
MISSIO AD GENTES IN THE CHINESE CONTEXT: FROM MAXIMUM ILLUD TO THE PROVISIONAL AGREEMENT

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ABSTRACT

Pope Benedict XV, who is often known as the “missionary pope” or the “unknown Pope,” developed a missiological approach which was especially significant for the Far East, especially China. His focus on missionary work or *missio ad gentes* is a reflection on the very nature of the Church itself. In his apostolic letter *Maximum illud* he describes it according to three principles. The first is on the obligations of the laity to act as ‘missionary disciples.’ The second stresses the non-political nature of mission. An the third describes the local nature of mission. While the political, economic and missiological situation has changed since these documents, these three principles still remain relevant. The obligations of *missio ad gentes*, both in relation to faith within the Church (*ad intra*) and in relation to local communities (*ad extra*) remains important for the whole Catholic Church, and especially for the Chinese Catholic Church. This essay will explore the relevance of mission *ad intra* and *ad extra* for the Catholic Church in China.

Keywords: Pope Benedict XV; missiology; *missio ad gentes*; *Maximum illud*; China

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The “Unknown Pope”

Benedict XV (1914-1922) was called by many as the “missionary pope” because of his emphasis on mission. He is also known as the “unknown pope” because he was overshadowed by his predecessor Pope Saint Pius X. It was also due to his short term pontificate which lasted only eight years. However, this “unknown Pope” put in place three significant historical principles that have influenced the Catholic Church and the world, and continue to have relevance to in today’s world

He was elected Roman pontiff on 3 September 1914, despite having been a cardinal only three months, only 37 days after the start of World War I. Immediately after his inauguration, on the 8th of September, the new Pope, in an apostolic exhortation, called for peace and an end to the disaster.² Less than two months later, on November 1st, in his first encyclical, *Ad Beatissimi Apostolorum*, Benedict XV boldly points out the fact that “The combatants are the greatest and wealthiest nations of the earth; what wonder, then, if, well provided with the most awful weapons modern military science has devised, they strive to destroy one another with refinements of horror. There is no limit to the measure of ruin and of slaughter; day by day the earth is drenched with newly-shed blood, and is covered with the bodies of the wounded and of the slain.”³

The encyclical then goes on to appeal for peace, “Moved by these great evils, we thought it our duty, at the very outset of our Supreme Pontificate, to recall the last words of our Predecessor of illustrious and holy memory, and by repeating them once more to begin our own Apostolic Ministry; and we implored Kings and rulers to consider the

² “Allorché da questa vetta Apostolica abbiamo rivolto lo sguardo a tutto il gregge del Signore affidato alle Nostre cure, immediatamente l’immane spettacolo di questa guerra Ci ha riempito l’animo di orrore e di amarezza, constatando che tanta parte dell’Europa, devastata dal ferro e dal fuoco, rosseggia del sangue dei cristiani.” “E poiché, sullo stesso esempio del Signore, dobbiamo essere — e lo siamo — pronti a dare la vita per la loro salvezza, abbiamo fermamente deciso, per quanto è in Nostro potere, di nulla omettere per affrettare la fine di questa calamità.” Benedict XV, Apostolic Exhortation, *Ubi primum*, 8 September 1914.

³ Benedict XV, Encyclical, *Ad Beatissimi Apostolorum*, no.3; 4, 1 November 1914.

floods of tears and of blood already poured out, and to hasten to restore to the nations the blessings of peace.”⁴ Benedict’s call for peace persisted throughout the course of the war.

On 27 May 1917, the feast of Pentecost, Benedict XV, in his Apostolic Constitution *Providentissima Mater Ecclesia*, promulgated the very first Code of Canon Law in Catholic history. The work on this code was started by the mandate of his predecessor, Pope Pius X. In the constitution, he declared that these authentic laws and precepts should be used prudently by both clergy and Catholics.⁵ It is evident that the code is not only for clergy to govern the people but also for laity. This inclusion of the laity, especially considering the more clerical structure of the Church at that time, was quite open minded and showed the real concern of Benedict XV. Based on this emphasis on both clergy and lay Catholics, it is easy to understand the third intervention that Benedict XV has made in his pontificate.

His apostolic letter *Maximum illud* of November 30, 1919, is his best known apostolic letter, not only in Asia but also in the world. This apostolic letter was considered as the *Magna Carta* of Catholic missiology throughout the 20th century and it continues to be an inspiration in the 21st century. This letter opened a completely new vision and new understanding of the Catholic missiology from at least three perspectives. It continues to have a high impact in today’s Catholic missiology, and is worthy to be studied for the inspiration of the present.

The Missionary disciples

Maximum Illud opened with the words that Jesus Christ addressed to his disciples: “Go into the whole world and preach the Gospel to all creation” (Mk 16:15). This missionary work or *missio ad gentes*, as the

⁴ Benedict XV, Encyclical, *Ad Beatissimi Apostolorum*, no.3; 4, 1 November 1914.

⁵ “Hisce vero legibus preceptisque tum cleri populique Christiani consuluit regimini sapienter, tum ipsam, ut historia testatur, rei publicae utilitatem civilemque cultum mirifice provexit.” Benedict XV, Apostolic Constitution, *Providentissima Mater Ecclesia*, 27 May 1917.

letter's opening words in Latin indicated, is *Maximum* (the most important) and *sanctissimum* (the most holy) work.⁶ Then the letter provided examples of the great missionary disciples in the Church history for the inspiration of the present. However, there is no doubt that the letter was especially interested in the Far East. While it was relevant to the world in general, it was often considered to be particularly addressed to the newly established Republic of China.

This letter clearly pointed out that every baptized Catholic should be a missionary disciple. This is considered an obligation. The letter clearly states that a Catholic who becomes a missionary disciple "would be fulfilling his obligation in this important matter."⁷ Secondly, a person who becomes a missionary disciple, "would also be thanking God in a particularly appropriate way for the faith that has been given to him."⁸ Almost half a century later, Vatican II made clear that the sacred obligation is from the Lord himself by stating that "the lay apostolate, however, is a participation in the salvific mission of the Church itself. Through their baptism and confirmation, all are commissioned to that apostolate by the Lord Himself."⁹ Therefore, this sacred obligation to be missionary disciples is deeply rooted in the baptism and confirmation that a Catholic receives, and the mandate is commissioned by the Lord Himself. This obligation becomes even more important in the present times as the document states that "our own times require of the laity no less zeal: in fact, modern conditions demand that their apostolate be broadened and intensified."¹⁰ Missionary disciples or *missio ad gentes* are the core concern

⁶ "Maximum illud sanctissimumque munus quod, suo iam instante ad Patrem reditu, Dominus Noster Iesus Christus discipulis demandavit, cum dixit." Benedict XV, Apostolic Letter, *Maximum illud*, 30 November 1919.

⁷ Benedict XV, Apostolic Letter, *Maximum illud*, no. 31, 30 November 1919.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Vatican II, Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, no.33, November 1964.

¹⁰ Vatican II, Decree on the apostolate of the laity, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, no. 1, 18 November 1965.

not only in the letter *Maximum illud* but also the Vatican II Council as its constitution *Lumen Gentium* says “the obligation of spreading the faith is imposed on every disciple of Christ, according to his state.”¹¹ De facto, *missio ad gentes*, or being missionary is the nature of the Church. This obligation is stated in the present code of canon law, “since the entire Church is missionary by its nature and since the work of evangelization is to be viewed as a fundamental duty of the people of God, all the Christian faithful, conscious of their own responsibility in this area, are to assume their own role in missionary work.”¹² Therefore, present day missiology needs to be understood according to this demand.

The second principle relates to freedom from political manipulation. Facing the political situation then, the letter *Maximum illud* significantly pointed out that “The Catholic Church is not an intruder in any country; nor is she alien to any people.”¹³ And the letter continued that “the true missionary is always aware that he is not working as an agent of his country, but as an ambassador of Christ.”¹⁴ It is also true, as the Vatican II council already stated, of the Catholic Church, the Universal Church: “Thus, the Church has been seen as a people made one with the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.”¹⁵ This, of course, does not deny a Catholic’s nationality, does not reject a Catholic’s locality, but “though there are many nations there is but one people of God, which takes its citizens from every race, making them citizens of a kingdom which is of a heavenly rather than of an earthly nature.”¹⁶ It is in this way that the missionary disciples are instructed to refrain political manipulation in whatsoever part of the earth that they belong to. This view is based on the

¹¹ Vatican II, Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, no.17, 21 November 1964.

¹² c.781, Code of Canon Law, 1983.

¹³ Benedict XV, Apostolic Letter, *Maximum illud*, no. 16, 30 November 1919.

¹⁴ Ibid. no.20.

¹⁵ Vatican II, Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, no.4, 21 November 1964.

¹⁶ Ibid. no.13.

teaching of Jesus Christ, “Repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God” (Mk 12:17). The name “Catholic” identifies the very nature of the Church, that is to say “the Church, sent to all peoples of every time and place, is not bound exclusively and indissolubly to any race or nation, any particular way of life or any customary way of life, recent or ancient. Faithful to her own tradition and at the same time conscious of her universal mission, she can enter into communion with the various civilizations, to their enrichment and the enrichment of the Church herself.”¹⁷

The letter *Maximum Illud* also established a third principle, namely, the mission of the missionary disciples, including especially the local clergy, should be locally based. The letter encouraged the whole Church, especially those in charge of the mission, that “he must make it his special concern to secure and train local candidates for the sacred ministry.”¹⁸ There is no doubt that this encouragement is not only for clergy candidates but for all candidates of missionary disciples, requiring us somehow to develop or broaden its meaning. The local situation or circumstance and contextualization is also particularly recognized by the Vatican II council which says “it may be carried out differently according to circumstances. Hence, the differences recognizable in this, the Church’s activity, are not due to the inner nature of the mission itself, but rather to the circumstances in which this mission is exercised.”¹⁹ This shows that the Church began to place emphasis on the local situation of the missionary disciples and fully encourages attention to the local situation in the *missio ad gentes* of the missionary disciples.

¹⁷ Vatican II, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, no.58, November 1964.

¹⁸ Benedict XV, Apostolic Letter, *Maximum illud*, no. 14, 30 November 1919.

¹⁹ Vatican II, Decree on the mission activity of the Church, *Ad gentes*, no.6, 21 November 1964.

The Chinese Missionary disciples and their *Caritas Jesus*

Of course, the concept of missionary disciples is much older than the Apostolic letter *Maximum illud*. This apostolic letter encouraged the missionary disciples to be sensitive to the local situation, and to apply a new vision to a new context, particularly in China and in the Far East. A historical perspective shows to us many examples of Chinese missionary disciples who were inspired by a passion for Jesus or *caritas Jesus*. This includes not only the Chinese clergy, but also, even more especially, the Chinese religious and the lay faithful. From the time Fr. Matteo Ricci set foot in China to the Apostolic letter *Maximum Illud*, the Church often experienced persecution. Foreign missionaries were severely restricted in their missionary works. Nonetheless, through their passion for Jesus, they contributed so much to the Chinese Church and Chinese society even in this difficult period, not to mention in more peaceful times. De facto, the Chinese lay faithful and also women religious, supported by the foreign or Chinese clergy, played a significant role as missionary disciples in the Chinese Church history. A few names could be given here as example.

A Chinese cleric, as a missionary disciples, named Li Ande (李安德) was ordained priest in 1725 as a member of Missions étrangères de Paris (M.E.P) and returned to China in the following year. That time the Church was under a most serious persecution by Emperor Yongzheng in Qing Dynasty. Fr. Li through his passion faithfully performed his pastoral works in Sichuan Province. For 16 years, he kept a diary in written in Latin, recording his pastoral works in this situation of persecution. He became a seminarian and a missionary priest during the period of serious persecution of the Catholics in China.

One lay example is St Agata LIN Zhao (林昭). She was born in 1817 in Guizhou Province, China.²⁰ After being baptized and reaching adulthood, she found her passion for Jesus and took up the responsibility for educating illiterate Catholic women in the rural area in Guizhou Province. Her passion encouraged her to become a missionary disciple through her teaching and through the establishment of a catechumenate.

²⁰ http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_a0261a090102y9ko.html

It also inspired her to dedicate her life to God and to the Church, so that as a celibate religious woman, she can better dedicate herself to teaching her fellow women. During her time Chinese women were mostly illiterate, mainly due to the social and cultural structures of the time. At the end she was beheaded for her efforts and for establishing a catechumenate. She has been recently canonized for her efforts.

There were two further examples that occurred arising from the Apostolic letter, *Maximum illud*. On 28th October 1926, six Chinese bishops led by Apostolic Representative Archbishop Celso Constantini were consecrated by Pope Pius XI himself in St Peter's Basilica. De facto; the ordination of these six Chinese bishops was directly inspired by the Apostolic letter *Maximum illud*. They were the first group of Chinese bishops ordained in nearly two and half centuries since the first Chinese bishop Luo Wenzao (Gregorio Lopez, 罗文藻) a Dominican named in 1674 and ordained 11 years later in 1685. Bishop Zhao Huaiyi (赵怀义), one of the six, was named prelate of the newly created Apostolic vicariate of Xuan Hua in Northern China. In September of the following year after Bishop Zhao's ordination, Northern China engaged in war. Bishop Zhao was personally involved in refugee work. It was while engaged in his work in the refugee camps, he caught a serious chill and did not recover. One month later he was dead at the age of only 47.

Another lay missionary disciple from Shanghai was LU Bohong (陆伯鸿). Already having participated in philanthropic activities, on 5th August 1934 he was elected director of Chinese Catholic Action (中华公教进行会), which was a Catholic lay movement started in the late 19th century. In the following year, he organized a meeting of 183 representatives of the movement, all lay Catholics, in Shanghai

These four examples show us that the Catholic Church in China has never been short of missionary disciples who were full of *passion for Jesus* and for service to the people.

The Chinese Missionary Disciples *ad intra*.

During the Chinese Cultural Revolution from 1966-1976, all temples and churches were closed down, monks and priests were often sent to jail or labor camps and religious activities were completely stopped. Nevertheless, the activity of the Chinese missionary disciples inspired by their passion for Jesus never ceased. After the re-opening policy in 1980s, when the churches were allowed to re-open, Catholic devotion bloomed again and many churches in Chinese villages were rebuilt by the local Catholics. In those villages which were not yet able to build a church, the Catholics would gather in a Catholic family house, almost every day, to recite long traditional prayers. One example is that of my own mother, who turned the age of 80 in 2019. She is illiterate and not able to read and write except for a few Chinese characters and signing her own name. But she knew the many long morning and evening prayers recited by the village Catholic community. On Sundays, because of shortage of priests, the village Catholics would meet together, after long morning or evening prayer to read the whole liturgy of the day's Holy Eucharist, only omitting the consecration words of the host. Besides these, they would have their traditional fourteen stations for the respect of the Cross at 15 PM in the afternoon on every Sunday and Friday. It is evident that the Catholics in China, with their passion for Jesus, kept their faith during many difficult times in history. It is in this sense that they are the missionary disciples *at intra*.

Chinese missionary disciples *at intra* are now facing a different situation after the signing between the Holy See and the People's Republic of China of the Provisional Agreement on the 22nd of September 2018, relating to the appointment of bishops in China. Of course, the difficulties that Chinese Catholic community are facing will not be totally solved by a "provisional agreement". But the agreement is a significant step forward for the Catholic Church in China as well as for the universal Church. The main and core effect that is evident is that the agreement brought the Catholic Church in China to the full communion with the universal Church. The Chinese bishops are now united in a visible manner after more

than a half century of separation and division. Certainly this agreement is only a first step. It should inspire Chinese missionary disciples to express their passion for Jesus both *at intra* and *at extra*. *Ad Intra* is always first. Facing the new situation after the Provisional Agreement, the Chinese missionary disciples *ad intra* will be devoting attention to the following areas: unity of the church, Spirituality, and community.

Unity in the Catholic Church in China is fundamental for missionary disciples. It is understandable that after many years of division, a group needs time to overcome the obstacles to be really one, or as Jesus prayed to the Father, “keep them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one just as we are.” (Jh 17:11) The unity, of course, includes two aspects: one is unity with the universal Church, the other is the unity or reconciliation among Catholics in China. We can say that without the unity with the universal Church, the Catholic Church in China would not be authentically Catholic, and without the reconciliation among the Catholics in China, the Church in China would be broken, like the wounded body of Jesus Christ. We must remember that Catholics in China, just as any other local Churches, can have different opinions towards politics, economy, culture, society, even theology. Nevertheless, these different opinions should not create divisions that would divide the body of Christ. The idea of unity of the Church is following the teaching of the universal Church, is to be in communion with the successor of St. Peter, namely the Pope, and to be Catholic missionary disciples, as Jesus Christ said to his disciples, “go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature.” (Mk 16:15) It is in this sense that the unity of Catholic missionary disciples is for the re-igniting of the passion for Jesus in the context of China.

The history of Catholic Chinese Church has occurred not through any kind of conquest, either economical nor political, but solely by *caritas Jesus* which is essentially passion for Jesus and passion for people. There is no doubt that there are not any other elements other than love that can establish the unity and flourishing of the Catholic community. St. Paul the Apostle taught us, “if I give away everything I own, and if I hand my

body over so that I may boast but do not have love, I gain nothing.” (1 Cor 13:3) As Pope Francis said in his letter, “Their testimony reminds us that, more than bureaucrats and functionaries, the Church needs passionate missionaries, enthusiastic about sharing true life.”²¹ From this point of view, the most harmful situation would be for the reduction of Catholic community to resemble a more secular institution or community. That would “gain nothing” as St Paul says. The only way to counter this is to strengthen our love or passion for Jesus and to see a Catholic community in the light of the risen Jesus.

The Chinese Missionary Disciples *ad extra*.

A century has now passed since the letter *Maximum illud* by Pope Benedict XV and the Asian political and economic and cultural situation has also changed dramatically. The “Message of Pope Francis to the Catholics of China and to the Universal Church” points to the task ahead. Pope Francis writes: “On the civil and political level, Chinese Catholics must be good citizens, loving their homeland and serving their country with diligence and honesty, to the best of their ability. On the ethical level, they should be aware that many of their fellow citizens expect from them a greater commitment to the service of the common good and the harmonious growth of society as a whole. In particular, Catholics ought to make a prophetic and constructive contribution born of their faith in the kingdom of God.”²² To realize this mission the Chinese Catholics need to direct their passion for Jesus to the people, and to be missionary disciples *ad extra*.

In the first place, Chinese Catholics must direct their love of Jesus, or their Caritas Jesus, to the people in their community. This is a duty not only for the bishops, but also for all ecclesiastical offices, or in the words of Pope Francis, “It is not a question of appointing functionaries to deal with religious issues, but of finding authentic shepherds according to the heart

²¹ Pope Francis, *Message of the Holy Father to the Catholics of China and to the universal Church*, no. 7, 26 September 2018.

²² *Ibid.* no.6

of Jesus, men and women committed to working generously in the service of God's people, especially the poor and the most vulnerable."²³

Lay people have a special obligation to engage in mission or as the letter *Maximum illud* points out, "the sacred obligation of assisting in the conversion of unbelievers applies also to them."²⁴ The Vatican II council instructs the same thing and pointed out that "With a constantly increasing population, continual progress in science and technology, and closer interpersonal relationships, the areas for the lay apostolate have been immensely widened particularly in fields that have been for the most part open to the laity alone."²⁵ Because of this special recognition of lay missionary disciples, Chinese pastors need to encourage, guide, and open the new paths for participation by the lay apostolate. Particularly in the Chinese context, the history has taught us that where the lay apostolate is more active, there is more splendid fruits. Therefore, Chinese missionary disciples need to remember the instructions of Vatican II, that "a true apostle looks for opportunities to announce Christ by words addressed either to non-believers with a view to leading them to faith, or to the faithful with a view to instructing, strengthening, and encouraging them to a more fervent life."²⁶

Last but not the least is the importance of charity work. "You always have the poor with you." (Jn 12:8) From very earliest era of the Church, following the teachings of Jesus, Catholics have always given priority to care for the poor and the most in need. "For this reason, pity for the needy and the sick and works of charity and mutual aid intended to relieve human needs of every kind are held in highest honor by the Church."²⁷ When foreign missionaries came to Chinese lands, they immediately began charity works. There were many kinds of such

²³ Ibid. no.5.

²⁴ Benedict XV, Apostolic Letter, *Maximum illud*, no. 31, 30 November 1919.

²⁵ Vatican II, Decree on the apostolate of the laity, *Apostolicam actuositatem*, no.1, 18 November 1965.

²⁶ Ibid. no.6.

²⁷ Ibid. no.8.

works, in response to the main social issues of the time. They opened clinics, pharmacies, orphanages and schools. These charity works not only earned great honor for the Catholic Church but also contributed so much to Chinese society. The Chinese Catholics who performed charity works during their lay apostolate were, according to Chinese customs, honored as “大善人”“善人”, namely “charitable person,” by the whole area.²⁸ The previously mentioned Chinese missionary disciple. Lu Bohong (陆伯鸿) was the most famous Catholic philanthropist in his time. The most recent well-known Catholic philanthropist is Wang Pingan (王平安), a candidate for “Touching China 2009” (感动中国 2009), who opened a charity institution in his home in Hebei province. Wang honestly stated: “I have faith. Doing things for the poor is doing it for Jesus.”²⁹ In November 2013, This mission to the poor is a central obligation of Chinese society. In fact, the Chinese president Xi Jinping also called on citizens to assist the poor.³⁰ Nevertheless, charity works, particularly by Catholic missionary disciples, are sometimes misunderstood by common people. Therefore, Chinese missionary disciples in doing charity works need to be sensitive, and perform their work with pure heart and intention. The Vatican II council, while it encouraged charity work, pointed out that “It is imperative also that the freedom and dignity of the person being helped be respected with the utmost consideration, that the purity of one’s charitable intentions be not stained by seeking one’s own advantage or by striving for domination.”³¹ The charity works of Chinese missionary disciples are actions driven purely by love of Jesus alone rather than any other causes. The core of commandments from God is to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself. That should be the true basis for Catholic charity work.

²⁸ http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_a0261a090102y9ko.html

²⁹ http://phtv.ifeng.com/project/special/gongmin/zuixin/detail_2010_12/11/3459725_0.shtml

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³¹ Vatican II, Decree on the apostolate of the laity, *Apostolicam actuositatem*, no.8, 18 November 1965.

To sum up, *Missio ad gentes* continues to be a main concern and reflect the definitive nature of the Catholic Church until today. This core mission of the Church cannot be changed, but only strengthened. In the Chinese context, facing ever new situations and changing social contexts, the Catholic Church in China needs to be inspired by a passion for Jesus and a passion for Chinese people. In this, they follow Jesus to be true Chinese missionary disciples to do their mission urgently and diligently both *ad intra* and *ad extra*.

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