese Religion," in John K. Fairbank, ed., *Chinese Thought and Institutions*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957, pp. 269-290.)

"... Nor were western scholars alone in this evaluation. Many Chinese scholars preferred to define Confucian tradition as humanism, rejecting the notion of Confucianism as a religious tradition. However, this evaluation of Confucianism as simply a form of non-religious humanism is dated." (John Berthrong, "Trends and Interpretation of Confucian Religiosity," in *Ching Feng*, 32, 4 [December 1989], pp. 228-229.)

⁴ The episode is quoted by P.M. D'Elia, "La recente Istruzione della S.C. di Propaganda Fide sui riti cinesi," in *La Civiltà Cattolica*, 2150-2151. January-February 1940, (Extract, pp. 13-14).

On May 31, 1934, the Standing Committee of the Central Executive Council of the Kuomintang (國民黨, Chinese Nationalist Party) decided to restore the national cult of Confucius, and fixed August 27 as a national holiday in honor of the Confucius' Birthday. The president of the Executive Council Wang Ching-wei (Wang Jingwei 汪精衛, 1883-1944) presided at the ceremonies on that day in Nanjing, and explained the official meaning of the restoration of the Confucian celebrations in this way:

The object of the ceremonies is to pay homage to the great Chinese sage and, on the other hand, to eradicate all erroneous opinions concerning his teachings.

The "erroneous opinions," he mentioned, were to consider him the founder of a religion and to put the whole blame for the backwardness of China upon him.

In 1935, a written declaration on the civil nature of the honors given to Confucius, as we shall soon see, was given both by the authorities of Japan and of Manzhouguo (滿洲國, the Manchu Empire), in northeast China.

In Hong Kong, on December 10, 1935, the inauguration ceremony of the new Confucian Hall, on Caroline Hill, provided another occasion to explain Confucian teachings:

Confucius' teachings are but a code of morals regulating human conduct and defining the duties of every man in his relations with God and with mankind. A study of Confucian principles will not deflect anyone from his own religion, but rather make him a better follower of it.

All will agree——concluded the reporter——that this speech makes it clear that the Chinese Government and modern Confucian scholars have no other intention than to pay respect to a great social philosopher, to whom Chinese civilization is greatly indebted. There is no intention of paying religious worship.⁵

⁵ Reported by Patrick Joy, "A New Instruction on the Chinese Rites," in *The Rock*, March 1940, pp. 107-112.

b) Previous initiatives of the Holy See

The first important initiative of the Holy See, previously taken on this line, deals with the situation in Manzhouguo, the empire set up in Manchuria (northeast China) under the control of Japan.⁶

The Manchu Government, within its conservative and nationalist program to revitalize traditional values, intended to make compulsory the veneration to images or statues of Confucius in public places and schools. In November 1934, the Bishop of Jilin, Mgr. Auguste E.D. Gaspais (1884-1952), informed Rome about this plan. Meanwhile, some missionaries urged him to make inquiries of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Some time later, the Minister sent him the written answer of the Ministry of Education:

The ceremonies in honor of Confucius have the sole objective of manifesting the veneration due to him, but they have absolutely no religious character.

On December 3, 1934, Propaganda Fide asked Mgr. Gaspais to take a “common vote” of all the Ordinaries of Manzhouguo, so that the Sacred Congregation could make a decision based on solid evidence. On March 12, 1935, all the Ordinaries gathered together in Jilin, and, following the opinion of the Ministry of Education,

⁶ For further details, especially about the debated issue of whether the Holy See had established diplomatic relations with the Manzhouguo or not, see Giovanni Coco, *Santa Sede e Manciukuo 1832-1945* (Roma: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2006), pp. 84-91. According to the author, the Vatican did not establish the diplomatic relations with the Manzhouguo. However, Msgr. Auguste Gaspais (1884-1952), Vicar Apostolic of Jilin, misinterpreting the “mandate” of the S.C. Propagation of Faith to “*agendi coram Auctoritatibus loci vice et nomine omniun Ordinariorum territorii de Manciukuo, necnon cum eisdem Auctoritatibus eas relationes fovendi*” (act with the local Authorities in the name of and on behalf of all the Ordinaries of the Manzhouguo territory, and foster relationships with the same Authorities), undertook some ambiguous actions, which made the Japanese authorities, eager to be officially recognized, to consider Gaspais as the “Apostolic Delegate” of Manzhouguo.

they drew up a questionnaire, asking what could be allowed, tolerated or definitely excluded for Catholics. This documentation was sent to Propaganda, on March 25, with the written opinion of the Manchu authorities. On May 28, 1935 Pope Pius XI approved the return Instruction with the answers, and the Cardinal Prefect Fumasoni Biondi and his secretary Celso Costantini signed it.⁷

The Instruction gives, first, some guidelines to the bishops of *Manzhouguo*, asking them to make clear to the Catholics that the “ceremonies in honor of Confucius are absolutely not of a religious nature,” that the clergy should obey the Instruction avoiding any further debate, and that the faithful should clarify their intention, when it is needed to avoid misunderstanding and scandal.

Then, the Instruction provides the answers to the practical questions, proposed by the bishops:

- About schools: In the Catholic schools, it is allowed to expose an image or statue of Confucius, even in special decorated niches and to bow in front of it, but not to put the image on an altar with candles, flowers, incense and other religious articles. In all other schools, the Catholic students should observe “passive attendance” at the ceremonies, although bowing is permitted.
- In the villages, if a schoolmaster cannot get an image of Confucius, he can write his name on a tablet and expose it.
- Concerning compulsory communitarian participation of students, soldiers and officials at sacrificial ceremonies in a pagan temple: they can participate, but with only a “material or passive attendance.” They can sing only patriotic songs or songs in honor of Confucius, but not songs directly related to the sacrifice. They can bow at the end of the sacrifice even if the offerings are exposed, but they can never take part in the consumption of the offerings.

⁷ See the Latin text in Fortunato Margotti, “La Cina cattolica al traguardo della maturità,” in *Sacrae Congregations De Propaganda Fide Memoria Rerum*, (Rom, Freiburg, Wien: Herder 1975), Vol. III/1, pp. 508-540.

- About the financial cooperation in building and repairing temples or monuments in honor of Confucius, the answer is positive. But for other temples, the cooperation is allowed only "*in globo*," that is when it is considered as general taxation for different purposes.
- Catholics can contribute to the expenses of public dramas for the entertainment of the people, but not for superstitious dramas.
- Concerning attendance at funerals: at private ones, bowing is allowed, since bowing and other external acts of veneration are considered merely civil in nature; at public funerals, only passive attendance is permitted.

The second initiative of the Holy See dealt with the situation in Japan.

On May 26, 1936, the SCPF sent an Instruction to the Apostolic Delegate of Japan, Mgr. Paul Marella (1895-1984, Cardinal in 1959), about the "duties of the Catholics towards their fatherland."⁸ It dealt practically with the *Jinjia* (Shrine) Ceremonies, or visits to national shrines.⁹ Quoting the 1659 Instruction of Propaganda, it asserted that the "Faith does not reject the rites and customs of any nation if they are in no way reprehensible; in fact, it desires to defend and protect them." It also reported the statement of the Ministry of Public Education given on September 1932 to the Archbishop of Tokyo:

⁸ AAS 28 (1936), pp. 406-409; also in Fortunato Margotti, "La Cina cattolica al traguardo della maturità," in *Sacrae Congregationis De Propaganda Fide Memoria Rerum*, (Rom, Freiburg, Wien: Herder 1975), Vol. III/1, pp. 508-540.

⁹ An official protocol, issued in 1907, promulgated these. They included regulations for practices such as the opening and closing of sanctuary doors, invoking the *kami* [spirits], presenting and clearing away offerings, presenting and withdrawing tribute, offerings, bowings, purifications, communal meals, the cleansing of hands and mouth, posture, rising and sitting, movements, and the use of fans, etc.

Visits to the national temples are requested from school authorities and from the students of primary and secondary schools because they are part of the educational program. However, the requisite reverence and bowing have no other meaning than to show a patriotic sentiment and a loyalty to the country.

Therefore, Catholics could attend the ceremonies at the national temples, which were prescribed by the government for the students and staff of all universities and schools.

Regarding the ceremonies held during funerals, marriages and other social functions, the Instruction stated that although they drew their origin from religious observances, by then they had become only a polite expression of urbanity, and of benevolence to neighbors and to friends. So they appear to have lost their intrinsic connection to pagan religious beliefs, and have become merely civil customs. Therefore, Catholics are allowed to be present at such ceremonies.

The Instruction went on to say that the bishops should inform all Catholics about the possibility of taking part in the ceremonies requested by the government, as well as in those connected with funerals and marriages, clearly declaring their intention in case of a possible scandal.

Pope Pius XII undertook the third initiative with the publication of his first Encyclical Letter, *Summi Pontificatus*, on October 20, 1939. In it, the pope reiterated the Church's positive attitude towards the culture, customs and traditions of all peoples.

The Church of Christ, the faithful depository of the teaching of Divine Wisdom, cannot and does not think of deprecating or disdaining the particular characteristics which each people, with jealous and intelligible pride, cherishes and retains as a precious heritage. Her aim is a supernatural union in all-embracing love, deeply felt and practiced, and not the unity, which is exclusively external and superficial and by that very fact weak...

She has repeatedly shown in her missionary enterprises that such a principle of action is the guiding star of her universal apostolate. Pioneer research and investigation, involving sacrifice, devotedness and love on the part of her missionaries of every age, have been undertaken in order to facilitate a deeper appreciative insight into the different civilizations and to take their spiritual values into account for a living and vital preaching of the Gospel of Christ. All that in such traditions and customs is not inseparably bound up with religious errors will always be subject to kindly consideration and, when it is found possible, will be sponsored and developed. (nos. 44-46)

Consequences

"It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of the Instruction"—wrote the Jesuit Father Patrick Joy (1892-1970) in March 1940.¹⁰ The Instruction put an end to the long controversy on the Chinese Rites, by providing positive solutions, which solved the issue at its roots and liberated both foreign missionaries and local Chinese Catholics from a great deal of anxiety and fear.¹¹

It produced in everybody a greater sense of freedom and respect for Chinese Catholics and their culture, since, until then, even the names of *Tian* (天) or Heaven and *Shangdi* (上帝), Supreme Emperor, for God were proscribed, as well as the worship addressed to Confucius and to the ancestors. Funerals and visits to the tombs of the dead were considered dangerously contaminated with superstition. The clergy no longer had to be intransigent with the Chinese faithful, who had a more positive opinion about these issues.

It opened up the way for the process, which is now called "inculturation," but which unfortunately, could not proceed

¹⁰ P. Joy, "A New Instruction of the Chinese Rites," art. cit., pp. 110-111.

¹¹ P.M. D'Elia, "La recente Istruzione della S.C. di Propaganda Fide sui riti cinesi," art. cit., p. 28.

smoothly due to the historical events that soon followed, namely World War II, the civil war in China, and the ascent of the Communist Government and its policy on religion. The Second Vatican Council (1962-65) provided a new push for the adaptation to and inculturation of the Christian faith into the local culture, especially the use of the local language and music in liturgical celebrations. Popes Paul VI and John Paul II, the former in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* and the latter in his Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Missio*, have emphasized the importance of efforts to both incarnate the Christian message into local cultural forms, and to absorb local values within the Christian faith. The 1998 Synod of Asian Bishops' document, *Ecclesia in Asia (The Church in Asia)*, reiterated the same theme. *Redemptoris Missio* states (n. 52):

The process of the Church's insertion into peoples' cultures is a lengthy one. It is not a matter of purely external adaptation, for inculturation 'means the intimate transformation of authentic cultural values through their integration into Christianity and the insertion of Christianity into the various human cultures.' The process is thus a profound and all-embracing one, which involves the Christian message and also the Church's reflection and practice. But at the same time, it is a difficult process, for it must in no way compromise the distinctiveness and integrity of the Christian faith.

Through inculturation the Church makes the Gospel incarnate in different cultures and at the same time introduces peoples, together with their cultures, into her own community. She transmits to them her own values, at the same time taking the good elements that already exist in them and renewing them from within. Through inculturation the Church, for her part, becomes a more intelligible sign of what she is, and a more effective instrument of mission.

All the particular or local Churches living in a Chinese context, especially in the more traditional Taiwan, have indeed

carried out the liturgical reform and have initiated some attempts at inculturation for the Lunar New Year celebrations, funeral and marriage rites, and even concerning theological investigation. Since the early 1980s, the Church on mainland China, after the liberalization policy launched by Deng Xiaoping, followed suit. However, the enterprise turned out to be rather difficult, due to the cultural and political ambiguities present in the modernization process in the Chinese world. This explains the present hesitation in this direction, even 70 years after the end of the Rites Controversy.

To sum up, Jacques Roland made the following general comment:

We must recognize that any progress made since Vatican II still does not go far enough. The participants in the 1998 Synod of Bishops of Asia, when voicing concordant concerns about the veneration of ancestors, revealed an enduring unease. However, the historical and political intricacies of the Far East prevent a decisive move forward, one which is more and more openly requested by the local Churches.¹²

¹² Jacques Roland, "Le dossier des Rites Chinois doit-il être ouvert?", in *Mission*, 2001, vol. 8, n. 2, pp. 165-186.