

Bobby Nichols

Professor Chen Jing

Chinese Culture & Society

21 June 2012

The Chinese Catholic Church

Religion and the People's Republic of China. On the surface this is a topic of much debate. The Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association, which is the officially state-run Catholic Church in China, does not recognize Vatican as the supreme ruler of Catholic authority nor does the Vatican recognize the legitimacy of the association organized body. Over the years this currently heated relationship has struggled to understand one another and has often directly butted heads. In its current state, both the Holy See and Chinese Catholics have been working to reconcile their differences and develop a more prosperous relationship. Their struggles are not, however, at the expense of the people; Catholicism is the fastest growing faith in China, with approximately 12 million members, who continue to receive the sacraments, do good works, and venerate the Gospel. The purpose of this essay is not to be seen as evangelization, nor should it attack either the Roman Catholic Church, the Holy See, and the Vatican or the People's Republic of China and the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association, nor any persons who identify as or desire to identify as "Catholic". The point of this article is to understand the current state of relations between the Roman Catholic Church and the People's Republic of China, and how their relationship effects the lives of the faithful in China.

In 1578, a Jesuit Priest named Matteo Ricci—known as 利玛窦 (*Lì Mǎdòu*) in Chinese—came to China as a missionary. Ricci entered China with an air of respect and mutually

understanding; he spent years studying Chinese language and culture before beginning his missionary work. His efforts to assimilate to Chinese culture resulted in the first Chinese dictionary to be translated into a European language, creating the first European-style map of the world in Chinese, translated Confucian teachings to Latin, and was the first Westerner to be invited to the Imperial Palace by Emperor Wanli of the Ming Dynasty in 1601. Ricci was granted total access to the Imperial Palace and a generous living stipend, because of the knowledge of geometry, astrology, and the sciences that he and his brother Jesuits shared with the Chinese scholars. Where other missionaries were quick to identify the differences between Christian and Chinese thoughts, Ricci used Confucian teachings and ancient Chinese practices as a method for teaching Christianity. He taught that Christianity was merely a deeper manifestation of Confucianism and allowed Chinese converts to continue studying Confucian ideals while also allowing them to practice their ancient rituals of honoring their ancestors. While this angered many conservative Catholics who saw these practices as forms of idolatry—a direct violation of Catholic teaching—Ricci was punished for his action, only later to be praised years later for translating Confucian writings to Latin and educating his fellow missionaries on his method for evangelization. Yang Tingyun, a Chinese convert inspired by Ricci, who spent thirty-five years of his life devoutly studying the teaching of Confucius wrote the following passage in the 1620s while reflecting on his life as a Christian:

A spiritual nature is God's gift to man, and it is the greatest gift of all... benevolence, righteousness, social etiquette, and wisdom (the four Confucianist virtues) are all indeed of this nature. These things that God has given us are what we've had all along. The

Bible calls it morality and Confucius calls it conscience.

(Standaert)

It was Yang Tingyun's writings of dialogue between Confucian and Christian teachings that helped to bring the religion to its maturity in China, and continues to be influential to this day.

In 1951 religious activity was banned during Chairman Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution and much was done to prevent it from spreading. Through the understanding of the destruction of the Four Olds—old customs, old culture, old habits, and old ideas—religion, including Christianity, was one of the targets for destruction. A common propaganda slogan was "beating down Jesus following." It was during this time that missionaries were no longer allowed to enter the country, many ordained and lay Catholics were imprisoned, and several churches were either demolished, heavily damaged, or repurposed into storage facilities, offices, or other purposes for the needs of the government. Efforts by the Communist Party of China takes Marxism-Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought, Deng Xiaoping Theory and the important thought of Three Represents as its guide to action.¹ This full acceptance of Marxist-Leninism creates the void between religion and China, as Marxist ideology states “unreservedly that religion and communism were in theory and practice irreconcilable”.² The Cultural Revolution ended in 1976 and with it many of its policies against religious institutions; that being said, the void between China and Catholicism continues today.

The People's Republic of China has made significant growth towards opening its walls to social freedoms that would have seemed virtually impossible during Mao's era—especially those

¹ Constitution of Communist Party of China, amended and adopted at the 17th CPC National Congress on October 21, 2007

² *The ABC of Communism* (1919) by Marxist Philosopher Nicholas I. Bukharin

freedoms in the genre of religions. That being said, the Chinese government formally recognizes only five religions and requires these groups and those belonging to these religions to register with the government and submit to the control of the state. According to the United States Congressional-Executive Commission on China Annual Report in 2011, Catholics—one of the five officially recognized religions, including Buddhism, Taoism, Falun Gong, and Protestants—have been harassed, and in some cases detained, for worshipping outside of state-controlled churches.³ The state-operated Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association on several occasions has blatantly disregarded Canon Law and the regulations of the Holy See and have ordained priests, as well as bishops without the approval of the Pope. While there are clear setbacks towards full religious freedom for the Chinese People, it does not falter their faith.

Pope Benedict XIV, in a letter to the Catholic Church in China in 2007, encouraged steps towards reconciliation for grievances on behalf of both parties and reassured the Chinese Government by recalling the words of Father Matteo Ricci S.J., “the Catholic Church seeks *no privilege* from China and its leaders, but solely the resumption of dialogue in order to build a relationship based upon mutual respect and deeper understanding.” He further goes on to explain:

The Church... is not identified with any political community nor is she tied to any political system. She is at once the sign and the safeguard of the transcendental dimension of the human person... The political community and the Church are autonomous and independent of each other in their own fields. They are both at the

³ The *Annual Report 2011*, reporting the current state of China, particularly reporting on Human Rights.

service of the personal and social vocation of the same individuals, though under different titles. Their service will be more efficient and beneficial to all if both institutions develop better cooperation according to the circumstances of place and time. (Benedict)

Pope Benedict's efforts to reestablish connections between the Holy See and the People's Republic of China have reassured many Chinese to prove the modernity of their faith through their works and deeds.

In Shanghai, China, home to the largest population of Chinese Catholics, numerous Church based organizations inspired by their faith have established a wide range of social services that demonstrate the good capacity of Chinese Catholics. Education, health care, homeless shelters, food centers, the list of resources grows daily in and around Shanghai. The ordained and the laity wish to be living examples of their faith in hopes to encourage a better understanding of the desires of religious freedom and the Catholic Church. While stumbling blocks do exist for religious individuals, their maturity and response are steps towards great things. It is the hope of these people that they can continue to be upstanding citizens of the People's Republic of China as well as faithful Catholics.

As China continues to grow more open minded towards outside influence and thought time can only tell how future dialogue will develop, but from most perspectives the horizon looks promising.

Works Cited

Benedict XIV, Pope. "Letter to Bishops, Priests, Consecrated Persons and Lay Faithful of the Catholic Church in China." *Vatican, The Holy See*. N.p., 27 May 2007. Web.

"International Religious Freedom Report 2010." *U.S. Department of State*. U.S. Department of State, 17 Nov. 2010. Web.

Jesuits' Journeys in Chinese Studies. Renmin University of China, Beijing. Macau Ricci Institute, 26 Mar. 2007. Web.

Paul II, Pope John. "Message for the Fourth Centenary of the Arrival in Beijing of Father Matteo Ricci, S.J." *Vatican The Holy See*. N.p., 24 Oct. 2001. Web.

Standaert, N. *Yang Tingyun, Confucian and Christian in Late Ming China: His Life and Thought*. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1988. Print.

United States of America. Congressional-Executive Commission on China. *Annual Report 2011*. Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2011. *Congressional-Executive Commission on China*. 10 Oct. 2011. Web.