

Maximum Illud: an Apostolic Letter of Great Impact on Catholic Missionary Work in China

Louis Ha
Translated by Anthony Lam

A hundred years ago, Pope Benedict XV, (1854-1922) promulgated the Apostolic Letter *Maximum Illud* (meaning “the greatest mission”) on November 30, 1919.

Ernest P. Young’s magnum opus *Ecclesiastical Colony: China’s Catholic Church and the French Religious Protectorate*, gave a detailed account of the historical background, Christian faith in China, religious incidents, localisation, and imperialism.¹ Chapter 10 of the book focuses on the Apostolic Letter, and analyses Catholic missionary activities as well as issues with French diplomacy. Another book by Dr. Chen Tsung-ming on the history of the diplomatic relations between the Holy See and China from 1912 to 1978) is also a noteworthy reference.² This article, using secondary resources, gives an introduction to this Apostolic Letter of great significance to mission work in China.

¹ Ernest P. Young is professor emeritus at the University of Michigan and studies Catholicism in China. He published *Ecclesiastical Colony: China’s Catholic Church and the French Religious Protectorate* in 2013 (New York: Oxford University Press).

² Chen Tsung-ming [陳聰銘] is the director of research at Ferdinand Verbiest Institute, KU Leuven in Belgium. The book in Chinese is titled *Zhong Fan waijiaoshi – Liang an yu Jiaoting guanxi (1912-1978)* [《中梵外交史：兩岸與教廷關係(1912-1978)》]. (Taipei [台北市]: Kuangchi Cultural Group [光啓文化事業], 2016).

The background of the Apostolic Letter

After the Opium Wars, Catholic missionary work in China enjoyed certain advantages due to Western political and economic superiority. But it also sowed consequences that contradicted the intent of missionary work. The most serious problem was that some western missionaries treated the missionary area assigned to them as their own property. They jealously refused other people's involvement or helping hand. On the other hand, they paid scant attention to the formation of local people for the sake of building up the local Church. Although Pope Benedict did not directly mention the French Protectorate in China, those in China who understood the evangelising problems mentioned in the pastoral letter knew they were closely related to the Protectorate. (Young, *op. cit.*, p. 214)

The Papacy of Benedict XV was from 1914 to 1922. Soon after his inauguration, the First World War broke out. He and the Church lived through difficult times during the war. Because the *Risorgimento* (Italy's unification movement) had been completed, he stayed at the Vatican palace in the city of Rome during his papacy. It was only after 1929 when the Holy See signed the Lateran Pact with the Italian Government that the Vatican was recognised as a sovereign nation. Since then the Holy See regained a certain status to participate in world affairs.

In 1844, 75 years before the promulgation of *Maximum Illud*, France and China signed the Treaty of Whampoa (黃埔條約) which gave France the right to protect missionaries and lay Catholics in China. It later became the French Protectorate. France benefited from this arrangement. In order to avoid the Chinese penal system, some Chinese joined the Catholic Church to seek French protection. It caused a lot of civil conflicts and generated different religious cases. There are complex reasons behind the Tianjin Church Incident (天津教案) of 1870 and the Boxer Rebellion (義和團事件) in 1900, but the legacy of the Protectorate should be counted as one of them.

Due to the weakness of the Manchu dynasty in the late 19th century, different countries set up concessions in China. In 1861 France set up the French Concession as one of nine foreign concessions in Tianjin. After the Xinhai Revolution (辛亥革命) in

1911, provinces in China called for independence. But they were not strong enough to resist the foreign powers. In 1916 France sought again to expand their concession which resulted in the Laoxikai incident (老西開事件) involving the Catholic Church, and generated fiery protests.

The Laoxikai Incident

In 1912 the Holy See declared that part of Beijing Diocese would be divided into a new Tianjin Vicariate and appointed a French Vincentian priest Paul-Marie Dumond (1864-1944) as the new Apostolic Vicar, while Fr. Frederic Vincent Lebbe (1877-1940) was the dean. At first the administrative centre of the vicariate was at the Church of Wanghailou (望海樓教堂), east of Shiziqiao (獅子橋). After that, Dumond built a Cathedral, some schools, seminaries as well as a hospital in the adjacent Laoxikai (老西開) which was not part of the French Concession. Many religious congregations and mission societies working in northern China also set up their procuration, and engaged in land and property investments in Tianjin.

While the foreign powers were expanding their influence and concessions, Fr. Lebbe, together with some Chinese Catholics, articulated the slogan: “China belongs to the Chinese people and the Chinese people belong to Christ” (中國歸中國人，中國人歸基督). They also pushed the Holy See to appoint Chinese bishops to promote local churches run by a Chinese hierarchy.

In 1916 the French government merged the St. Joseph Cathedral and surrounding areas into the French Concession. They hoisted the French flag, so Chinese officials could not enter. It was a *de facto* extension of the Concession. Lebbe disagreed with such illegal occupation of Chinese land. In the Catholic newspaper, *Yishibao*, which Lebbe had established in 1915, he strongly criticised such expansion and eventually clashed with Dumond.

Maximum Illud

Maximum Illud was promulgated two years after the Laoxikai Incident. It talked about general principles of missionary work. But the timing and the issues raised showed that the pastoral letter and the Laoxikai Incident were deeply related. The main drafter of the pastoral letter, Cardinal Willem van Rossum (1854-1932), Prefect of Propaganda Fide, had frequently exchanged ideas with Lebbe and his supporter Father Antoine Cotta (1872-1957) through frequent correspondence regarding problems of missionary work in China. (Chen, *op. cit.*, p. 49)

In July 1918, one year before the publication of *Maximum Illud*, *L'Osservatore Romano* (the daily newspaper of Vatican City State) published the statement that the Holy See would establish diplomatic relations with China and that both sides had appointed diplomatic representatives. But the implementation was postponed indefinitely owing to serious objections by the French government. The French government saw the Sino-Vatican relations as a threat to the French Protectorate in China. The Protectorate was supposed to take care of secular matters, e.g., China's compliance with Article 13 of the 1858 Tientsin Treaty, intervention on behalf of Catholics' material needs, and issuing passports to missionaries from various countries. (*ibid.*, p. 58)

Maximum Illud's instructions to superiors of missions included the admonition to each: be the soul of the mission, oversee with paternal love and encourage the missionaries working in his area. "If, out of an immense populace, he has converted a few thousand people, he has no reason to lapse into complacency.... The preaching of the Gospel can be brought more immediately and more effectively to everyone in an area if more mission stations and posts are established as soon as it is practicable to do so. Then when the time comes to divide the mission, these will be ready to serve as centres for new vicariates and prefectures." The Superior should not take the section of the Lord's vineyard that has been allotted to him for cultivation, and proceed to treat it as a piece of private property, a domain not to be touched by the hands of an outsider. (# 9-12)

But the most important message to superiors of missions concerns the formation of the local clergy, so that one day they can

manage the local Church, and enter upon the spiritual leadership of their people. For the local clergy is not to be trained merely to perform the humbler duties of the ministry, acting as the assistants of foreign missionaries. (# 14-15)

Maximum Illud also pointed out a disappointing fact that there are countries that have been deeply penetrated by the light of the Faith, and have besides, reached such a level of civilization that they produce eminent men in all the fields of secular life—and yet, though they have lived under the strengthening influence of the Church and the Gospel for hundreds of years, they still cannot produce Bishops for their spiritual government or priests for their spiritual guidance. (# 17)

This was one of the key problems in China. French missionaries gave a multitude of reasons to oppose the consecration of any Chinese local bishops. It was also because the French government wanted to continue their role as middleman between the Catholic Church and China and influence the development of China. So it tried to prevent any direct contact between the Church and China.

Maximum Illud also gave some general advice to missionaries. They should not get involved in business activities but focus on saving people's souls. They should master local languages. They should practice virtue by praying and spiritual formation. But the most important warning is against "busying themselves with the interests of their terrestrial homeland instead of with those of their homeland in heaven. It would be a tragedy indeed if an apostolic man were to spend himself in attempts to increase and exalt the prestige of the native land he once left behind him. Such behaviour would infect his apostolate like a plague. It would destroy in him, the representative of the Gospel, the sinews of his love for souls and it would destroy his reputation with the populace." (# 19)

Maximum Illud related that the Holy See had been deeply saddened by some recent accounts of missionary life, "accounts that displayed more zeal for the profit of some particular nation than for the growth of the kingdom of God." (# 20) Obviously, this bears great resemblance to the Laoxikai Incident.

Six months before the publication of the Apostolic Letter, the May Fourth movement erupted in Beijing following the

humiliating treatment of China, one of the Allies, at the Versailles Treaty. Nationalism swept the country. The Holy See also understood that with China so bullied, Chinese Catholics could not learn from Western missionaries how to care for the destiny of their own nation.³ In China, however, the Western missionaries did not agree with *Maximum Illud*. Bishop Jean Budes de Guébriant, MEP (1860-1935), Apostolic Vicar of Canton, was assigned as Apostolic Visitor to China in July 1919. In his letter to Propaganda Fide, he reported that the Apostolic Letter arrived in February 1920. He quoted critical remarks by representatives of the French Jesuits in Jiangnan Vicariate: that the Holy Father had been badly informed, and had severely condemned the heads of missions and the missionaries. The mission until then had done all it could, and it was futile to ask more from them. De Guébriant also reported that the French Jesuits openly neglected this letter and did not disseminate the full version. It seemed *Maximum Illud* did not achieve the expected result. (Young, op. cit., p.215)

A sequel to *Maximum Illud*

In 1920 Lebbe was assigned back to Europe to take care of Chinese students in Belgium. He took this opportunity to petition to the Holy See and was granted an audience with the Pope. Shortly after his inauguration in 1922, the succeeding Pope Pius XI (1857-1939) assigned Celso Costantini (1876-1958) as the first Apostolic Delegate to China. Pope Pius asked him to take charge of localisation efforts, overcome the interference of the French government, and select local clergy to serve as Chinese bishops. Pope Pius promulgated his encyclical *Rerum Ecclesiae* (RE)⁴ in 1926 at the end of the Vatican Mission Exposition. In it he cited the key points of *Maximum Illud* and reminded missionaries not to

³ See Chen Fang-Chung's article in this issue of *Tripod*, pp. 74-81.

⁴ http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_28021926_rerum-ecclesiae.html. According to *A Compilation of Theological Terms* [Shenxue cíyú huìbian] (Taipei: Kuangchi Cultural Group, 2005), the title of the encyclical in Chinese is *Evangelising in China*.

replicate a “little Europe” in other parts of the World. He quoted directly from *Maximum Illud*:

“The foreign missionary, because of his imperfect knowledge of the language, often finds himself embarrassed when he attempts to express his thoughts with the result that the force and efficacy of his preaching are thereby greatly weakened.” (RE 22)

“You should not allow the native clergy to be looked upon as if they were a lower grade of priests, to be employed only in the most humble offices of the ministry.... On the contrary, you should prefer the native priests to all others, for it is they who will one day govern the churches and Catholic communities founded by your sweat and labor. Therefore, there should exist no discrimination of any kind between priests, ... Let all priests, missionaries and natives be united with one another in the bonds of mutual respect and love.” (RE 26)

“We, without hesitation and whenever it shall appear to be either necessary, more opportune, or useful for the larger growth of the Catholic Church, shall transfer the mission territory of one Institute to another Institute; We shall also divide and subdivide a mission territory and shall confide to the care of native priests or other religious Congregations new Vicariates and Apostolic Prefectures.” (RE 33)

To accomplish the last point, Cardinal Van Rossum, Prefect of Propaganda Fide, ignored the objections of the French government, and arranged for the consecration of six local Chinese clergy as bishops by Pope Pius XI on October 28, 1926 at St. Peter’s Basilica. That can be said to fulfil the main aim of *Maximum Illud*.

The Decree on the Mission Activity of the Church (*Ad Gentes*) of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) quoted *Maximum Illud* ten times and basically accepted the main points of the Letter. Hence the Letter’s seminal importance. On Mission Sunday in 2017 Pope Francis wrote an open letter to the Prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples in which he mentioned the

upcoming Centenary of *Maximum Illud*.⁵ He stressed that the Church advocates missionary work, that she cannot not face politics. But the Church should not interfere in politics. The Church should purify herself of colonial tints and stay away from the mindset of nationalism and expansionism, and avoid any kind of introversion and complacency, pessimism or useless nostalgia.

Conclusion

From the 16th Century to 1858 the Catholic Church in China was under the Portuguese "Patronage" (*Padroado*) agreed upon by the Holy See and Portugal. Then after the Opium Wars, the Church in China lived under the French Protectorate which the French government obtained from the Qing government. Both the patronage and the protectorate brought a certain convenience to missionary activities. But the murky distinctions between political and religious activities also created many negative consequences.

In the midst of the difficult political situation and a mixture of Church and secular interests in the early 20th Century, the significance of *Maximum Illud* lies in articulating a religious goal. It provided the Church a correct way to move forward.

After 1949, the People's Republic of China again separated the Church in China from the Universal Church. Recently the Vatican and China signed a provisional agreement on the appointment of bishops. As the content has not been disclosed, no precise commentary could be made. But it seems the Church in China is once again on uncertain terms with politics.

The *Maximum Illud* of Pope Benedict XV, the *Rerum Ecclesiae* of Pope Pius XI, the Second Vatican Council's *Decree on the Church's Mission Activity*, as well as Pope Francis' *Letter for The Centenary Of "Maximum Illud"* belong to the same lineage. They do not despair of the missionary work of the Church. Therefore, as different people of the Church in China now bear the hardships of the suffering Church nowadays, they will certainly bear beautiful fruit in the future.

⁵ *Letter Of His Holiness Pope Francis For The Centenary Of The Promulgation Of The Apostolic Letter "Maximum Illud" on The Activity Of Missionaries In The World.*