

MATTEO RICCI AND GLOBAL CIVILIZATION

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Abstract

This essay will examine the contributions of the Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci. His evaluation of Confucian ethics and the related religious thought of the ancient Chinese tradition is not the result of a work of mere “intellectual meditation”, but the obvious outcome of an authentic Christian experience, which enabled him to receive all that was positive in the culture that he met. There is in Ricci the clear knowledge that the Christian faith gives a vision of the human experience and of history that does not go against human cultures, but assumes all of them in a real encounter between all the peoples. The Christian faith, in fact, generates a total vision of the truth, in which science, culture and politics are not separated, but unified in a Weltanschauung (vision of the world). In this way the encounter and the dialogue that Ricci established with the Chinese culture turned out effective, in as much as compromises were not attempted, nor convictions were abandoned. Neither did he pursue the road of syncretism, but it is in true dialogue that an encounter was attempted, a dialogue that is also a new interpretation and a new assumption of the essential elements present in the ancient Chinese religious tradition and in the original Confucian thought. An understanding of Ricci’s approach can serve as an example of authentic intercultural dialogue.

Introduction

The dialogue and the encounter with Chinese culture that the Jesuit Father Matteo Ricci established more than four hundred years ago, today constitute an example of extraordinary significance for those looking forward

to a pacific and constructive relationship between the civilizations of the European West and that of the East. The extremely precious contribution that this missionary gave to the knowledge of the Chinese civilization and culture in the Western world, as documented in his autobiographic writings, represents an amazing anticipation of that intercultural dialogue of which today a lot is spoken about.

However the work accomplished by Ricci in China cannot be understood in its full meaning if we forget that what he was trying to do was something primarily apostolic in nature, namely evangelization. The deep knowledge that Ricci gained from the study of the Chinese classics and from the friendly relationship he enjoyed during the time of his permanence in China with the class of the literati, did not have any other aim outside that of introducing Christianity in this immense continent. That is why reviewing Ricci's contribution, without thinking of the reason that basically inspired him, would be too partial and incapable of explaining the fervor that animated his entire life.

Moreover, the analysis of the work of evangelization completed in China by Father Ricci gives new light also to the history of Catholic Missions in the modern age. His "method of adaptation", his being "Chinese with the Chinese",¹ his attempts towards incarnation inside Chinese culture in order to find the points from which proclaiming the Gospel, all of this came centuries before the Vatican Council II declared that "*In order that they may be able to bear more fruitful witness to Christ, let them be joined to those men by esteem and love; let them acknowledge themselves to be members of the group of men among whom they live; let them share in cultural and social life by the various undertakings and enterprises of human living; let them be familiar with their national and religious traditions; let them gladly and reverently lay bare the seeds of the Word which lie hidden among their fellows.*" (Ad Gentes, n.11).

Ricci's evaluation of Confucian ethics and the related religious thought in the ancient Chinese tradition is not the result of a work of mere "intellectual meditation", but the obvious outcome of an authentic Christian experience, which enabled him to receive all that was positive in the culture that he met. There is in Ricci the clear knowledge that the Christian faith gives a vision of the human experience and of history that does not go

against human cultures, but assumes all of them in a real encounter between all the peoples. The Christian faith, in fact, generates a total vision of the truth, in which science, culture and politics are not separated, but unified in a *Weltanschauung* (vision of the world). In this way the encounter and the dialogue that Ricci established with the Chinese culture turned out effective, in as much as compromises were not attempted, nor convictions were abandoned. Neither did he pursue the road of syncretism, but it is in true dialogue that an encounter was attempted, a dialogue that is also a new interpretation and a new assumption of the essential elements present in the ancient Chinese religious tradition and in the original Confucian thought.²

Ricci's Missionary Method

1. The Abandonment of the Buddhist Dress

At their arrival in China the fathers Ruggeri and Ricci dressed like Buddhist monks and justified their coming from far away citing “the reputation of the good government of China” and the desire “to build one small house and one small church”.³ After the return of Ruggeri to Europe, in 1595, taking the opportunity from the opening of a residence in Nanjang, capital of the Jiangzi, Ricci decided to renounce publicly the Buddhist dress and joined the revered class of the Confucian literati.⁴

If at first Ricci thought “to conform to the dress and to the condition of the Buddhist monks, because he was convinced that in doing so he would be seen for what he truly was, that is a ‘religion man’”, later on “realized that the religious conception and the atmosphere in which he lived was remarkably different from that of the West: the monks, in fact, lived at the margin of society; their places of worship were usually built outside the cities. Ricci, with his companions, decided then to carry their religious witness at the very heart of society, and in order to do this, adopted the style of life of the men of letters, and engaged like them in the social life

of the community. By doing this he meant to show that his religious faith did not imply an escape from, but an engagement in the world, contributing to the improvement of the social life until it would open itself to the Redemption of Christ and the life of Grace in the Church”.⁵

Ricci writes about realizing the effectiveness of the newly adopted method, when introducing himself as a man of letters so that he could make more friends with the people working inside the bureaucracy and the court which at the beginning had not considered him because of the little esteem they had towards those who dressed like Buddhist monks.⁶ After this period, Ricci renews also his approach: instead of saying mass and preaching in public, he dedicates his time “to private conversations, trying to earn the confidence and the consideration of the listeners, even at the cost of taking care more of scientific curiosities and of literary arguments than direct proclamation of the Gospel”.⁷

In a letter of 14 August 1599 to father Costa, after having described China as a different culture, because the people were given more to the letters than to war and were mistrustful towards the aliens, Ricci concludes saying that “this is why the wisest thing we can do is to take to this enterprise little by little and the best result we can expect seems to be earning credit with this people, take away every suspicion and enter in conversation with them”.⁸ This attitude of prudent and diplomatic gradualism adopted by Ricci vis-à-vis the men of letters resulted slowly in a change from the inside and without any external imposition, of his counterparts. This is what characterizes the apostolic method of Ricci and what earned him the esteem of the men of letters, and also the conversion of some of them.

2. Knowledge of the Chinese Language

However the decisive factor, at the base of Ricci’s method of adaptation, was the learning of the Chinese language. That knowledge made possible holding arguments of philosophical, religious and scientific character and to write some literary works that would eventually be part of the best Chinese literary production. “For this I recommend to all the fathers who are here - Ricci wrote to Maselli in 1605 – to dedicate themselves to the study of Chinese literature, as to something on which

depends in large part the conversion of China”. “It was a fundamental necessity to know the language”, since - as Ricci will write in the letter to his brother Anton Maria on 24 August 1608 - “who does not use it is reputed a barbarian and cannot bear any fruit”. Similarly in the letter to father Pasio of 1609, Ricci asks for “good missionaries and all learned” because “nobody so far does not attend more than mediocly to the letters of China, since to know ours without knowing theirs is not of much utility; and Your Reverence will very well see how much this point imports at the beginning of this mission. I for me estimate this more than having made ten thousand Christians, for being this the condition for the universal conversion of the all Kingdom”.⁹ In this quotation, we can see the innovation that Ricci brought to the method of traditional evangelization. In fact, he changed the traditional emphasis on quantification (how to obtain the greater number of baptisms) – to that of entering in a living culture in order to take advantage of all that would allow a deep understanding of the proclamation of the Gospel.

What Ricci perceived as the priority was the necessity of “inculturation”, entering in the middle of the living social and cultural issues of a people. In the letter to father Acquaviva of the 22 August 1608 he asks the Superior General not to judge “of the fruit that is made here only from the number of Christians”, but to consider the “great foundation that is being laid here in preparation for a great aim”; and asks him to send “here men of good talent and men of letters, able to build better things than the foundations”.¹⁰

3. Science at the Service of Faith

Deeply knowledgeable in geography, cartography, astronomy and geometry - learned during the years of its cultural formation at the Roman College - Ricci understood the value of these sciences in order to earn some credibility with the Chinese people, still unaware of the real geographic borders of the world, the astronomical discoveries of Galileo and Euclidean geometry. Ricci himself testifies that, having shown as insufficient the explanation of natural phenomena made by the monks, “it happened that many, having learned our sciences of mathematics, laughed at the law and doctrine of the idols, saying that who spoke many errors about the natural

things and about this life, should not be credited when talking about supernatural things and the other world”. Ricci moreover understood that the vision of the world of the Chinese of those times was encompassing: morality, religion, science, theology and the philosophical instructions of the Chinese men of letters of the end of the Ming dynasty constituted an organic and unified all. It seemed to Ricci that this cultural characteristic of the Chinese civilization would eventually have facilitated the transmission and the understanding of the total and organic vision of the world possessed by Christianity which the Chinese called Tianxue (Instruction from Heaven). Science therefore was totally at the service of faith, did not pursue other aim than the one of spreading the Gospel. And Ricci was always aware that the better means “in order to prepare China to give credit to the things of our holy Faith” was the instruction of Western sciences. Although Ricci has contributed to the introduction of Western sciences to the Chinese, he was and remained primarily a missionary as we can see also from his works and his correspondence. The contribution that he gave to scientific knowledge, the satisfactions and the successes that he gained from this did not change his attitude as a missionary and his purpose of proceeding to the one all important task of evangelization.¹¹

4. The Valorization of Reason

Faithful to the Aristotelico-Thomistic tradition, Ricci from the beginning intended to put himself on the standpoint of pure reason. The predilection in China “for letters, the sciences and opinions founded in reason - he will write to father Pasio in 1609 - will render easier to persuade the principals of the kingdom about the things of our faith, confirmed with so much evidence from reason”. This was also the reason that made Ricci give prominence in his catechism¹² to those truths that could be understood with the natural light of reason. In the demonstration of the existence of God he makes use of the classic arguments of Thomistic philosophy (CR, pp. 495-515). In order to give a reasonable foundation to the possibility of an ultramundane existence, he makes reference to the suffering during our life, the constant dissatisfaction of human beings and to their thirst for happiness and fullness that are unattainable during life in this world (CR, pp. 534-540). With the same method he proceeds criticizing monist

pantheism (CR, pp. 557-590), metempsychosis and the fear to kill animals: all parts of the Buddhist conception of the time (CR, pp. 591-614), in order to put on a rational footing the idea of the existence of a paradise and a hell (CR, pp. 615-647), of the goodness of human nature (CR, pp. 647-674), of the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ (CR, pp. 695-699).

In this way Ricci remains faithful to his option of an anthropological approach to the revealed mystery: before approaching the fullness of Revelation, he strives to show the reasonableness of his arguments in the order of the natural reflection. From this method, inaugurated by Ricci, we can understand his attempt to lead gradually the Chinese people to conversion, beginning with the truths that could be grasped with the intellect in order then to pass to the revealed enunciation of the truth. Speaking about its Catechism, Ricci reports that “it is not about all the mysteries of our holy Faith, which are to be taught only to catechumens and Christians, but about some of the main ones, especially those that in some way can be proved with natural reason and can be understood with the help of the same natural light (“istesso lume naturale”); so that it could be of service to Christians and Gentiles and to others in remote places, where we cannot soon arrive, opening with this the way to the other mysteries which depend on faith and the revealed science. That is to say: there is a Lord and Creator of the universe and of all the things that he continuously keeps in existence; the soul of man is immortal, and he is rewarded by God for his good and bad deeds in the other life; the transmigration of souls in bodies of other human beings or animals is false, a doctrine that many follow here, with other similar things. And all of this proved not only with many reasons and arguments taken from our sacred doctors, but also with many authorities from their ancient books, which the father had noticed when reading them; and that gave great authority and credit to this work” (FR, II, n. 709, pp. 292-295). Ricci, with this method of evangelization, builds a bridge between Scholastic philosophy and Confucianism.¹³ In other words, in order to find acceptance in the Confucian tradition, Ricci did not choose – as did other religions present in that period in China - the way of mediation or syncretism, but opted for the valorization of all the elements that could be amenable to the Christian conception, elements which he did not fail to notice in the ancient Chinese tradition, as in Confucianism. In this way he gave rise to an effective encounter, keeping

the truth of the respective positions, without having to vilify or in some way to attenuate the original meaning of the proclamation of salvation.

5. The Return to the Ancient Chinese Classics

In his meticulous study of the ancient Chinese classics Ricci did not fail to find an original concept of God, monotheistic in nature and without any implication of pantheistic and polytheistic character, as was the case in other primitive religions. In the pages of his “History of the Introduction of Christianity in China” and in many letters, Ricci anticipates some of the results later confirmed by modern Sinology. In the valorization of this pure and original concept of God, that to Ricci appeared deeply connatural to the Chinese mentality, Ours took the occasion for introducing the Christian doctrine not in a way stranger to the feelings of the Chinese, but deeply immersed and participating of the best tradition. In the letter to the general father Acquaviva of 4 November 1595, Ricci will declare his aim as wanting “to prove the things of our holy faith by their books”. For this reason “in these past years I had myself taught by good masters not only about the ‘tetrabilio’ [the Four Books], but also all the six doctrines, and I noticed many passages in many of them that confirm the things of our faith, such as the uniqueness of God, immortality of the soul, the glory of the blessed, etc. And when I speak with these men of letters, I am used to ask what is their doctrine, and through it I prove what I want to prove to them”. (TV, 207)

This apostolic method, inaugurated by Ricci in China, pursued therefore two objectives deeply related to each other: on one side the attempt of an adaptation to the cultural and religious atmosphere of China, and from the other the revaluation of all that could be interpreted in the light of the Christian concepts and that could serve for evangelization. For this purpose, the terms of Supreme Lord (Shangdi) and Heaven (Tian) - to which the ancient Chinese had attributed the character of uniqueness, personality, omnipotence, creator of all the things and all the men - came to the profit of ours which did not hesitate to use them in the translation of the Gospel and Christian prayers. In this way Ricci appeared to the eyes of the Chinese people not like a bearer of one new doctrine, of a new dominion, but as one who indicated the urgency of a return to the ancient

Chinese classics and their sound tradition. However, his attempt to offer an interpretation of the Chinese classics has not always been seen in a benevolent light.¹⁴ We should not forget, however, that Ricci has always been aware of operating an interpretation of the Chinese classic thought, consisting of taking advantage of those passages which for their obscurity allowed for different readings.¹⁵ Other Jesuits, at least those who were nearer to Ricci, admit that they never tried “to assimilate Heaven and the Monarch of the High of the Chinese with the God of the Bible”, as Gernet says, but they have always taken from the Chinese tradition those terms that more approached the Christian conception, in order to enrich their sense. They have never, moreover, spoken about “equation”, but about proximity of sense, that allowed the use of the traditional term for the opening to a new sense. It turns out therefore false to say that Ricci expected to find inside the tradition of ancient China some form of Christian thought, as is wrong also to accuse him of syncretism. What he discovers in the ancient traditions concepts near to Christian ideas, he uses them in order to introduce his audience and readers to the truth of the Christian faith; and when he finds something that seems incompatible with the Christian faith, he does not hesitate to condemn it. In Ricci the attempt to manipulate the Chinese truth or to impose to it a prejudicial interpretation, as has been said by some, is completely absent. In the attempt to recover and to value the ancient Chinese religion, giving to this a Christian meaning, Ricci realizes a true “inculturation”, in so much as the essential elements of the Christian proclamation are not made to come from outside like something stranger, but they are made to derive from the Chinese cultural tradition itself. In this way he anticipates by some centuries the pastoral orientation proposed by the Vatican Council II and based on a great esteem and respect for the moral and religious ideas of every culture.

6. The Interpretation and the Recovery of the Ancient Confucian Tradition

This same attitude, of deep respect towards Chinese culture and religion, is manifest in Ricci also in his handling of Confucianism. From the study that he undertakes of the Confucian texts (the four books), he is led to the belief that no element was present in Confucianism that could make

one think of it as one religion. For this reason Ricci in its “History of the Introduction of Christianity in China” and the numerous correspondence that he had with its confreres and relatives, many times reiterates that the cult rendered to Confucius had nothing to do with the worship of a divinity or the adoration of a God. It is true that the men of letters were, usually twice a month, going to the shrine of Confucius in order to show respect and gratitude with prostrations, ignitions of candles, offering of animals, food, incense and other things. Still, they did that without reciting any prayer or asking for some grace.¹⁶ The attitude of the Chinese people was therefore expression of the gratitude that it nourished towards those who with their own life and teaching represented a model of virtuous life.

The aim of Confucianism - says Ricci - “is the peace and quiet of the kingdom and good governance of things particular; for which it gives much good advice, all in compliance with natural reason and the catholic truth. They make a great deal of the five relationships that they call common to all mankind: that is of father and son, of husband and wife, master and vassal, older and younger brother, companion and companion; thinking that the other foreign kingdoms do not value them so much (...). Their books have a lot to say about the second precept of charity, that is doing onto others what we want the others do to us. And they very much emphasize obedience of children to their father and mother, and loyalty of vassals to their subjects and superiors. And therefore they neither command nor prohibit anything of what we are to believe of the things of the other life, and many of them follow, besides the others two sects, from which we can come to the conclusion that more than a complete law it is a sort of academy, established for the good government of the ‘republica’ [sic]. And therefore they can very much be part of this academy and be also Christians, given that in essence it does not contain anything against the Catholic Faith, neither the Catholic faith prevents them in anything, indeed it helps very much to build the quiet and the peace of the ‘republica’, as their books require”.¹⁷

In spite of this sincere admiration of Confucianism, Ricci’s attitude towards this doctrine was never an unconditional support, but a critical and active one, as in the case of the things left in doubt by Confucius, which he always tried to interpret to the benefit of his mission.¹⁸ Moreover, Ricci made a clear distinction between the ancient Confucian doctrine, as

it is derived from the reading of the Four Books, and which represents the classic thought of the Master, and the version of Confucianism of his time which tended to conciliate it with Taoism and to fight the interference of Buddhism. For this reason in his Catechism he made the rationalistic and syncretistic version of neo-Confucianism the object of a strong criticism, in the conviction that such interpretation had not been assumed warily and in a systematic way by the Confucian men of letters, but had come in to place without the clear knowledge of the connected consequences as one might expect. It was for this reason that Ricci strived so much in order to recover the principles of the ancient Confucian tradition.¹⁹

Some Critical Appraisals of Ricci's Attitude towards Confucianism

Ricci's attitude towards Confucianism, together with his missionary method, in some studies of the last century, have received various critical appraisals. His work has often been accused of syncretism, a "devout conciliator of different beliefs".²⁰ H. Boehmer has accused "Ricci's pedagogical method" of creating "a Christian-Chinese religious mixture".²¹ Kristofer Schipper denounces Ricci and the Jesuits for entering "in the sphere of Officialdom", for putting themselves "under the protection of the government" and for having credited to the outside, therefore among us, the official ideology and the image of Confucius as the "Sinarum philosophus", minimizing the religious aspect of the cult sponsored by the State". Moreover he charges Ricci with having conferred "to Confucianism the image of a doctrine or wisdom of the Supreme Being to which nothing, in the end, was lacking except the revelation of the Gospel".²² Other authors, like Bavaj and Natali, consider Ricci's attitude towards Confucianism as "a purely tactical means for action", as nothing more than an "instrumental" strategy for evangelization.²³ Jacques Gernet thinks of the contribution given by the Jesuits to the knowledge of European sciences as simply a work of seduction, made in order "to draw advantage, in religion and moral matters, from seeming analogies between Chinese and Christian traditions" (p. 9). He charges Ricci of wanting "to appear like a philosopher among the philosophers of China" without "revealing himself for what he was, a religious come to preach the true God to the pagans" (p.21). Ricci's decision to distinguish in the proclamation of the Gospel

between truths of reason and truths of faith is considered a mere simulation of the real intentions and of the ideas the missionaries wanted to impose (cf. pp 64-65), while the prudent approach towards Chinese civilization is considered an instrumental act on the part of who “is careful not to reveal his true intentions, limiting himself to discuss, to cite the classics, trying to confer them a meaning favorable to his own theses” (p. 23). Ricci and the Jesuit missionaries, finally, are accused of wanting “to weaken the Chinese traditions”, to have transformed them “from the inside” and to have tolerated, also for purely tactical reasons, ancestor worship, knowing that it would have been “too risky to criticize frontally the most venerable traditions of China”, as would have been “imprudent to create too many enemies at one time” (p. 59).

To my opinion these critical observations are all born from a prejudicial and too partial reading of Ricci’s work of evangelization, in which the point of view of faith not only turns out completely absent, but it seems also that all of the explicit affirmations made by Ricci and the Jesuit missionaries must stay at all costs out of the discussion. In fact, all these interpretations fail to give any reason for the missionary approach put into effect by Ricci. It is not for Machiavellian tactics or duplicity that Ricci and the Jesuits discovered progressively the method of their work in China, but for respect towards those to which they addressed themselves and towards the message they had come to convey. After all Christ himself, during his life on earth, used, in revealing himself, a “pedagogy”, surely not theorized but lived in the concrete relationship with his disciples.²⁴ Moreover, the adaptation to the customs of China, learning the language and the closing of public worship must be read from inside the perspective of a new assumption of Chinese culture in the Christian event.

“The mission - writes John Paul II in “Redemptor hominis” - is never a destruction, but a new assumption of values and a new construction” (n. 21). For this reason the work accomplished by Ricci in China cannot be characterized as a “cunning form of *captatio benevolentiae*, bent on capturing pagans and increasing proselytism”, but it must be interpreted as “a wide opening towards the civilization and the human values that the Company had inherited from the Humanism [of the Renaissance]”, in the conviction “that human history was a continuum endowed with progress and that in the pagan there were to be found

germs of the truth which the explicit proclamation of the Gospel brings to fruition”.²⁵ Ricci was not satisfied with preaching the message of salvation to purely passive listeners, as it was usual in the missionary method of that age. He operated, instead, a true change in the classic missionary attitude. Before preaching he took care himself to listen and to understand in what kind of land the Gospel would have been planted. The knowledge of the language, adaptation to the habits of the new civilization, the study of the classics and of all religions of that period were all gradual steps in order to find those natural elements that could allow him to introduce the evangelical message in a way not stranger to the Chinese lifestyle. In Confucian thought, in particular, Ricci valued the notion of human nature contained in the thought of the Master and that the Classics considered as naturally good. In this way he began his teaching starting from the traditional ethics, in the conviction that this could serve as a base for the explanation of Christian morality. This was also the reason that led Ricci to inaugurate his literary production with the famous “Treaty on Friendship” (Jaoyoulun),²⁶ which, before being a theoretical elaboration on a universal phenomenon in the moral field, constituted for ours an experience of life and one the most important. We know how Ricci was able to make many friends for his affability, for his outgoing and lovable character with his ability to listen to everybody. In this way he developed an apostolic method based on human relations in which the starting point is human nature and the human being in its concrete situation. With his missionary work, Ricci has to offer a true philosophy and theology of the human condition, because it is only through a better understanding of the human condition that Revelation can be understood.²⁷

In forging this intercultural relationship, Ricci did not omit - as he is accused by some - to transmit the nucleus of the Catholic doctrine, that is the proclamation of the passion and death of Jesus Christ on the cross. Pasquale D’Elia has discovered a document in Chinese containing a complete summary of the Catholic doctrine, which was destined to the Chinese men of letters who went to visit the Father in the first years in Zhaoqing.²⁸ This Chinese writ is very important in order to demonstrate how Ricci and his companions, from the beginning of their apostolate, had never forgotten to introduce to the Chinese men of letters the Catholic doctrine in its entirety. The text, composed in 1585, after explaining the

attributes of God and the necessity of acknowledging his Presence in order to receive eternal happiness (paradise) and to escape total perdition (hell), proceeds to tell the story of Adam and Eve and of Original Sin. Given the human condition of sin, God has sent his Son Jesus, “a European word that in Chinese means universal Savior of the world”. In spite of his good works he was crucified, died and resurrected the third day. Appeared to his disciples and ordered them to go all over the world in order to spread the Announcement of salvation that God in Jesus Christ had donated to all mankind.

After the main text follows an appendix called “Explanation of the remission of sins of the past [by means] of the Holy Water”, in which all those who wish are invited to get baptized in order “to enter the religion of the Lord of Heaven”. It should not be forgotten moreover that, at the end of 1583 a translation in Chinese of the Decalogue, had already appeared. In the letter to the Father General of 30 November 1584, Ricci claims to have sent copy of the Chinese Catechism written by Ruggeri together with “the Commandments, the Paternoster and the Hail Mary, also in Chinese” (TV, 51). A translation of the Creed already existed before 24 November 1585 (cf. TV, 71).

The Inculturation Process

From what has been said, it is clear that for Ricci evangelization was never a second step, something that could be done later. Ricci followed the way of “incarnation”, putting into effect a real process of “inculturation”, not theorized, but lived in the concrete. “Inculturation”, in fact, is that process through which the Christian message becomes part of a particular culture, incarnates itself inside a cultural community, arriving until the roots, so as to produce in this culture original forms of thought, action and expression. It is not to be confused with tactics or propaganda. It excludes any attempt to manipulate a culture and it does not produce conformist cultural copies. Inculturation, moreover, cannot be reduced to a “temporary adaptation”, based on the outer aspects of a culture, like language, ceremonies, dresses and the way of living. It contains in itself, as an important stage, the adaptation, but it has to do first of all with the incarnation of the evangelic message in a concrete cultural atmosphere, in such way

that the Christian experience is not only expressed in the elements of that culture, but becomes also a force that inspires from the inside this same culture.²⁹ “It was thanks to such work of inculturation - said John Paul II in the speech made in Rome in 1984, at the end of the International Convention of Studies on Ricci - that Father Matteo Ricci could succeed, with the aid of his Chinese collaborators, in achieving something that seemed impossible: to elaborate that is, the Chinese terminology for theology and Catholic liturgy and to create therefore the conditions needed to make Christ known and to incarnate his evangelic message and the church in the context of the Chinese culture”.

Mission and Cultures

The failure to understand the real meaning of “Incarnation” and “Inculturation” has led in modern times to several misunderstandings and to a strongly critical attitude towards missionary work. Many anthropologists, in fact, have accused Christian Missions of being carriers of a religious conception of a specific culture, the Western one, which paternalistically has tried to impose itself to other cultures.³⁰

If it is true that every culture is valuable and therefore as such must be respected and safeguarded, there is nothing wrong with the fact that between different cultures can happen a contact and a dialogue. We cannot ignore the fact that mental categories and the religious and cultural sensibility are not outside time, given once and for all, closed to the mutations that happen for endogenous evolution or for the impact of other cultures. As there is no such thing as a culture good for all, superior to every other culture, so it is an illusion to think of cultures as isolated, perfectly separated from each other, “chemically pure”. Cultures without external influences do not exist; every culture, just like any person, is called to be open and to communicate.³¹

On the other hand, there cannot be true evangelization except through the particularity of one specific culture, of one specific person or circumstance. The faith needs a body in which to manifest itself; it is not simply words, but a living experience and as such it cannot exist without incarnating itself (taking flesh) in a determined cultural atmosphere. The Christian message, in fact, becomes part in the evolutionary process of a

culture as a dynamic element and with the aid of Grace leads it to a higher level. However, Christianity, although incarnated within a particular culture, must not be equated with or made to serve only one particular culture, it should keep its autonomy and independence vis-à-vis any cultural expression.³² As a matter of fact, there should not exist a culture that, a priori, is irreconcilable with Christianity. It is this specific sense of the word “Inculturation” that Ricci has inaugurated, founded on a deep sense of respect for Chinese culture; always ready for dialogue, but also intransigent in avoiding dangerous compromises. In its work Ricci does not fall in the trap of considering the historical forms of the culture he met in a static way; in the study that he undertakes of the Chinese culture he also finds signs of decline and crisis, cultural elements that betray the original intentions and others able to express the true traditional sense. For this reason his interpretation of Chinese culture constitutes a recovery and a repositioning of those original elements belonging to that primitive Revelation of which also China is an instance and through which we have evidence of the universal reasonableness of Christianity, of the “pretension” that supports it and that it differentiates it from other religious and cultural perspectives elaborated by mankind in the course of history.³³ In this line of thought the adaptation Ricci realized, is one direct consequence of his living the Christian message and we can say that it was this faith experience that “has conquered” China, not the merely practical adaptations, necessary as they might have been.

Ricci and the “Rites Controversy”

The apology by Pope John Paul II for the past errors of the Catholic Church in its relations with China, and his appeal to Beijing to renew ties between the Vatican and the People’s Republic of China,³⁴ has come at a time in which the Pope is playing a crucial role in the campaign to build an understanding between different civilizations, as the only alternative to conflict. He chose to make this historic call in the name of Father Matteo Ricci. The Pope describes Father Ricci as “a precious connecting link between West and East, between European Renaissance culture and Chinese culture, and between the ancient and magnificent Chinese civilization and the world of Europe.”

As I shall very briefly report here, Ricci's role was not limited to his own lifetime; rather, his ideas have been at the center of every subsequent effort to build a true alliance between the people of Europe and those of Asia, based on the principle of reason. As Lyndon LaRouche said in his address to the Italian Institute for Asia in Rome,³⁵ an effort to build a world alliance among sovereign nations can never succeed if it is based on the mutual acceptance of each other's opinions, but only through a dialogue based upon a fundamental agreement on an *idea*—an idea of man distinguished from the beasts through the cognitive power of reason. Ricci lived by this principle, which flourished in China until a hundred years after Ricci's death. Some factions in the European Church questioned his ideas in what is known as the “Chinese Rites Controversy”, and that is why Pope John Paul II felt it necessary to extend an apology in regard to certain “theological disputes.”³⁶

It is most interesting that this particular Pope, who profoundly understands the importance of his personal mission in the current crisis of civilization, reaches back to Ricci as the universal figure representing the dialogue of cultures so necessary today.

Personally I draw these lessons from the vicissitudes of the Rites Controversy:

- Power struggle is always a factor to be reckoned with in intercultural relations, even (sad to say) inside the Church. So we need the “spirit of discernment” in order to be able to make a distinction between real problems and all forms of narcissism.

- This long dispute is nothing more than the tip of the iceberg, it just highlights the distance, not only geographical, but above all psychological that still persists nowadays between Europe and Asia. What we need to bridge this gap are men and women who, emulating Ricci, would dedicate their life to mutual understanding.

- Besides power struggles, the other big enemy of intercultural dialogue is, in my view, superficiality. As can be seen many times during the dispute, decisions based on insufficient or superficial knowledge become the seed of conflict. Above all we should beware of stereotypes, “politically correct” ideologies and downright prejudice.

ENDNOTE

¹ Cf. 1 Cor 9:22.

² "Quod non est **assumptum**, non est sanatum" (cf. St. Gregory Nazianzen, Ep. 101 ad Cledon.) . Franco Di Giorgio, *Comprendere e Convertire. Il dialogo di Padre Matteo Ricci con le religioni Cinesi*, Edizioni Istra, Milano 1986.

³ M. Ricci, Storia dell'introduzione del Cristianesimo in Cina, in "Fonti Ricciane", edite da P.M. D'Elia, Roma 1942-1949, vol. I, n. 234, pp. 180-183. From now on "FR".

⁴ P. Tacchi Venturi, "Le lettere dalla Cina" in *Opere storiche del p. Matteo Ricci*, Macerata 1913, vol. II, p. 200. From now on shortened "TV".

⁵ Giovanni Paolo II, Padre Ricci stabilì tra la Chiesa e la cultura cinese un ponte che appare ancora solido e sicuro, "L'Osservatore Romano", CXXII, n. 250, 27.10.1982. See also the speech in Manila, 18 February 1981.

⁶ Cfr. FR, I, nn. 187, 340, pp. 125-126, 282; FR, II, n. 637, pp. 187-188.

⁷ C. Portatadino, Cristianesimo e culture nell'Estremo Oriente, in "Communio", III, 1974, n. 15, p.32.

⁸ TV, 247.

⁹ TV 257, 376. See also the letter Ricci wrote to his father the 10 May 1605 in TV, 270-271.

¹⁰ TV, 367-368. «Il frutto che facciamo si può comparare et anteporre con altre missioni, che al parere fanno cose meravigliose; perciòché il tempo in che stiamo nella Cina non è anco di raccolta, anzi né di seminare, ma di aprire i boschi fieri e combattere con le fiere e serpi velenose che qua dentro stanno. Altri verranno

con la gratia del Signore che scriveranno le conversioni e fervori de' christiani; ma sappi che fu necessario prima fare questo che noi facciamo, e ci hanno da dare a noi la maggior parte del merito, se però faremo questo che facciamo con la carità che dobbiamo» (Letter to fr. Gerolamo Costa, 14 agosto 1599, TV, 246).

¹¹ FR, II, n. 540, p. 55. In a letter to the Father General (8 March 1608), Ricci asks for books of mathematics and astrology to be sent, because «through our sciences there is much to be gained by Christianity» (TV, 343). See also: R.P. Henri-Bernard, *Le Père Matthieu Ricci et la Société chinoise de son temps (1552-1610)*, Tianjin 1937, vol. I, pp. 329-332.

¹² "Tianzhu Shiyi" (1603). "The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven" (Chinese-English), Taipei, 1985. For a French translation see: "Lettres édifiantes et curieuses concernant l'Asie, l'Afrique et l'Amérique", edited by M.L. Aime-Martin. In Italian: "Scelta di lettere edificanti scritte dalle missioni straniere", Milano 1825, pp. 495-702, "Ragionamenti di un letterato cinese e di un dottore europeo" (from now on "CR").

¹³ Cfr. C. Portatadino, *op. cit.*, p. 34. See also J. Sedes, "A bridge between East and West: Father Matteo Ricci, his time, his life, and his method of cultural accommodation" in *Acts of the International symposium on Chinese-Western cultural interchange in commemoration of the 400th anniversary of the arrival of Matteo Ricci in China, Taipei-Taiwan, September 1983*, p. 591.

¹⁴ See for instance, J. Gernet, *Chine et Christianisme, action et réaction*, Paris, 1982. *Cina e cristianesimo*, Casale Monferrato 1984, p. 33.

¹⁵ Cfr. FR, II, n. 709, p. 296.

¹⁶ Cfr. FR, I, nn. 178, 55, pp. 118-119, 40; P. Corradini, *Confucio e il confucianesimo*, Fossano (Cuneo) 1973, p. 79.

¹⁷ FR, I, nn. 180-181, p. 120. Cf. the letter to Father General of the 4 November 1595 in TV, 203. See also R.P. Henri-Bernard, *op. cit.*, vol. II, pp. 110-112.

¹⁸ Cfr. FR, II, n. 556, p. 74; CR, pp. 519-527; TV, 387

¹⁹ Cfr. FR, II, n. 556, p. 74; CR, pp. 519-527; TV, 387.

²⁰ As the cenotaph written by prof. Isidoro Del Lungo the 11 May 1919 on the occasion of the III Centenary of the death would have it. This cenotaph is to be found in the corridor of Macerata University.

²¹ H. Boehmer, *Die Jesuiten. Eine Historische Skizze*, Leipzig 1907, p. 107

²² K. Schipper, *Il corpo taoista*, Roma 1983, pp. 25-26.

²³ A. Bavaj, "Padre Matteo Ricci e il suo metodo di apostolato" in *Sviluppi delle celebrazioni marchigiane: uomini insigni del maceratese*, Macerata 1936, p. 6; G. Natali, *Il secondo Confucio*, estratto dalla "Rivista politica e letteraria", settembre 1900, p. 21.

²⁴ Cf. L. Giussani, *All'origine della pretesa cristiana*, Milano 1987, pp. 88-109

²⁵ M. Marcocchi, *Colonialismo, cristianesimo e culture extraeuropee*, Milano 1981, p. 37.

²⁶ Yen Yong Lien S., "Traité de l'amitié par Li Ma T'euou d'Europe", *Recherches de science religieuse*, 72/1 (1984), pp. 59-70.

²⁷ Cf. L. Giussani, *Il senso religioso*, Milano 1970, pp. 13-52.

²⁸ P.M. D'Elia, *Il domma cattolico integralmente presentato da Matteo Ricci ai letterati della Cina*, "La Civiltà Cattolica", II, 1935, pp. 35-53. See also FR, II, n. 709, pp. 297-298.

²⁹ Cf. J. Scheuer, *L'inculturation*, "Lumen Vitae", XXXIX, Bruxelles 1984, n. 3, pp. 251-259; G. Chantraine, *Evangelizzazione e inculturazione*, "Il Nuovo Areopago", IV, 1984, n. 4, pp. 23-34.

³⁰ "Not only does there appear a strange inability to understand Christianity or Missions adequately from within – as one rightly tries to do in regard to foreign religions – on its own merit as it were, but also, in regard to Missions particularly, a propensity to evaluate it first and foremost according to its faults (which are indeed many) and to misunderstand it as to its intentions and role. Current hearsay is often used as a sufficient basis for judgment" (H. Kraemer, *World Cultures and World Religions. The Coming Dialogue*, Philadelphia, 1960, p. 84)

³¹ "Behind this condemnatory or unsympathetic attitude is hidden not only a deep misunderstanding of the Gospel, but also a curiously inhibited view of the Western Invasion. The arguments one meets everywhere, in able writers and in the mouths of Western businessmen and civil servants, runs as follows 'Why do Missions disturb and penetrate into these Eastern structures and religions, introducing an alien element? They have no right to do so.' The simple answer is first that the Whole Western Invasion, cultural, economic and political, represented in civil servants, business men, teachers etc. perpetrates the same thing by disturbing as an alien element the Eastern structures of culture and religion. Yet these agents of the great disturbance do not dream of applying the demand to quit, which they direct towards Missions, to themselves. (...) This whole kind of reasoning is at bottom rather childish, because logically speaking it excludes all spiritual free trade, which is the life-blood of true cultural life. At the same time it betrays the modern fallacy of the West: that is, treating religion as an isolated sector of human life." (H. Kraemer, *op. cit.*, pp. 82-83). Cf. S. Bocchini, *Il missionario di fronte alle culture*, "Mondo e Missione", 1979, nn. 13-14, pp. 387-409. See also F. Di Giorgio, *Il Vangelo in cinese*, in "Litterae Communions", A - IX, luglio/agosto 1982, n. 7/8, pp. 38-42.

³² "Evangelii nuntiandi", n. 20.

³³ Cf. L. Giussani, *All'origine della pretesa cristiana*, *cit.*, pp. 17-49.

³⁴ See "*Message of His Holiness Pope John Paul II for the Fourth Centenary of the arrival in Beijing of the great missionary and scientist Matteo Ricci*" (Message to the Participants in the International Conference commemorating the Fourth Centenary of the Arrival in Beijing of Father Matteo Ricci, 24 October 2001). Text available on <http://www.vatican.va> or www.zenit.org.

³⁵ <http://larouchein2004.org/pages/speeches/2001/011016dialogueofcultures.htm>

³⁶ About the controversy see: *The Church in the age of absolutism and enlightenment* / by Wolfgang Müller ... [et al.]; translated by Günther J. Holst. — New York: Crossroad, 1989, — (History of the church / edited by Hubert Jedin and John Dolan; v. 6) Translation of: *Die Kirche im Zeitalter des Absolutismus und der*

Aufklärung .