

Maximum Illud and the May Fourth Movement

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1. Key concepts of *Maximum Illud*

Pope Benedict XV promulgated *Maximum Illud* on November 30, 1919. There have been different Chinese translations. Now the most popular is the translation made by Ma Xiang Bo in 1920.

Maximum Illud pointed out that missionary work was the most important task of the Church because there were still millions of people who had not yet heard the Gospel. The letter was first addressed to bishops, apostolic vicars, prefects apostolic, i.e., those in charge of missionary works; then the audience included all priests, especially those missionaries working in fields afar.

In *Maximum Illud* bishops are asked to take Jesus Christ as their model for being a good pastor. They should have no reason to lapse into complacency with just a few thousand converts, but they should keep paying attention to infrastructure, e.g., to the development of new vicariates and prefectures.

After the establishment of a new mission, if the managing religious congregation does not have enough manpower, it should seek assistance from missionaries of other congregations, or of other countries, or congregations of religious women. This happens “when a man takes the section of the Lord’s vineyard that has been allotted to him for cultivation, and proceeds to treat it as a piece of private property, a domain not to be touched by the hands of outsiders. Dwell for a moment upon the severity of God’s judgement on a man like this.” (# 12) To enhance cooperation among bishops, the simplest way is to call regular synods.

The most important issue is the formation of the local priesthood. In this regard, “their education should be abundant and complete, excellent in all its phases, the same kind of education for the priesthood that a well-educated person in secular society would

receive. (# 15) The ultimate aim of missionary work, however, is to establish the local church, which should be led by local bishops, with key works entrusted to local priests. “For the local clergy is not to be trained merely to perform the humbler duties of the ministry, acting as the assistants to foreign priests.” (# 15)

It is an ideal in theory, “yet it is a deplorable fact that, even after the Popes have insisted upon this principle, there still remain sections of the world that have heard the Faith preached to them for several centuries, and still have a local clergy that is of inferior quality, ...and though they have lived under the strengthening influence of the Church and the Gospel for hundreds of years, they still cannot produce their own Bishops for their spiritual governance or their own priests for their spiritual guidance.” (# 17)

From this we can learn how poor the formation was in the past. So *Maximum Illud* also urged the bishops to follow the instructions of Propaganda Fide to establish, or to strengthen the established formation institutes.

Maximum Illud candidly disclosed that some missionaries “forgot the dignity of their office so completely that they busied themselves with the interests of their terrestrial homeland instead of those of their homeland in heaven.” (# 19) Moreover, “such a situation could easily give rise to the conviction that the Christian religion is the national religion of some foreign people and that anyone converted to it is abandoning his loyalty to his own people and submitting to the pretensions and domination of a foreign power.” (# 19) This condemnation in particular applied to China.

Maximum Illud also reminded missionaries not to seek any rewards beyond evangelisation. It encouraged missionaries to study the local culture and to master local languages. Proficiency gives confidence to representatives of the Faith when they associate with leaders and scholars of the district. Missionaries were asked to explain Church Doctrine themselves, instead of delegating the task to catechists. In a word, *Maximum Illud* clearly told the missionaries that the Church must cut off all relations with imperialism. For the sake of evangelisation, missionaries have to better understand the local culture, and at the same time avoid cultural imperialism.

2. Tianjin Movement

The promulgation of *Maximum Illud* was directly related to the Laoxikai Incident in Tianjin between 1915 and 1917. Laoxikai (老西開) was a piece of marsh land on the southern side of the French Concession in Tianjin. After the Boxer Rebellion of 1900, the French government sought to extend their concession. In 1912 after the Vicariate Apostolic of Tianjin was set up, the plan was to build the Cathedral at Laoxikai, and the French Consul General Henri Séraphin Bourgeois set out to accomplish that. Fr. Vincent Lebbe and Fr. Antoine Cotta jointly organised the Society for Protecting National Sovereignty and National Territory (維持國權國土會), and in October 1915 started to protest against the extension of the French Concession. The French ambassador Alexandre Maurice Robert de Conty disagreed with Lebbe, and asked Bishop Paul-Marie Dumond and Fr. François-Xavier Desrumaux, head of the Vincentians in North China, to remove Fr. Lebbe. Eventually Lebbe was assigned to the Zhengding Vicariate. Cotta, who supported Lebbe, was also suspended. Both continued to write letters to the Holy See until 1919. Through a French priest, Msgr. Gaston Vanneufville, their letters eventually reached Pope Benedict XV.

The Holy See almost established diplomatic relations with China in 1918, but France blocked the effort. The Holy See thus realised the necessity of cutting the ties between missionary work and imperialism. All these matters were reflected in *Maximum Illud*.

What became known as the Tianjin Movement referred to a series of new evangelisation methods adopted by Fr. Lebbe when he was appointed to Tianjin in 1906. He set up “Proclamation institutes” to replace catechetical schools that were tainted by the offer of material incentives to catechumens. He also befriended distinguished members of the community and businessmen (many of whom were Christians) and took part in joint relief and charitable activities. Lebbe promoted “Catholic Action,” a lay evangelising organisation, which gained the support of some Chinese clergy. He created a modern newspaper which grew into a premier daily *Yishibao* (益世報) in North China, featuring nationalist and democratic ideas, and which became a forum of dialogue with contemporary society.

The Tianjin Movement was an attempt to engage directly with the non-Catholic world, so that the Catholic Church—far from being isolated or antagonistic—would become one of the choices available in a pluralistic society. It encouraged modern currents, democratic and lay participation. It did not shy away from ecumenical and inter-religious cooperation. By affirming patriotism, it shaped a modern religious identity—to be Chinese *and* Catholic.

The Movement ran counter to traditional ways of evangelising, and was seen as a rebellion against the hierarchy.

3. The May Fourth Movement

On May 4, 1919, university students marched in Beijing to protest against the Treaty of Versailles, which had turned over the German Concession in Shandong to Japan, even though China was on the winning side in World War I. This is a narrow view of the May Fourth Movement. The emergence of Chinese nationalism and the idea of anti-imperialism were the key factors in the May Fourth Movement. But the May Fourth Movement could be traced back to 1915, when Japan forced China to sign the so-called “Twenty-one Demands.” At that time Lebbe organised patriotic speeches in Tianjin. The Society for Protecting National Sovereignty and National Territory was established in this context.

Another important facet of the May Fourth Movement was the “New Culture Movement.” “Those encouraging people to rally, protest, strike and boycott Japanese commodities were quite often also reformers who promoted new literature, new thinking and social reforms.” (Chow Tse-Tsung, 1984, p. 5)¹

After May Fourth in 1919, more and more debates emerged regarding modern versus traditional, or Western versus Chinese ideas. The slogan of “Down with the Confucius Family” represented their criticism of traditional Confucian philosophy.

¹ Chow Tse-Tsung [周策縱], *Wusi yundong shi* [《五四運動史》] (Taipei: Longtian chubanshe, 1984) [臺北: 龍田出版社, 1984年] The book is also available in English *The May Fourth Movement, Intellectual Revolution in Modern China*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960, first edition).

They opted for Democracy and Science as their core thinking, and treated traditional Chinese thinking as autocracy and superstition.

The leaders of the May Fourth Movement could not, however, agree on how to build up a new China. According to Chow Tse-Tsung (周策縱), the May Fourth Movement leadership was divided into four factions: liberals, left-wingers, Kuomintang members and members of the Progressive Party (進步黨). (Chow, pp. 353-354)

Usually the liberals opted for freedom of thought and freedom of speech. Their most well-known representative would be Hu Shih (胡適). Regarding left-wingers, including Socialists, Anarchists, Unionists, and later on Marxists and Communists, the most famous were Chen Duxiu (陳獨秀) and Li Dazhao (李大釗). Hu Shih always maintained a skeptical attitude towards religions, while Chen Duxiu and Li Dazhao, as founders of the Chinese Communist Party, were absolutely anti-religious. Even though some people had graduated from European and American universities, and had converted to Christianity, their mild attitude hindered them from becoming leading voices in the May Fourth Movement.

The May Fourth Movement gradually developed into an anti-Christian movement. Zhu Zhixin (朱執信) wrote “What is Jesus?” (「耶穌是什麼東西」) in December, 1919, and it immediately won wide popularity. Faced with such an anti-Christian movement, the World Student Christian Federation decided to host their 11th Congress at Tsinghua University (清華大學) in Beijing in April 1922. This news prompted left-wing students in Shanghai to organise the Student League of Anti-Christian Movements (「非基督教學生同盟」) as a counter-force. They criticised Christianity as a means of suppressing the Proletariat. Then students of Peking University organised an Anti-Religion League (「非宗教大同盟」). Participants were not only students, but also teachers and political leaders. Their protest against Christianity as a supporter of capitalism developed into a general atheistic denial of all religions. (Yang Tianhong, pp.105-111)² Some Christian intellectuals had

² Yang Tianhong [楊天宏], *Jidujiao yu mínguo zhishi fenzi--1922 nian ~1927 nian zhongguo fei jidujiao yundong yanjiu* [《基督教與民國知識分子--1922年~1927年中國非基督教運動研究》]. (Beijing [北京]: People's Publishing House [人民出版社], 2005年)

argued on behalf of their beliefs, and some liberals championed religious freedom, but the mainstream was anti-religious.

4. The Consequences of *Maximum Illud*

In February 1920, when Father Vincent Lebbe first read *Maximum Illud*, he exclaimed, “I never expected such a complete resolution. Now we can say with relief that all our sacred accusations have gained total victory.” (Lebbe, p. 264)³

The cases that led to the publication of *Maximum Illud* were not mentioned in the letter. Pope Benedict XV focused on principles that were non-controversial, but that had not been put into practice: missionaries should proclaim the Kingdom of God, and build up the local Church. The Letter did not address the differences between old and new missiology as manifested in the Tianjin movement. And *Maximum Illud* made no response to the call for democracy of the May Fourth Movement.

Before departing to take up the position of Apostolic Delegate to China, Archbishop Celso Costantini visited the Prefect of Propaganda Fide, Cardinal Willem Marinus van Rossum. Van Rossum urged Costantini to implement *Maximum Illud* and to call for a national synod as soon as possible. These were to be Costantini’s first tasks. Costantini also visited Secretary of State, Cardinal Pietro Gasparri, who urged Costantini to look for suitable candidates to become bishops in China. This was to be Costantini’s second task in China. (Costantini, 1980A, pp.3-4)⁴ Eventually in 1924, the synod was called into session in Shanghai. It not only reflected the cooperation of the bishops to whom *Maximum Illud* was addressed, but also manifested the Apostolic Delegate’s direct leadership over the Church in China. There was no place for France

³ Frédéric-Vincent Lebbe (雷鳴遠), Letter of 5 February, 1920, *Leiming yuan shenfu shuxin ji* [《雷鳴遠神父書信集》]. (Taichung [臺中]: The Little Brothers of St. John the Baptist [天主教耀漢小兄弟會], 1990).

⁴ Costantini, Celso Benigno Luigi [剛恆毅], *Zai zhongguo gengyun—gang heng yi shuji huiyilu*, vols I and II [《在中國耕耘—剛恆毅樞機回憶錄》上、下] (Taipei [臺北]: *Congregatio Discipulorum Domini* [天主教主徒會], 1980).

to act as a middle man. In 1926, in Rome, Pope Pius XI consecrated six Chinese bishops. This was a fresh start for the Church in China.

The third task of Costantini was to help establish a Catholic university in Beijing. *Maximum Illud* did not mention this. But in 1925 the plan for a university unfolded. In 1927, the university was in operation and renamed Fu Jen University. The new Catholic university stressed the merging of Christianity and Chinese culture. In 1927, during the opening ceremony for Fu Jen University, Costantini praised the patriotism of the students, but disapproved of protest activities on the campus. He also stressed that “people should avoid those anti-social ideologies, which were transmitted into China from foreign countries.” He also objected to “materialistic science.” (ibid, pp.436-437) These ideas ran counter to the May Fourth Movement.

Costantini set up the local congregation, *Congregatio Discipulorum Domini* (主徒會) in 1927. This could be counted as his fourth task. *Maximum Illud* did not mention local congregations, but a follow-up encyclical *Rerum Ecclesiae* by Pope Pius XI (1926) did encourage the establishment of local religious congregations for men and women. This encyclical can be seen as a follow up to *Maximum Illud*. It reflected Pope Pius XI’s confirmation of the ideas of his predecessor. At the same time Lebbe encouraged the foundation of the Little Brothers of St. John the Baptist (耀漢小兄弟會) and the Little Sisters of St. Therese of the Holy Child (德來小妹妹會) in Anguo, Hebei Province (河北安國). All these congregations became models for other Chinese congregations.

The fifth task of Costantini would be the revitalisation of Catholic Action (公教進行會). Costantini mentioned it during the Shanghai Synod but it was not until 1928 that Catholic Action was resumed in China. Costantini argued that the Pope had endorsed it, and that it was also a long-standing tradition of the Church. (Costantini, 1980B, pp.23-24) This also reflected Costantini’s affirmation of Lebbe’s work in Tianjin.

5. Conclusion

If we say that the Laoxikai Incident instigated the promulgation of *Maximum Illud* and the Laoxikai Incident accorded with the

patriotism of the May Fourth movement, we can say the two shared a common idea. If we review the Laoxikai Incident in the context of Lebbe's Tianjin Movement, we may also find that his emphasis on youth activities, new faces of the Church, the introduction of western ideas and the facing of social needs, all these ideas share common ground with the New Culture Movement of May Fourth.

Maximum Illud avoided the arguments regarding different methodologies of missiology. Indeed, Costantini had settled parts of such arguments. While Lebbe was the vanguard of modern mission and localisation, Costantini was rather conservative in his implementation of *Maximum Illud*. But he was more inclusive. Through the work of Costantini, some foreign missionaries were eager to cooperate, while other missionaries still worked according to the old model of the Catholic Church as a foreign religion.

Facing the hundredth anniversary of the May Fourth Movement, we should ask whether it deserves such acclaim. In Taiwan some people still commemorate May Fourth because it was a mass movement and a student movement fighting against suppression. The system of suppression then was imperialism and the Beiyang Government (北洋政府). What about now in Hong Kong? In mainland China people perhaps are commemorating the May Fourth Movement because of the rise of Communism.

Personally I view May Fourth as an over-radical movement. Confucianism, religions and family—objects of its criticism—are still worth studying. It provoked nationalism which produced more destruction than justice. Its antagonism against tradition was a bad example for the Cultural Revolution. The passion of the May Fourth Movement may have blinded the eyes of the participants so much that they totally ignored the Church's attempts at reformation taking place at the same time.

We should go beyond the May Fourth Movement. For the Church, what is more important is localisation. But real and sound localisation should come from deep inner faith and participation in society. The Church speaks out to the world. The Church should co-exist with society, and let non-believers feel comfortable with the viewpoints of the Church, so that the Christian faith becomes a possible option for the people of this world. Actually this was what Lebbe and Costantini promoted in their time.