

## Part III: Matteo Ricci and the Early Jesuit Mission to China

*by Joseph & Michele C.*



The Jesuit mission in China in the 16th-18th centuries has been described as “the greatest missionary work which the world till then had seen” (Hollis, p. 67). It presents another interesting study in field governance and home/field relationships in mission, and another opportunity to learn from history in order to avoid the mistakes found there.

Matteo Ricci, born in 1552, was the chief pioneer of the Jesuit mission in China who became one of the most respected and effective missionaries of the Church there. He and his colleague Ruggierius first gained permanent residence in 1583 in the capital of Kwantung near Canton and quietly worked to build friendships and to deepen their knowledge of Chinese language and culture. Stephen Neill suggests that this was especially remarkable since in Neill’s view,

China proved for a long time far less accessible to the Gospel than Japan. The well-known Chinese xenophobia kept the doors entirely closed, except as the Chinese themselves expressed it, ‘to members of subject races who come to pay tribute. . .’ The Chinese of that period regarded theirs as the only true civilization in the world (Neill, p. 138,139).

Ricci eventually came to have a profound knowledge of the Chinese language, of Chinese culture, and of classic Chinese literature, as well as a deep understanding of the nuances of Confucian philosophy. Ricci’s scholarly abilities and his training in the sciences served him well. Since he and his colleagues had no protection under any treaty in order to remain to do their work, they had “to establish and strengthen their relations with that scholar class in whose hand were most of the offices of state” (Latourette, 1929, p. 93).

Though most of the Chinese were very wary of foreigners, “in some quarters a restlessness, a dissatisfaction with the accepted philosophies, and a spirit of inquiry existed and promised a certain amount of receptivity to foreign ideas” (Ibid.). With considerable determination and after much persistence in building relationships with scholars and officials, Ricci attained his goal of being allowed to settle in the capital, Peking in 1601.

Ricci’s mission was outstandingly effective in winning their Chinese friends to the Christian faith. Latourette describes Ricci’s success thus:

The position of Ricci and his companions had its desired effect and opened doors in other parts of the Empire. . . Numerous conversions were made and the state of public opinion was such that it was possible to administer baptism openly. . .

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At Peking there were conversions among some of the highest officials... By 1605 the Peking mission numbered more than 200 neophytes. More Jesuits entered the country, and steps were taken to train a native clergy in a college at Macao (Latourette, 1929, p.96).

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Much of what gave the Jesuits favor in the eyes of the governing officials was the fact that those officials saw the Jesuits as making a positive contribution to Chinese society. Ricci also believed that

there was no hope of making any impression on (the Chinese) if one delivered no more than a direct frontal attack on all their customs. On the contrary, since the Christian revelation was for all men and since men were of an infinite variety, it was necessary to respect the customs of others wherever this was possible, and to interfere only where it was absolutely necessary (Hollis, p. 63).

Ricci did deep research into the culture, language and classic literature, and based on that, he carefully evaluated which elements of the culture were compatible with Christian doctrine and which were not. As Hollis points out,

The argument of Ricci's most famous apologetic work, *The Teaching of the Lord of Heaven*, was that Confucians of his day, so far as they indulged in superstitions, did so because they had corrupted the original teaching of Confucius. Go back to the original teaching, he argued, and you will find that it leads much more logically to Christian conclusions than to the conclusions of its present followers (Hollis, p.65).

The effectiveness of Ricci's approach may be seen in Neill's conclusion that

Under Ricci's wise guidance... the mission continued to flourish. At the time of Ricci's death, on 10 May 1610, it was reckoned that the Church had about 2,000 members (Neill, p. 141).

In 1611, the year after Ricci died, a persecution of the Jesuits erupted. They

were expelled to Macao. In 1620 the Jesuits were summoned back.

It is important to note here that prior to 1622 the Roman Catholic Church had no mission-specific centralized administrative or supervisory structure to which Catholic missionaries were to

relate (Addison, p.106). Of course Ricci and his colleagues acknowledged the authority of the pope, but the Vatican had no mission-specific structure to implement practical missiological control over field missionaries. Ricci consulted with his colleagues in China and with such officials as the Visitor Valignano in Macao, and they made decisions on the field about the strategy and work of the mission.

Having invested themselves in the deep study of the language and the culture, and having committed themselves to the service of the Chinese, they were able to win the respect of the Chinese people and to gain access to people in the interior of the country. Such access had previously been denied. They were also able to win the favor of high-ranking officials, some of whom eventually came to faith in Christ. As a field-led mission they did very well in building relationships with influential Chinese, in building up an indigenous Christian community, and in producing Chinese Christian literature (Neill, p.140).

However, a major structural change took place in 1622 when Rome created a new institution for the advancement and supervision of Catholic missions. It was known as the *Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide* (abbreviated as "the Propaganda") (Latourette, 1975, p.926). More than once in missions history (cf. the examples of Andrew Fuller and William Berger and their successors later in this paper), a home-base coordinating structure was created and initially operated by a godly person with strong sympathy for the concerns of the field. However, once the structure

had been created, it was inevitable that successors would turn out to be people with less understanding of the field and less humility about their own personal level of authority. This led to inevitable conflict with field missionaries. In the best cases this greatly hindered the effectiveness of the missionaries; in the worst cases it destroyed the fledgling church on the field.

This pattern can be seen in the Vatican's creation of the Propaganda in the 17th century and its relationship to the Jesuit mission in China. The first secretary of the Propaganda, Francesco Ingoli was a man deeply sympathetic with the concerns of the field and with the various cultures and peoples among whom missionaries were serving. The problems which arose later were not because of any flaw in Ingoli personally, but rather because of the inherent flaw in a structure which sought to govern strategy in China and to make decisions about Chinese language and culture from an office in Rome.

Stephen Neill's description of Ingoli and of his missiological vision is worth quoting at some length to illustrate this:

[Ingoli was] one of the most remarkable missionary statesmen of whom we have record. Determined that action should be taken only on the basis of accurate knowledge, he first set himself to acquire the fullest possible information about the state of the missions in every part of the world. Then he decided on certain lines of action. Missionary work must be freed from the stranglehold that Spain and Portugal had been able to maintain upon it... An indigenous clergy must be developed as rapidly as possible in every part of the world. The Christian faith must be delivered from those colonial associations which condemned it to be everywhere and in permanence a foreign religion. The prophetic quality of the mind of Propaganda in its early days is to be seen most notably in the instructions which it sent out in 1659, ten years after the death of Ingoli, to its vicars apostolic: 'Do not regard it as your task, and do not bring any pressure to bear on the peoples, to change their manners, customs, and uses, unless they are evidently contrary to religion and sound morals. What could be more absurd than to transport France, Spain and Italy,

or some other European country to China? Do not introduce all that to them, but only the faith, which does not despise or destroy the manners and customs of any people, always supposing that they are not evil, but rather wishes to see them preserved unharmed. It is the nature of men to love and treasure above everything else their own country and that which belongs to it; in consequence there is no stronger cause for alienation and hate than an attack on local customs, especially when these go back to a venerable antiquity. This is more especially the case, when an attempt is made to introduce the customs of another people and those of Europe; do your utmost to adapt yourselves to them.' Even when customs are bad and have to be changed, so run the instructions (of the Propaganda), it is better to do this gradually, and by helping the people themselves to see what is perverse in them rather than by any direct attack or condemnation in words (Neill, p.152, 153).

This lengthy quotation is cited here to demonstrate that initially there was a great concern on the part of the Propaganda to be sensitive to the local culture. This stands in contrast to the attitude of those who became involved later, who did not show this kind of sensitivity.

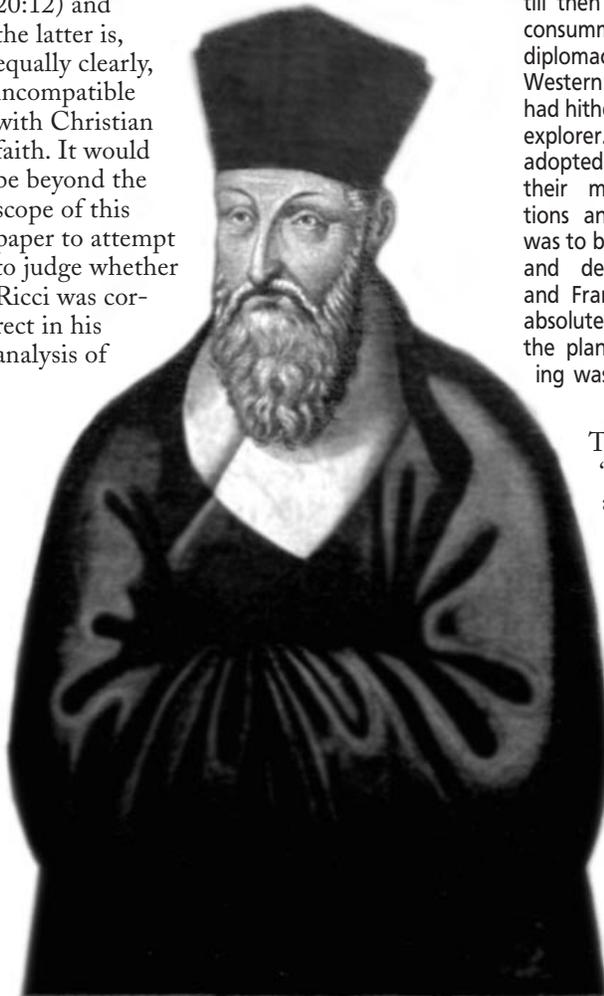
As noted earlier, the Jesuit mission in China was remarkably fruitful. By 1664, only eighty years after Ricci had first gained residency in China, the number of Catholics in China was recorded as well over 200,000. Because the growing numbers were more than the Jesuits could handle themselves, they called on other religious orders to come. "It was with their arrival that the mission's real troubles began" (Hollis, p. 65).

The focus of the problem was a prolonged dispute that lasted 100 years, known as the "Rites Controversy."

This had to do with the term to be used for the translation of the word 'God'... and with the questions concerning the permissibility of participation by Christians in the customary Chinese rites of honor of ancestors and Confucius... If the Church conscientiously felt that they must be forbidden to Christians, the faith would appear an enemy to traditional Chinese beliefs and practices

and destructive of such fundamental bases of society and the state as the family and the Confucian school. Most of the Jesuits favored toleration, but many members of other missionary organizations vigorously opposed it. The controversy lasted... until the final papal decision in 1742. Much of the ecclesiastical Roman Catholic world entered into the discussion. Jealousies between orders, rivalries among European nations, the Portuguese claim of the right to control the Church in the Far East, and the rising tide of feeling in Europe against the Jesuits (for other reasons) complicated the debate. The Pope finally decided against toleration (Latourette, 1947, p.318).

In this paper we are not attempting to analyze in depth the specific cultural issues at stake here or to argue for a specific position on them. Ricci attempted, for example, to distinguish between honoring one's ancestors and worshiping them, since the former is clearly a Christian duty (Exodus 20:12) and the latter is, equally clearly, incompatible with Christian faith. It would be beyond the scope of this paper to attempt to judge whether Ricci was correct in his analysis of



whether certain carefully circumscribed actions by Chinese Christians would be interpreted by the Chinese culture of his time as honor or as worship. Rather, our concern is the issue of authority in mission structures, and the question of whether such decisions about Chinese culture and about mission strategy in China should have been made in China or in Rome. We are also concerned to observe what impact the administrative structure and the decision-making process had upon the effectiveness of the work in China.

Hollis offers his interpretation of the events and quotes from J.E. Jenkins:

The Jesuits were not guiltless, but they were a great deal more sinned against than sinning... Their opponents were people from outside coming in to spoil it. One can hardly dispute Jenkins' verdict:

They had been founders and architects of the greatest missionary work which the world till then had seen. By the most consummate prudence and skilful diplomacy they had opened to the Western world an Empire which had hitherto been closed to every explorer. The method they had adopted had succeeded beyond their most sanguine expectations and now their life work was to be suddenly broken down and destroyed by Dominican and Franciscan rivals who were absolutely unable to estimate the plan upon which the building was laid out (Hollis, p. 67).

The Rites Controversy was "doubtless up to a point a sincere controversy, but it was exacerbated by national rivalries between the Jesuits, who were mainly Spanish, and the Dominicans, who were mainly Portuguese" (Hollis, p.72).

To estimate the relation of early Confucian to Christian thought there was required not only a deep knowledge of the Christian teaching but also a deep knowledge of Chinese teaching and

life. The Jesuits could at least claim to have acquired such knowledge by many years of intimate experience. Rome sent out to judge them two bishops, de Tournon (1704-1710) and Maigrot (1719-1721), who were not even acquainted with the characters of Chinese writing. 'One wonders' said the Emperor K'Ang Hsi on reading the facile accusation which they leveled of Chinese atheism, 'how the ignorant and contemptible Europeans dare to speak of the Great Doctrine of the Chinese, these men who know nothing about either its rules or its practices and cannot perhaps even understand the characters in which they are written.'... Whether the Jesuits were right, there seems at least little question about it that their antagonists were wrong. One of the new priests, speaking through an interpreter, told his congregation that Confucius and all his ancestors were in hell and that the Jesuits had taught them wrong doctrine. The result was, as was to be expected, persecution (Hollis, p. 67).

Hollis goes on to say,

Any plan to dictate from Rome the details of Catholic policy in China was in the conditions of that time an absurdity. Men at Rome knew and could know nothing of conditions in China... If any success was to be achieved, there was no alternative but to allow the men on the spot, who alone could know the conditions, to take the decisions for themselves (Hollis, p. 69).

Of the papal decision Latourette writes,

The most serious indictment which can be brought against the papal decision is that it established a tradition for making the Church unadaptable to Chinese conditions and beliefs. It tended and still tends to keep the Roman Catholic Church a foreign institution, one to which China must conform, but which refuses to conform to China (Latourette, 1929, p. 154).

In 1742 the pope ruled against Ricci's approach to Chinese culture and placed crippling restrictions on the Jesuit mission in China. Then, in 1773, for reasons which had little to do with the work in China, the pope took the radical step of completely dissolving (i.e. banning) the Jesuit order worldwide. It is important to emphasize that the reasons for the dissolution of the Jesuit

order were to be found in Europe, not in China. This fact demonstrates another weakness inherent in the governing structure of the mission to China. Back in Europe the Jesuit order became entangled in political and even commercial forces which had little to do with their missionary confreres' work in China. This eventually led to the dissolution of the Jesuit order worldwide and consequently destroyed most of the work that the missionaries in China had labored so sacrificially to establish there (Latourette, 1929, p. 166).

Latourette also comments on the influence of the opponents of the Jesuits in Europe, which stands in contrast to the eventual attitudes of most missionaries of other orders in China towards the Jesuits:

The Society had bitter enemies in Europe, even within the fold of the Catholic Church, and these welcomed such evidences of depravity as Navarette (a vigorous opponent to the Jesuits) seemed to disclose. In China nearly all Franciscans and Augustinians had been won to the Jesuit position and only the Dominicans continued as a body to stand against it. Even among these last there was division, and it is interesting—and perhaps significant of what a purely Chinese church would have done—that in 1681 and 1686 Gregory Lopez (a Chinese Christian who had taken a European name) came out... in defence of Ricci's position (Latourette, 1929, p. 138).

It is important to understand some of the rivalry which developed in China among the missionaries and how that exacerbated the problem with the Propaganda in Rome. Rowbotham describes the rivalry of some Dominican and Franciscan priests who he thinks

felt that fervor and faith were adequate substitutes for wise planning in the missionary field... They preached Christ crucified in a way that permitted no compromise with the religious practices of the country, which they branded offhand as idolatrous. They preached publicly in the streets, using their own language and relying on interpreters of doubtful ability. They were dogmatic, unyielding, and either oblivious to, or careless of, the fact that they were constantly wounding

the susceptibilities of the Chinese. These tactics... were... unsuitable to the Chinese situation. From the start such methods had given the Jesuits a great deal of trouble, and it is not to be wondered at that the persistence of the members of other orders caused many misgivings among the Jesuits (Rowbotham, p.133).

The problem of the rites controversy was also aggravated and greatly prolonged by the complexity of the hierarchical structure of the Roman Catholic Church. Rowbotham comments on this and on the consequences of the long, drawn-out dispute:

It is not expected that the central authority of the Church should have radically surrendered its responsibilities in matters of doctrinal jurisdiction, but it is clear that a greater degree of local autonomy would certainly have hastened the end of the quarrel... The most tragic element in the controversy is, of course, the fact that the two opposing factions ignored the greatest danger of all: that of disunity, of presenting... a front disrupted by dissension. This was a danger far greater than that of doctrinal differences (Rowbotham, p. 298).

To fully appreciate the way in which the rites controversy and the struggle for a decision in the context of a cumbersome, centralized authoritative structure distracted the missionaries from their primary task of evangelism and church-planting, we will look at the numerous trips made between China and Rome over the years in an attempt to settle the dispute. It is no wonder that historians tell of the confusion in China over just what the missionaries' superiors in Rome were asking of them (Rowbotham, p.136).

After the Dominicans and Franciscans were established in China they took the question about the rites to bishops in the Philippines. The Jesuits in the Philippines defended the Jesuits in China.

In 1635 the Archbishop of Manila denounced the Jesuit practices to the Pope, but in 1638 withdrew his accusation (Latourette, 1929, pp.135, 136).

Morales, a Dominican, led the opposition and (after being expelled from China during the persecution of 1637)

presented his case to the Propoganda in Europe in 1643 (Ibid, p.136). In 1645 the Propaganda issued a decree in which the Jesuit practices described by Morales were prohibited (Ibid., pp. 136,137). In 1651 the Jesuits sent Martini to Rome to present their case. In 1656 the Holy Office issued another decree “giving sanction to the practices as described in the Jesuits statement.” (Ibid., p. 137). In 1661 Morales (a Dominican) “submitted a new memorandum to the Holy Office (of the Inquisition)” stating that the Jesuits had misrepresented the facts (Ibid., p. 137). In 1669 a decree approved by the Pope explained that the decree of 1645 was not annulled by that of 1656 “but that both were to be observed ‘according to the questions, circumstances, and everything set forth in them’” (Ibid., p. 138). Huge amounts of time and energy were diverted in the writing of many volumes about this controversy in both Europe and China.

Latourette writes of the papal legate Tournon and his visit to China on the Propaganda’s behalf:

One’s sympathies cannot but go out both to Tournon and to the missionaries. Charged with the task of upholding the papal prerogatives and decrees in a distant land, ill, and with little experience in the East, the Legate found those contumacious whom he believed ought to be his supporters. On the other hand, missionaries who had given their best years to establishing the Church in China saw the edifice built by over a century of sacrifice threatened by the tactlessness and obduracy of a young man who was ignorant of China and of whose authority they believed there was ground for question. The Emperor received Tournon at first with courtesy, if not with cordiality, but he was more and more antagonized by him... K’ang Hsi (the Emperor) was even more antagonized by Maigrot [the legate who came from Rome some years later]... He also ordered the Legate to prepare for an early return to Europe (Latourette, 1929, p.143).

With the coming of the Legate the Church began to suffer. Concentration upon the dispute was not conducive to progress in evangelization (Latourette, 1929, p.156).

Once again this situation demonstrates

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how the structure in place created inevitable conflicts, because those making decisions were far removed from the context in which those decisions had to be enforced.

With the visit of Tournon (who was sent by the Propaganda in 1704) a series of misfortunes began... which were for over a hundred years greatly to retard the Church and then for a few decades to threaten it with extinction (Latourette, 1929, p. 156).

As we have noted above, the conclusion of this long, tortured process was that in 1742 the pope ruled against the Jesuits and placed crippling restrictions on the Jesuit mission in China. Then in 1773 the pope totally dissolved the Jesuit order worldwide. The effect of this on the Chinese Church was disastrous.

Stephen Neill describes the rapid collapse of the work in China which resulted:

The second half of the eighteenth century was a period of tragic collapse for the Roman Catholic missions... In China, as the Jesuits had feared, Roman interference and the imprudence of some of their brethren led to wave upon wave of persecution... Though persecution was intermittent and a number of missionaries were able to escape the net, numbers were always few, martyrdoms were many, and everywhere the tale was of diminishing congregations, of ruined churches, and of steadily deepening shadows... In this period, in which the missionary work of the Church had run into grave difficulties, a final blow was struck by the dissolution of the Jesuit Order... As a result of the dissolution at least 3,000 missionaries [worldwide] were withdrawn from their fields. A certain number gave up the name of Jesuit and remained at their posts; the great majority were given no choice—they were put on board ship like cattle and carried off to their country of origin. They were literally irreplaceable; the Pope had condemned Roman Catholic missions

to temporary eclipse... (Neill, pp. 173-175).

In reading the story of the collapse of the Church in China, the modern reader cannot help noting that after 200 years of work the foreign missionaries had still not trained and ordained enough Chinese clergy to carry on the work of the Church after the withdrawal of the missionaries. But this too was a direct consequence of the decision-making structure of the mission. The training and ordination of large numbers of Chinese clergy was greatly slowed down by Rome’s insistence on Latin liturgy and Latin-language literacy.

After the leadership of the Jesuits in China passed from Schall (Ricci’s successor) to Verbiest, Verbiest requested that they be allowed to institute a Chinese liturgy. Hollis notes that just as Rome had denied the Swedish Church permission to conduct the liturgy in Swedish, so also a Chinese liturgy was denied (Hollis, p.68). This meant that Chinese clergy had to learn to say the liturgy in Latin. In many cases they did not even understand the meaning of the words they were speaking. (Imagine what the impact would have been on the Church in Italy if Italian priests had been required to say the Mass in Chinese!) *Once again the mission’s administrative structure led to an important decision being made without the necessary understanding of the situation on the field or of the consequences of such a decision.*

In this context the consequences of the centralized decisions from Rome, including the 1742 decision against the Jesuit approach and the 1773 dissolution of the Jesuit order, were disastrous for the Chinese Church:

In 1784 two bishops and sixteen European priests were rounded up [by the Chinese government]; six of these died in chains. Something of Chinese Christianity survived; it is not surprising

that it was not very much, and that in the nineteenth century almost everything had to be done afresh from the start (Neill, p. 174).

As a direct consequence of a Rome-centered structure of mission governance, a Chinese Church which had seen dramatic growth from no members to over 200,000 members in just 80 years in the 17th century experienced an equally dramatic collapse at the end of the 18th century.

### *In Summary*

Ricci and his colleagues, operating a field-governed mission, gained access where access had been previously denied, established a growing community of believers, developed appropriate Chinese Christian literature and nurtured favorable relationships with the Chinese authorities and scholars. After Ricci died, the Propaganda was created and began with a sensitive and sympathetic secretary, Francesco Ingoli. Around that time the rites controversy arose and missionaries from other orders began settling to work in China. Representatives of some of those other orders complained to their superiors in Rome about the practices of the Jesuits in China. The Jesuits became entangled in rivalries and disputes and wasted much time and energy defending their practices and teachings. This was not conducive to the progress of their mission. Others succeeded Ingoli in the Propaganda, and inappropriate envoys then sent by Rome offended the Chinese authorities. Persecution of Christians in China immediately followed.

The creation of the Propaganda sprang from good motives and began with an attitude of sensitivity towards the local cultures and languages of peoples among whom Catholic missionaries worked. However, as difficult quandaries arose, the geographical and linguistic position of the Propaganda gave it a worldview that made it unable to gain the understanding necessary to make wise decisions in a timely manner. Even if a decision made in Rome could be considered the right one, the years and years of debate and committee

meetings and controversy, while messengers traveled back and forth between China and Rome, took a great toll on the work of the missionaries and on the unity of the Church in China. Already-existing rivalries were exacerbated by the controversy and by the confusion created by the manner in which the Propaganda dealt with the matter.

In our opinion, the authority for such decisions should have been delegated to the leader of the Jesuits in China in consultation with the bishop or Vicar Apostolic in the nearest regional center of Catholic operations such as Macao. One can only guess at how different the Chinese Church and missions in China might have looked in the following centuries, if important missiologically strategic decisions could have been left to those in positions of leadership on the field.

Many hold that the struggle and the papal decrees ruined the mission, and that but for them China would, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, have become Roman Catholic (Latourette, 1929, p. 152). **IJFM**

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