

The 70th Anniversary of Lifting the Ban on the “Chinese Rites”

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The Lifting of the Ban

(1) The purpose of this paper is not to discuss the reasons, including religious, cultural or political, whether in whole or in part, which led to the lifting of the ban on the “Chinese Rites.”¹ Rather, the purpose of this paper is to reflect upon some of the phenomenon that have taken place after the “Chinese Rites Controversy” was resolved.

(2) The ban on the “Chinese Rites” was lifted when the Roman Congregation of Propaganda Fide (now called the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples) issued the instruction *Plane Compertum Est* on December 8, 1939.² It permitted the Chinese Catholics and the missionaries to carry out

¹ Coverage of these may be seen in:

- Noll, Ray (edit), *100 Roman Documents Concerning the Chinese Rites Controversy (1645-1941)*, translation from Latin by Donald F. St. Sure, SJ, (San Francisco, The Ricci Institute for Chinese-Western Cultural History, 1992). Chinese translation of this book: 沈保義、顧衛民及朱靜譯，《中國禮儀之爭西文文獻一百篇（1645-1941）》，上海古籍出版社，2001年。Throughout his article Father Thomas Law makes many references to this work (*translator's note*).

- 李安當·方濟各 (Filippucci, F.S.)，〈臨喪出殯儀式〉，1685年。

- 高步瀛、陳寶泉編，《民教相安》，直隸學務處編書課編行，（清）光緒三十一年，1905年。

² *Acta Apostolicae Sedis (AAS)*, 32 (1940), pp. 24-26. Also in 沈保義等，175-177頁（文獻99）。

the rites to Confucius and the ancestors. The reason was that the circumstances had changed. The religious content of the rites to Confucius and the ancestors had already been secularized, and so could be considered civil ceremonies only.

However, the name for God, “Tian Zhu (天主),” as the highest pure spirit revealed by Jesus Christ must be retained. The instruction also forbid the use of such names as “Tian (天)” or “Shangdi (上帝)” for God. This prohibition is still in effect today. (See the decree of Pope Benedict XIV, *Ex Quo Singulari*, July 5, 1742, esp. No. 10.)³

(3) Actually, in the process of the development of the “Chinese Rites Controversy,” the Congregation of Propaganda Fide had already, in 1659, issued an instruction to the missionaries about respecting the customs and traditions of the local people. The short document reads as follows: “Do not try to persuade the Chinese to change their rites, their customs, their ways, as long as these are not openly opposed to religion and good morals. What would be sillier than to import things of France, Spain, Italy, or any other country of Europe into China? Do not import these, but import the faith. The faith does not reject or crush the rites and customs of any race, as long as these are not evil. Rather, it wants to preserve them. Generally speaking, people prize and love their own ways, and especially their own nations, more than others. That is the way they are built. There is no more effective cause of hatred and estrangement than to change a country’s customs, especially those which people have been used to from time immemorial. This is particularly true, if in place of the customs that have been suppressed, you substitute the practices of your own country. Do

³ Original Latin text from the Roman Congregation of Propaganda Fide, *Collectanea*, I, 1, Rome, 1907, article 339, pp. 130-141. Also in: 沈保義等, 88-115頁 (文獻24)。

not disdain Chinese ways because they are different from European ways. Rather, do everything you can to get used to them."⁴

(4) Actually, the same spirit was evident in the 6th century. Pope Gregory the Great (590-604) sent a letter to the English missionary Bishop Augustine, in which he wrote: "Brother, I know that you devotedly and firmly hold to the good customs you learned from the Roman Church. But I say to you, only look for those which are pleasing to Almighty God, no matter if they come from the Roman Church, the French Church or any other Church. Only make a careful choice, and you can use them in the English Church. The English Church has only recently accepted the faith. You can gather the best customs and methods from different Churches, and introduce them to the English Church. We "are fond of" something not because it has come from a certain place, but because of the "hidden beauty" within them. Therefore, please select from different Churches what belongs to God, what is devotional and whole, and gather them into a plate of good food to put on the English table to become their daily nourishment." (*Epist.* 64, Lib. XI, *PL* 77, *Col.* 1187)

At that time, Pope Gregory the Great also sent a message, through Abbot Mellitus, to Bishop Augustine of the British Isles, saying: "Be wise, and do not destroy the English temples. It is enough only to remove the idols from them. Prepare some holy water and sprinkle it on those temples. Build an altar, and place the sacred relics within it. The reason is that, if those temples are beautiful, it is only necessary to change those temples, which were used in the past to worship idols, into places to worship the true God. If the people see that the temples, that they are accustomed to, have not been torn down, but are now being used to worship the true God, the mistaken ideas in their hearts will be gotten rid of, and they will change to knowing and worshipping the true God.

⁴ Original Latin text from: *Collectanea*, I, 1, Rome, 1907, article 135, pp. 42-43. Also in 沈保義等, 11-12 頁 (文獻 3)。

Just as in the past they slaughtered cattle and offered them to the evil spirits, they can do a similar but enhanced type of ceremony, for instance, to celebrate the blessing of the church or to commemorate the anniversary of placing the relics into the altar. Around the former temple, which now has become a church, the people can use the branches of trees to erect tents, and hold elaborate religious ceremonies. Let them not again offer slaughtered animals to evil spirits, rather let them praise God with their slaughtered animals, and eat them. In that way they give thanks to, and please God, who gives us all things. Thus through external happiness, it will be easier for the people to obtain spiritual happiness. For no doubt they will not immediately be able to cut out everything from their hard hearts. They must go step by step, and stage by stage, to reach the highest level. They cannot reach that level in one leap.

It is like the Egyptians and Israelites, although God revealed Himself to them, He still allowed them to offer their slaughtered animals to Him. Although in past times they offered their sacrifices to evil spirits, now they offered their sacrifices to the true God. As a result, their hearts changed. When they offered sacrifice, they “took” and “gave up” the same slaughtered animals, but now they offered them to God, and not to the evil spirits. Therefore it was already not the same kind of sacrifice” (*Epist.* 76, Lib. XI).

(5) For the principles of the spirit behind the lifting of the ban on the “Chinese Rites,” see Pope Pius XII’s encyclical *Summi Pontificatus*, issued on October 20, 1939 and Propaganda Fide’s *Plane Compertum Est*.⁵ One can see that the encyclical *Summi Pontificatus* was used in Vatican II’s “Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy,” most notably in paragraph 37, which treated of “Norms for Adapting the Liturgy to the Temperament and Tradition of Peoples” (Paragraphs 37-40). Below we compare *Summi Pontificatus* with the “Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy.”

⁵ 沈保義等，19頁。

<i>Summi Pontificatus</i>	<i>Vatican II's "Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy" (Para. 37)</i>
44. The Church of Christ...seeks the unity of all human beings...it is not just something external...nor is it a uniformity.	Even in the liturgy the Church does not wish to impose a rigid uniformity in matters, as long as it does not involve the faith or the good of the whole community.
45. Everything that is internal to and is characteristic of each race — as long as it is not opposed to the origins and final destiny of humankind, ...the Church, as a compassionate mother, agrees to and supports.	Rather, she respects and fosters the qualities and talents of the various races and nations.
46. For several centuries, up to the present time, missionaries have positively and carefully studied the cultural systems of every race of people. They have obtained a deeper understanding of these, and have tried each race's qualities and good points, so that the Gospel of Christ can bear more abundant fruit in each place. As long as they contain no heresy or evil preaching, the Church always studies the customs of each race with good will, and if possible, supports and preserves them.	Anything in these peoples' customs and traditions, which is not indissolubly bound up with superstition and error, the Church will give due consideration to, and if possible, preserves intact. She even admits these things into the liturgy itself, provided they harmonize with its true and authentic spirit.

In 1994, the Sacred Congregation for Liturgy and the Sacraments issued the Instruction "*Varietates Legitimae.*" Paragraph 17, footnote 33 of this Instruction cited the letter of Pope Gregory the Great to Mellitus, the 1659 Instruction of Propaganda Fide to missionaries in China, and the 1939 Instruction *Plane Compertum Est.* mentioned above.

(6) From the abovementioned process, we can see that it has always been the Church's practice that, if the Church's fundamental faith does not run into "opposition," "attack," "heresy," "secularization," or any other similar dangers, she is happy to accept local customs. She adopts the method of "adapting to local customs," of "when in Rome do as the Romans do," or of "placing a flower on top of gold." Thus in different degrees, richer evangelical practices make the faith sink roots into the life of the local Catholics, reaching finally to "a communion of faith and culture."⁶

The Church has learned this from what she went through during the "Chinese Rites Controversy." From the discussion during the Second Vatican Council, she has also learned this lesson. One document stated: "Likewise, other religions found everywhere try to counter the restlessness of the human heart, each in its own manner, by proposing 'ways,' comprising teachings, rules of life, and sacred rites. The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men [and women].... The Church, therefore, exhorts her sons [and daughters], that through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, carried out with prudence and love and in witness to the Christian faith and life, they recognize, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among these men [and women]." (*Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*, October 28, 1965, # 2.)

⁶ 羅國輝，「基督徒禮儀節令與本地文化的互融——以香港教會的經驗為例」，〈神學論集〉110期，光啓出版社，台北，1996年，543-559頁。

Chupungco, J.A., *Cultural Adaptation of the Liturgy*, Paulist Press, New York/Ramsey, 1984.

(7) How has the lifting of the ban on "honoring the ancestors" been reflected in the lives of the Chinese Catholics? Has "honoring the ancestors" enriched the faith of Chinese Catholics? Just as the lifting of the ban on the "Chinese Rites" influenced paragraph 37 of the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, has it also blessed the universal Church?

Experiences after the Lifting of the Ban

(8) After the publication of the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, mainland China experienced ten years of turmoil (the 1966-1976 Cultural Revolution). At the same time on Taiwan, Cardinal Yu Pin (1901-1978) vigorously promoted the virtue of "worshipping God and honoring the ancestors." He would carry out this ceremony especially at Chinese New Year. The ceremony included burning incense, offering fruit, a reading of the "offering text" and prayers.⁷

In 1978, the tablet in honor of Father Vincent Lebbe was installed among "the list of Nationalist Revolutionary Heroes" in Taipei. Most of the churches in Taiwan built a "memorial" to the "ancestors," and placed it at the side of the main altar.

(9) Taiwan's custom of honoring the ancestors has also spread to Hong Kong, and they imitate their ceremony of honoring the ancestors after the Chinese New Year Mass. However, Hong Kong's Chinese clergy and Catholics, from the very beginning, did not show very much interest in it. Of the 52 parishes in the Hong Kong Diocese, only about 7 carry out the ceremony of honoring the ancestors at Chinese New Year.

But in Hong Kong the tablet in honor of the ancestors has developed into a place in the church set aside for remembering the dead. The churches, which have such a special place are: St. Mary's Church, Mother of Good Counsel Church, Annunciation Church,

⁷ 陳方中編著，《于斌樞機傳》，商務印書館，台北，2001年，289-294頁。

Ma'anshan's St. Francis Church, Our Lady of Mt. Carmel Church, and St. Jerome's Church. Most of these memorials are located in the back of the church. They are decorated with pictures of the deceased persons or a book recording their names, and symbols of the faith such as a crucifix or a tree of life, to represent "the presence of Christ's redemption and hope for resurrection to eternal life." Usually there are also flowers and candles, symbolizing respect and prayers. (*See photos at the end of this article.*)

(10) The liturgical renewal of the Church in mainland China only started in the 1980s and the 1990s. Due to a danger of "heresy," the Catholics strongly object to the burning of incense to honor the deceased, or other similar customs. They strictly observe the customs in existence before the reforms of Vatican Council II. After an elaborate funeral Mass, the Catholics surround "the place of rest," which is an empty coffin with no corpse in side, to carry out the "final farewell" ceremony.⁸

According to today's ritual rules, it is inappropriate to carry out the "farewell ceremony" when the body is not present.⁹ Therefore some dioceses in mainland China, like Shanghai and Beijing, are gradually replacing it with a "requiem service" (prayer service for the deceased).¹⁰ The prayers have the meaning of "gaining salvation and hoping for the resurrection."

After 2007, the Nanmen Lane Catholic Church of Handan, Hebei Province set up a place for remembering and praying for the dead. But it is set against the background of "awaiting salvation in purgatory." It is full of a spirit of "foreboding," and the Catholics beseech the saints to help their loved ones' souls to be released from purgatory.

⁸ 《每日彌撒經書》，香港公教真理學會，1956年，1193-1194，1199頁。

⁹ 《基督徒殯葬禮 *Ordo Exsequiarum*》導言，1969年，10號。

¹⁰ 《乙年主日彌撒經文》，天主教上海教區，1994年，565-574頁；《天主教殯葬追思禮儀》，天主教上海教區光啓社，2000年。

This reflects the contents of the prayers of the pre-Vatican II farewell service: "Lord, we ask you not to pass a strict judgment on your servant: because unless you yourself forgive all the sins of each man and woman, no one can be considered righteous. Therefore, we beseech you not to use a righteous judgment to bear down on your servant: we count on your judgment to be conciliatory because our request relies on faith in Christ and on inspired prayer. We call on the help of your grace, to help the person to avoid a revengeful judgment. During his life, he was signed with the seal of the Holy Trinity. Amen."¹¹

A Reflection on the Present Situation

(11) It is worthwhile to make a general reflection on what has been said above.

Lex orandi (law of prayer) → lex credendi (law of faith) → and lex vivendi (law of living) must all be linked together.¹²

Today the ban on honoring the ancestors has been rescinded for 70 years. Honoring the ancestors and praying for the dead is not a problem of cultural communion. Rather, it concerns how the Chinese Catholics practice their faith.

Do the liturgy books published after Vatican Council II, like *Prayers for the Care and Anointing of the Sick* (1972), *The Liturgy of Christian Burial* (1969), and "The Four Last Things" in *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1992), articles 988-1065, 1472-1473, 1680-1690, and the reinterpretation in the *Compendium to the Catechism of the Catholic Church* (2005) influence our lex orandi, lex credendi and lex vivendi?

Also, there has been great advancement in investigations in the fields of medicine, psychology, anthropology, religious sciences, and in the study of "life and death" in the Christian faith.¹³

¹¹ 《每日彌撒經書》，香港公教真理學會，1956年，1193頁。

¹² *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1992) #1124, and the "Introduction" of the *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church* (2005).

Pastoral workers must deeply enter into the prayers of the liturgy, experience a close union with the Lord, have a firm grasp of the faith, and possess a pastoral love when they are caring for the sick, sending off a person in the last stage of life, and accompanying the family of the sick person and praying for them. In this process, *lex orandi* brings about *lex credendi*, which forms the *lex vivendi*. The pastoral worker and his flock are united in prayers, both going in the direction of Christ. Otherwise it is only a “superficial” exercise, and it will not be beneficial to others and himself.

(12) Perhaps we can recall and learn something from the traditions of the old Roman Church. A prayer for the dead in an old Roman Eucharistic Prayer says the following: “Lord, please remember your servants (names of deceased). They bore the seal of the faith. They have gone before us, and are now at rest. Lord, we ask you to give them, and all those who rest in the bosom of Christ, a place of rest, light and peace.”

This prayer seems to reflect the sentiments of Psalm 23: “The Lord is my Shepherd, there is nothing I lack. In green pastures you let me graze; to safe waters you lead me; you restore my strength.” We ask the Lord to bring the deceased to the pasture in the heavenly Kingdom, and to be at peace. It is the same shepherd who cares for us in this life. If we follow him, in the future we will arrive at the pasture in heaven.¹⁴

¹³ Cf. Cardinal Paul Shan, SJ (單國璽樞機)：「超越生死看生死：與聖嚴師父、主教的談話」；單國璽《生命告別之旅》，天下遠見出版股份有限公司，台北，2008年；單國璽，《活出愛：單國璽樞機主教的傳奇故事》，啓示出版，台北，2009年；葉青霖編輯及攝影，《生死兩相安》，善寧會，香港，2008年。與病者主內共舞的經驗，可參考：何樂賢，「家母何甘少貞」，網址：<http://catholic-dlc.org.hk/mrsho.doc>

¹⁴ Jungmann, J.A., *The Mass of the Roman Rite: Its Origins and Development (Missarum Sollemnia)*, translated by Brunner, F.A., 2 vols. New York: Benzinger Brothers, 1961, vol. 2, pp. 237-248.

Actually, a fresco of the Good Shepherd and the dead resting together in a field of green grass, dating back to the 5th century, can be seen at the Galla Placidia Mausoleum in Ravenna.

At the same time, frescoes on the walls of the Roman catacombs show the dead eating a banquet in the heavenly kingdom. It also shows the origins of the Mass for the dead.¹⁵ They are testimonies to our faith.

The above traditional liturgical life should nourish our present day liturgical life. It can help the Chinese Catholics to have a more fruitful experience when they honor the ancestors and pray for the dead. It can also help us to pass through this life, as we await to participate in the heavenly banquet in the future (Lk 14:15; Rev 19:9)!

(13) The second wake service in the Hong Kong Diocese's Tianzhujiao Binzang Liyi (天主教殯葬禮儀) (1999) is a ceremony special to the local Church. This is especially true of the prayers at the "candle light ceremony," the "memorial service," the sprinkling of holy water, and the offering of incense.

These prayers and ceremonies, having developed out of the Roman liturgy and incorporating the religious life of the local Catholics, are much appreciated.

The prayers say: "Brother/Sister (name of deceased), we sprinkle water on you to bless you, and to remember your Baptism. May you forget all the worries you had in this world, and joyously follow Christ to enter eternal life."¹⁶

"Brother/Sister (name of deceased), you are a person whom God loves. We honor you with incense because God the Father has created you, God the Son has saved you, and God the Holy Spirit has resided in you. Let your good works follow you, like holy

¹⁵ Jungmann, J.A., *The Early Liturgy to the Time of Gregory the Great*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, 1959, pp. 140-141, 183-184.

¹⁶ 《天主教殯葬禮儀》，香港教區禮儀委員會辦事處編輯及出版，1999年，28頁。(See also *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #1472-1473.)

incense, and may God accept them. When Christ returns, may you rise and enter eternal life.”¹⁷

“Omnipotent Heavenly Father, in you the deceased have life, and the saints have complete happiness. We beseech you to hear our prayers for your servant (name of deceased). He/she is no longer attached to this earthly world. Please receive him/her into the heavenly city, where he/she may see you in your merciful glory, and help us also to one day meet you in heaven. (The Collect for Paschal week)¹⁸

Can these have an influence on the universal Church? Only time will tell. However, it takes 10 years to grow a tree, and 100 years to grow a person. We hope that this is only a beginning, and as an initial stage, it can concretely take effect in our daily liturgical and pastoral concerns. We hope it can beneficially help the deceased person’s family, during their period of mourning, and comfort and inspire them, as they continue on the road to a reunion in heaven. (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1994, #1680-1690)¹⁹

(14) Regarding what the lifting of the ban did not yet include, that is, only permitting “Tianzhu (天主)” to be used for the “highest one only God revealed by Jesus Christ,” this is also worthy of further reflection.

Chinese Christians, like the Eastern Orthodox, and other Christians, including the Anglicans, the Lutherans, the Methodists,

¹⁷ 《天主教殯葬禮儀》，29 頁。(See also Rev 14:12-13; 2 Cor 2:15; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #1015-1019.)

¹⁸ 《天主教殯葬禮儀》，90 頁。

¹⁹ Refer to some homilies in funeral services, which show liturgical and pastoral experiences:

- (Father Thomas Law) 羅國輝，「義人因信德生活」，網址：<http://catholic-dlc.org.hk/mrslee.pdf>;

- 羅國輝，「輕身上路（珍姨喪禮講道）」，網址：<http://catholic-dlc.org.hk/auntchun.pdf>;

- 羅國輝，「父啊！我把我的靈魂交在你手中（Lk 23:46）—— 逾越的反省」，網址：<http://catholic-dlc.org.hk/mrtin.pdf>.

the Church of Christ in China, and the Presbyterians use the words "Shangdi (上帝)" or "Shen (神)" for God. These words in Chinese are all very close in meaning. They are only an expression of their Christian faith. So, we can use an attitude of "when in Rome, do as the Romans do," "follow the customs of the place," or "put a flower on the top of gold" to go through the process of cultural communion. This process is seen in the early Roman Church, when they used the word "Deus" for God. It also came up again on the 70th anniversary of the lifting of the ban against "the Chinese Rites."

(15) In manifesting our liturgical and pastoral life (*lex orandi* and *lex vivendi*), does it influence and help to develop our faith life (*lex credendi*), and lead us to make theological reflections? Does it help us to experience a fuller faith life (*lex credendi*)? Is it, in turn, reflected in our liturgical life (*lex orandi*), and our pastoral practice (*lex vivendi*)?

If we only stay rooted in one part, and forget that *lex orandi*, *lex credendi* and *lex vivendi* are all interrelated, we will be stubbornly conservative. Also, the human sciences are making great strides in development. Pastoral workers should be even more aware that our faith in "Christ who became man and surpassed all of life" should also be like this.

This article is only the introduction to a larger essay. I hope all people of good intent will work harder!



*Cathedral of Chiayi
Diocese, Taiwan*

Memorials for the dead in churches of Hong Kong



Mother of Good Counsel Church



Annunciation Church



Ma On Shan, St. Francis Church



St. Jerome's Church