

Matteo Ricci Conference, 8 May 2010

Introductory address by Patrick Claffey SVD

Please forgive me if I start my introduction to our short conference commemorating this quatercentenary of the death of Matteo Ricci on a somewhat personal note based on my own missionary experience. I can still remember very clearly arriving in West Africa, having left Dublin covered in deep snow, on the 25th of November 1977, at the relatively young age of twenty-six. The heat at Kotoka airport in Accra, the sounds, sights and smells of the following days in Ghana; a long, dusty trip to what was to be my first station in a bush town in northern Togo, the encounter with African culture in all its vibrant colour, the encounter with African religious tradition which jumped out all over the place in shrines, and sacrificial offerings and most important of all the encounter with African people in all their complexity over the following days and eventually years.

Fresh out of Maynooth, not exactly a hotbed of contextual theology, and looking back at the theology I had done there, it didn't take me too long to come to the point where I said to myself: "Well, so much for all of that, it's certainly not going to get me very far here. There has to be some other way." And in many ways that is where I parked my theology, such as it was, and somehow started all over again, trying over the following twenty-five years to rearticulate the message of faith in a way that made some kind of sense to the people I was talking to and living with every day; trying to make links, sometimes very tenuous or even dubious, with the culture that surrounded me. It was a tremendous adventure in many ways, a search for words and expressions, and looking again at the meaning of things. In several ways the culture had many aspects that were closer to the biblical world than the one I had left behind. The scriptures took on a new meaning and, of course, this led one to do theology again albeit in a very different way.

It is the challenge every missionary encounters, some take to it with great enthusiasm, many don't really try at all and simply rehash doctrinal niceties in a language that is incomprehensible to the people they are addressing, and some find it extremely difficult and are broken by it quite quickly. It is an encounter that has resulted in a lot of damage both to the missionaries themselves and to the cultures they are entering into, and, at the same time, it is also an encounter that has brought forth some remarkable men and some outstanding achievements, and none more so perhaps than Matteo Ricci.

For many missionaries he is an iconic figure, striking in his flowing robes, with his long beard and serene face, as on our wonderful poster, but also in his approach to and reverence for China's ancient and very developed culture. He was, as the translator of his most important work *Tien-cho Shih-I* or *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven* says "a pioneer in attempting to render into Chinese

the theological and philosophical ideas of the West”¹, faltering and hesitant, as he himself acknowledged, but with tremendous dedication. But in order to do so he had to first of all open up to the wisdom of that ancient civilisation and engage with its philosophical riches. This he also did.

The American political scientist Samuel Huntington several years ago wrote a very widely read, and in my view quite pernicious, article in the journal *Foreign Affairs* ² which subsequently became a book entitled *The Clash of Civilisation and the Remaking of the World Order*. In it Huntington drew up a list of nine major world civilisations³, including the Sinic or Chinese, suggesting in his preface that “the central and most dangerous dimension of the emerging global politics would be conflicts between groups from differing civilisations” adding that “clashes of civilisations are the greatest threat to world peace...”⁴

The Christian understanding of mission, at its best, is a refutation of just such a thesis. It is, on the contrary, an attempt to build bridges, bridges of mutual understanding across cultural and civilisation boundaries. John Paul II notes that “The speeches in Lystra and Athens (cf. Acts 14:15-17; 17:22-31) are acknowledged as models for the evangelization of the Gentiles. In these speeches Paul enters into "dialogue" with the cultural and religious values of different peoples.”⁵ This is very different to a discourse based on confrontation and clash.

At the same time, of course, it is an attempt to share the riches of a reality that is above all cultures and owned by none – the reality of God as it is being expressed so beautifully in the text from John’s gospel that we are reading in these days of the Easter Season. It is of course the idea of mission as *dialogue* and it demands a great openness and at the same time a great humility and willingness to listen and to learn. Ricci seems to have had this in abundance. There is a wonderful little passage at the end of the introduction to *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven* which illustrates this very well. He writes with great simplicity:

Although we know only a little about the GREAT LORD OF HEAVEN, the advantage of knowing this little is still more than that of knowing much about other things. It is my hope that those who read this *True Meaning* do not belittle the doctrine about THE LORD OF HEAVEN because of the poverty of my writing. The universe cannot contain THE LORD OF HEAVEN. How can this slight book contain Him?⁶

¹ Douglas Lancashire and Peter Hu Kuo-chen, S.J (translators), Matteo Ricci *Tien-cho Shih-I of The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven*, Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1985.

² Samuel Huntington, ‘The Clash of Civilizations’, *Foreign Affairs* 72, 3, 1993, pp. 23-49.

³ He listed these as Western, Latin American, African, Islamic, Sinic, Hindu,, Orthodox, Buddhist, Japanese.

⁴ Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilisations and the Remaking of the World Order*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996.

⁵ *Redemptoris Missio* #25

⁶ *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven* p.63

It is quite a remarkable little passage and surely a measure of the man. The challenge of translating the message of faith in a way that has both theological integrity and cultural accessibility is surely the greatest challenge of mission. Ricci is somebody we can look to in this context even today. I have gone well beyond my competence I dealing with him here and we are indeed very fortunate this morning in having with us Fr M. Antoni J. Üçerler SJ, Research Fellow and Senior Tutor at Oxford, who has also been closely associated with the Ricci Institute. He will no doubt offer us valuable insights into Ricci both in his own time and also perhaps what we can learn from him today.

In organizing this conference we did not wish to confine ourselves simply to the historical Ricci but also to look at the situation of the Church in contemporary China. In an important work published in 2002, Philip Jenkins, professor of history and religious studies at Penn State University, suggested what the future may hold in regard to religious developments and their consequences for the world. He argues that Christianity will in important ways shape the future as its adherents in the Southern nations of Africa, Latin America, and Asia grow in numbers while those in the Northern nations decline.⁷ He suggests that the “centre of gravity” in the Christian world will shift from north to south and that Christianity itself will take on a very different form in these new social and cultural contexts, and indeed this is already manifest in many parts of the world.

Nobody who has any interest in world affairs over the past twenty years will have ignored the growing importance of China on the world stage. It has gone through a period of rapid economic development, not without negative consequences. At the same time there has been a slow and sometimes hesitant opening to Christianity and a growing realisation of the role it might play in society. At this point it seems quite possible that Christianity will be part of the increasing modernisation of China. Religious statistics are often difficult to establish, however one source suggests indicates that 3%-4% of all the population in China are Christians (2002 est.)⁸ Independent estimates have ranged from 40 million to 100 million.⁹ What is clear is that it is a very significant number and it is growing.

We are fortunate this morning to have two people who can give us a much better picture not just of the statistics but of the life of the Church as it is lived in China today. My confrere Willi Müller has an academic background in Oriental languages and he has spent many years in China in different capacities going as far back as 1983. He has been editor of the specialist Chinese Studies journal *Monumenta Serica*, English Editor of *Tibet Studies* in Beijing and a visiting scholar to various universities and institutes in China. He worked at the Vatican, Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples in the section for China, Korea and Mongolia and more recently was rector of the Asian

⁷ Phillip Jenkins *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2002,

⁸ *The CIA World Factbook - China*

⁹ Johnstone, Patrick (2001). *Operation World*. London: Paternoster. p.167

Cultural Centre John Paul II" [for Chinese and Vietnamese priests], at Collegio Urbano, Rome; Lecturer on Confucianism at the Urbaniana.

Finally we are fortunate to have Fr John Lee Hua who is the Provincial Delegate of the Chinese Province, who can offer us a view of the church but also more particularly the Society of Jesus in China today.

We are very aware of the difficulties the Church is living through in our own society today, it is surely helpful and encouraging for us to see how others live the faith in very different and sometimes difficult circumstances. We can look forward to a very interesting and informative morning.

Patrick Claffey

Gonzaga College, Dublin

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