

# **THE JESUITS AND CHINA: reinterpreting Matteo Ricci's work.**

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## **Abstract**

The experience of the first Jesuits in China (especially Matthew Ricci) gives us an array of analysis on the cultural dialogue between different civilizations. In this paper will show the methods used by those Jesuits and the problems experienced by the rejects them.

To translate Christianity into the Chinese idiom, Ricci had to innovate. For example, the Chinese did not have a word for "God," so Ricci at first used T'ien Chu, "Lord of Heaven."

Later he decided that T'ien ("heaven") alone already had theistic overtones to the Chinese. He also believed that terms like Sheng, often translated "holy," were used in a wide sense to describe anything held as venerable. Thus Ricci used it when referring to Confucius. And in order to honor local traditions, he permitted his converts to continue many ancient customs, like ancestor "worship." Ricci's methods came under fire almost immediately, especially from competing orders, the Dominicans and Franciscans, who were jealous of Jesuit success. The affair became known as the Chinese Rites Controversy. Rome tended to take the side of the friars and tried to curtail Ricci's work. Peking, on the other hand, sided with the Jesuits, and the controversy raged for centuries without being resolved. (ChristianHistory.net).

A description of how Matthew Ricci and others understood what was the best way to enter into relations with China as the Vatican rejected such methods. An analysis of the concepts behind those practices and conclusions gives us the world today for dialogue between cultures and civilizations.

**Key Words:** Jesuits- China- Ricci- Vatican - intercultural dialogue – globalization

## 耶穌會與中國：重新詮釋利馬竇的作工

### THE JESUITS AND CHINA: reinterpreting Matteo Ricci's work.

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#### 摘要

最早的耶穌會在中國的經驗（尤其是利馬竇），給了我們關於不同文明之間的文化對話的大量分析。這篇論文將說明耶穌會所使用的方法，以及他們所遭遇的阻抗問題。

在將基督宗教翻譯成中國語言方面，利馬竇必須有所創新。例如說，中國並沒有「GOD」一詞，於是率先使用「天主」。

後來，他發現對於中國人而言，「天」就已經有了有神論的意含。他也相信，諸如「聖」之類的語詞，可以更廣義的用來形容任何莊嚴的事物。於是利馬竇在提到孔子時用到它。為了尊重當地的傳統，他容許歸正者延續許多古老的習俗，例如祖先「崇拜」。利馬竇的方法立即飽受抨擊，特別是和他們分庭抗禮的修會，道明會和方濟會，他們很妒嫉耶穌會的成就。這就是著名的「中國禮儀之爭」。羅馬教廷偏向修會這邊，試圖削減利馬竇的職務。另一方面，北京則支持耶穌會，而該爭論吵了數百年沒有解決。

我要描述的是利馬竇和其他人認為什麼是和中國建立關係的最佳途徑，而梵諦岡則拒絕這些方法。分析在這些實踐和結論背後的概念，可以讓我們反省現在不同的文化和文明之間的對話。

關鍵詞：耶穌會、中國、利馬竇、跨文化對話、全球化。

## **THE JESUITS AND CHINA: reinterpreting Matteo Ricci's work.**

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A new stage has opened in China's relationship with the world and the world's relationship with China, one that urges greater understanding. What the Chinese think is currently subject of recent commentaries and reports. Meanwhile, throughout China we can see growing interest in understanding the western world, in getting to know the ideas of Socrates, Plato or Aristotle. For many, as was revealed at an international conference held in Santiago, Chile, in mid-2014, it is worth asking oneself: What do Plato and Confucius bring to the 21st century?<sup>1</sup>

What is at stake in the globalized world is how to understand "the other" and, beyond that, how to live with the other, accepting diversity and cultural differences, values and traditions that uphold the world vision that the other is not less or subject to domination due to this difference. In this context, the experience of Matteo Ricci and the Jesuits in China is particularly enlightening: they practiced "inculturation," the method whereby they sought to insert their own message within the Chinese people's customs, traditions and beliefs.

The Jesuits' relationship with China has a long history and it takes on special meaning today, with a Jesuit in the Vatican as Pope, arriving in Rome from Latin America, the southern end of the world. But he also has the personal experience of being the descendant of Italian immigrants, who arrived in Argentina in such great numbers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

An examination of the Jesuits' experience and the methods of dialogue in China during the period spanning from 1580 to 1700 provides a window to contemporary cultural interactions. It expressed a form of respect for the culture encountered, acknowledgment of having arrived in a world that – notwithstanding its difference – had accumulated centuries of intellectual work and cultural consolidation. Many of the west's areas of knowledge did not exist in China – in astronomy, mathematics, physics and in other sciences – but that did not mean going in with a perspective of "cultural domination," but rather it was closer to what is today known as "interculturalism." This concept goes far beyond the multicultural or the implicit value of plurality. The concept interculturalism is aimed at describing the interaction between two or more cultures in a horizontal and synergetic way.

And in this context, it is a process that, in general, is developed in four stages:

**Respect:** Treating people with dignity, as individuals. Respectful listening and free expression of perceptions and beliefs. Acknowledgment of *otherness* (existence of other models for perceiving reality).

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<sup>1</sup> [http://spanish.china.org.cn/international/txt/2014-07/02/content\\_32839331.htm](http://spanish.china.org.cn/international/txt/2014-07/02/content_32839331.htm)

**Horizontal dialogue:** Interaction with equal opportunities. Acknowledgment that there is no single truth. Empowerment. Construction of a horizontal "win-win" relationship.

**Mutual understanding:** Understanding of the other(s). Mutual enrichment, understanding and resonance (capacity and willingness to understand and to incorporate what has been proposed by the other). Empathy.

**Synergy:** Obtaining results that are hard to obtain independently from a single perspective. Value of diversity, where one plus one is more than two.<sup>2</sup>

If this methodology can be seen in many aspects of the Jesuit mission in China, we cannot see it at all in the Church's presence – alongside the arms of the *conquistadores* – in the so-called New World after Columbus discovered it.

The civilizations they found there were splendid. When the Spanish *conquistador* Hernán Cortés came upon the Mexico Valley, what he saw there was the largest city his eyes had ever beheld: a beautiful city built among diverse interconnected lakes with modern communications solutions via its canals, with large temples and buildings dedicated to gods and powers, to games, markets and a perfectly organized life. It was Tenochtitlan with its 200,000 inhabitants, part of the two major cultural developments in Mesoamerica: *Náhuatl* and *Maya* culture. They were peoples with superior astronomical and medical knowledge sustained in illustrations and books that reveal a historical accumulation that is evidence of their interest in preserving the memory of past events.<sup>3</sup> And there was another great empire in South America, equally developed in its beliefs, architecture and diverse areas of knowledge. The Spanish *conquistadores* destroyed, eliminated, burned and killed: the culture they encountered was neither respected nor studied as a subject. In fact, after it was decided that the Indians in these lands were "subjects with souls," especially after Father Bartolomé de las Casas's steadfast defense, the goal has been for them to acknowledge the barbarianism of their own history, to embrace the cross or die like heretics.

But the way that the *conquistadores* acted in the Americas, wielding a cross in one hand and a sword in the other, is not very different from how *Euro-Christianity* reacts to other cultures (especially Muslim ones) that it considers barbaric and heretical. In this context, the Jesuits' attitude in China is an exception. It is true that they arrived alone, that they went as missionaries with the idea of expanding Christianity and getting "the other to convert," but their strategy was framed in the context of respect for the civilization that was receiving them. When projected to the 21st century it emerges as a reference for the way that relations between the West and China could be.

## Signs in the Present

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<sup>2</sup> Alcina, Miquel. *La comunicación intercultural* Edit. Antropos. 2003, Barcelona, Spain.

<sup>3</sup> Miguel León-Portilla and others. *Visión de los Vencidos: relación indígena de la conquista*. UNAM, Mexico, 1972.

Cardinal Bergoglio became Pope Francis on the same day that Xi Jinping became President of China. And neither of them will be able to avoid contributing to a 21st century intercultural dialogue, albeit from their respective traditions, visions and values. To this end, in 2007 the Jesuits received Benedict XVI's instructions to "work on the frontiers," a task that in modern terms meant approaching all of the complex issues of contemporary globalism. That was the framework of their work in China.

As we know, China does not have diplomatic relations with the Holy See because it moved to Taiwan after the People's Republic of China was created. There is an official Catholic Church (Patriotic Church) and a minority church that is "subjugated" and obeys the Vatican, both for a Catholic population of 10-12 million. But that does not prevent gestures and rapprochements every now and then. One example is the statements by Foreign Ministry Spokesman Hua Chunying after the Argentine cardinal's election as Pope:

*"We congratulate the bishop of Argentina for becoming the new Pope. We hope that the Roman Church, under the leadership of the new Pope, can collaborate with China and make joint efforts to create favorable conditions for improving relations between both sides."*

Of course, this rapprochement has to overcome significant obstacles. But the Jesuits know that and have gradually been forging ties in China anyway. Something important happened in the first week of July 2007, which the Chilean embassy in that country could not be left out of. The same day that Pope Benedict XVI published his letter to Catholics in China (a text that was well-received in Beijing), 26 Spanish speaking provincial Jesuits arrived in the Asian country to get to know it better and gain a closer understanding of it. The group, comprised of Society of Jesus provincials from Spain, Italy, Portugal and Latin America, visited China and attended a conference on Chinese reality.

Logically, the meeting was held with the authorities' blessing and more than one conversation was held on these issues with representatives of the Communist Party. Issues like the impact of modernity on Chinese men and women and cultural interactions in a globalized world were among those addressed in these exchanges. At the same time, the participants heard diverse conferences from foreign academics residing in Beijing. The Chilean embassy offered the visitors a reception for a very special reason: the first Latin American Jesuit saint is Chilean: Father Alberto Hurtado.

Society of Jesus Superior General, Father Peter-Hans Kolvenbach resigned in January 2008 after turning 80. On that occasion, he said that Jesuits are living "waiting for the time" to fulfill their desire to return to China, a country they were present in from the Company's origins. Now his successor, the Spaniard Adolfo Nicolás who, in addition to enthusiastically saluting the new Pope, said: "We share the joy of the entire Church, while at same time we wish to renew our willingness to be sent to the Lord's vineyard, in keeping with the spirit of our special vow of obedience."

Could China be part of that Lord's vineyard that the Jesuits are talking about? The scenario of the rapprochement has changed and that favors work in Asia, which they are experts in. Current Superior Nicolás lived in Tokyo for years, where he was in charge of the Asia Pacific Conference. He was jointly responsible for the entire Jesuit region of East Asia, which spans from Myanmar (Burma) and China to Micronesia in the Pacific.

In 1982, on the 400th anniversary of the Jesuits' arrival on Chinese shores, an important celebration was held in Rome. Nothing happened in Beijing. But in 2010, on the 400th anniversary of Father Mateo Ricci's

death, a great exhibition was held in one of Beijing's best museums, with over 200 works and paintings sent from Italy and which was inaugurated by Chinese ministers and authorities. China's official television network CCTV said at the time:

*"Ricci presented many gifts to the emperor, including representations of God and the Virgin Mary. These paintings surprised ministers and the royal family. From that moment the Chinese started getting to know Western religions, especially Catholicism. It was also the prelude to the artistic exchange between China and the West. Ricci was the first person to gain the Chinese people's trust and to inspire their curiosity in the Western world."*

Pope Francis flew over China when he traveled to South Korea. He was able to do so because, in contrast to what happened with John Paul II on a similar trip in 1989, this time he was authorized to do so. Upon reaching the Chinese border, Pope Francis sent Xi Jinping a message:

*"Before entering Chinese airspace, I send Your Excellence and your fellow citizens my best wishes and invoke divine blessings of peace and wellbeing for the entire nation."*

There might be new moves to bring the Vatican and Beijing closer to each other. But Pope Francis knows that the best way to get there will to always keep in mind the experience and lessons that Matteo Ricci and his successors left behind on their way to understanding China and how to relate with its reality. This is why that experience is now being reviewed with particular interest by both the Vatican as well as Beijing.

### **Ricci's mark**

Matteo Ricci – whose Chinese name was Li Madou – spent 28 years in China: almost half of his life. In 1583, Ricci was charged with leading the first Jesuit mission to China and he came to be received by Emperor Wan Li. He had studied astronomy and mathematics in Rome, traveled to India, where he was ultimately ordained as a priest, and then continued in Macao to start studying Chinese. His fluent command of the language enabled him to translate Euclid's "Elements" and to draw the first map of the world made in China and with Chinese calligraphy. He also traveled that road in the opposite direction: he translated the "Four Books" of Confucianism into Latin, the manuscript of which is kept in Rome to this day.

Both Ricci as well as the companions who were sent with him followed the adaptation guidelines of their brother Alessandro Valignano (1539-1606), Visitor to the Far East, who proposed an "inculturated" apostolic activity. As the Jesuit priest Carlos Hallet described,<sup>4</sup> they understood that they would not be accepted in China other than as scholars and wise men. The persecutions were motivated by the pretext that Christianity was a foreign religion, so it was therefore necessary to show that the new religion was not opposed to what existed, but rather that it came to enrich it. That meant studying Chinese culture in depth and having full command of the language, in addition to demonstrating the valuable contribution that Christians made to national culture. This was helped along by the scientific contributions of the missionaries, made with humbleness and always showing great respect for Chinese realities, even when they went against certain very old traditions.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://test.tercermilenio.ucn.cl/index.php/2010/06/matteo-ricci-y-sus-companeros-en-la-china-del-siglo-xvii/>

It is important to analyze the itinerary of Ricci and his companions in China: there is persistence, adaptation to circumstances and the quest to reach the elite. The idea was that the masses ought to be sought out from the maximum heights of society. Ricci reached Macao, another small Portuguese territory located on the southern Chinese coast, in 1582, accompanied by another Jesuit companion with a particular talent for languages: Father Michele Ruggieri, founder of the mission in China. They managed to reach Canton, capital of Guangdong province, the major Chinese city of the day, where they were given permission to live. They founded China's first Jesuit residence in Zhaoqing.

There he drew a map of the world to show the Chinese the existence of three continents: Europe, Africa and America. He continued to forge ties, especially in the area of astronomy and mathematics, gaining the trust of certain scholars. But they were still expelled and moved to Shaozhou, where they installed themselves in 1589. There they realized that the social rank of monks was lower than that of scholars or educated people, so they decided to dress as scholars and, like them, allowed their hair and beards to grow. By then Ricci had already dominated the Chinese language and he translated Confucius's Four Books into Latin, entitling them *Tetrabiblon sinense de moribus* (the manuscript is kept in the Company of Jesus archives in Rome). Likewise, Ricci came up with the first system for transcribing the Chinese language into Roman letters. These two achievements in and of themselves justify Ricci being considered the father of western sinology.<sup>5</sup>

There he worked to translate Euclid's Elements into Chinese with the mathematician Xu Guangqi. Impregnated by Confucius's thinking and his influence on Chinese history, he assumes that the idea of the Lord of Heaven makes it possible to explain the existence of a single God and Christian doctrine, which he describes in his book "The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven." His translation of Confucius's "Four Books" is his great contribution to Chinese thought in the west. His book "Friendship," increasingly appreciated as a text for interacting with Chinese developments, is also a product of that stage. Pope Benedict XVI stressed that contribution on the 400th anniversary of Ricci's death, in 2010:

*In addition, what made his apostolate so original and – we could say – prophetic, was surely the deep sympathy toward the Chinese, their history, their cultures, and religious traditions. One only needs to recall his treatise on friendship (De amicitia Jiaoyoulun), which was a great success from its first edition in Nanking in 1595. It was a model of dialogue and respect for the beliefs of others and made friendship into the trademark of his apostolate for the 28 years he spent in China. The friendship that he offered was responded in kind by local populations precisely thanks to the atmosphere of respect and esteem that he tried to cultivate, concerning himself with getting to always gain better knowledge of the Chinese traditions of the time.*<sup>6</sup>

He also worked making clocks and other members of the community, such as Diego de Pantoja, made instruments like the clavichord, until then unknown in China. Ricci was named superior of the mission in China in 1597. His desire was to reach the city where the emperor lived: Beijing. He started the trip in

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<sup>5</sup> [http://www.tendencias21.net/Ricci-un-esfuerzo-por-inculturar-ciencia-y-religion-en-la-China-Imperial\\_a4418.html](http://www.tendencias21.net/Ricci-un-esfuerzo-por-inculturar-ciencia-y-religion-en-la-China-Imperial_a4418.html)

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.zenit.org/es/articles/mensaje-del-papa-sobre-el-gran-evangelizador-de-china-matteo-ricci>

1598 but was to stay in Nanking from 1599 to 1600. He was highly appreciated in that city and was viewed as a wise and saintly man. Wan Li, 13th emperor of the Ming dynasty, summoned Ricci and he arrived in Beijing in 1601. Together with Ruggieri, they were allowed a house and to build a chapel. There Ricci was to multiply his contacts with scholars and he prepared the gifts that he was to bring the emperor.

There was also the flow of information to Europe. In addition to Confucius's books, he authored the first atlas that gave Europe an idea of the immensity of Chinese territory, which is why he is considered to be the father of Chinese geographic science. He wrote the first Chinese grammar book. He also wrote the History of the War against the Tartars and the end of the Ming Dynasty. Upon his death in 1610, he was given the honor of being buried in Beijing in a mausoleum that was inside imperial grounds.

Here it is important to underscore Matteo Ricci's own testimony, describing in a letter from 1595 the way his relations with the Chinese environment were unfolding:

*"I cannot say how welcomed I have been in this city, something that I attribute to five causes. The first is [the fact] of coming to see a foreigner, something unprecedented, even more so one who knows the country's language, science, customs and ceremonies. The second is the fame that has spread that we can make real silver from quicksilver [mercury], and many people came to learn that science, which is something they value highly. And regardless of how much I say that I know nothing of that matter, the less they believe me. The third [reason] is [the fact that] I have an art [that develops] memory that allows me to retain four hundred or five hundred words in my memory and recite them back to front with ease after reading them just once. The fourth [reason] is the fame that I have gained among them in mathematics and the truth be told, among them I am a sort of Ptolemy (...) Scholars and other educated people are pleased to hear the causes of [that] appearance and want me to teach them mathematics, something I am considering doing if I stay here. The fifth [reason] is the desire that many people have to hear things [related to] their salvation, so much so that they beg me of it on their knees. And the academics themselves, who do not believe in the immortality of the soul, say that our law is true because of the debates that I have held with them, after which they sink to the floor without contradicting me and thank me for the good doctrine that I have taught them."*

### **The Chinese Rites and the controversy over the missionary work**

Everything that the Jesuits did under Ricci continued under his successors. But they found growing obstacles to their task. In 1651, Father Martino left China as his order's delegate to inform the Holy See on the "missionary inculturation" of Jesuits on the continent. In March 1656 the Propaganda of the Faith issued a decree in favor of the Jesuits' work, but that was to be no more than a step. The controversy became known as the matter of the Chinese Rites.

The first prohibition of Chinese rites (essentially the veneration of ancestors and Confucius) was issued by Pope Innocent X in 1645. Alexander VII authorized them in 1656, but there was a new interdiction by Clement XI in 1704. Benedict XIII gave the Jesuits eight permits in 1721, but in 1742 Benedict XIV confirmed Clement XI's condemnation and thus Christianity's interdiction in China was sealed.

To be sure, at the root of the controversy were the diverse ways of understanding how evangelization ought to be undertaken. The Jesuits, with inculturation, the study of the Chinese language, the use of science and, above all, great respect for Chinese culture, were ahead of their time. The Catholic Church



attained great prestige in China thanks to the Jesuits. The Jesuits wanted to follow their own apostolic method based on prudent missionary adaptation, which tended to take advantage of whatever there was of use among the peoples where the mission was and which could be condensed into that dual function: adapting what is ours to theirs and adopting what is theirs as part of what is ours, as long as it can be integrated into Christianity. When it comes to China, this can be reduced to three main points: 1) the name or word that must be assigned to God, 2) the homage paid to Confucius, 3) the homage paid to deceased ancestors.<sup>7</sup>

As the Argentine researcher Ana Carolina Hosne says in her excellent work, the Jesuits' excessive inculturation – that is, respect and assimilation of Chinese social rituals and rewriting the contents of the faith in the cultural contexts – brought them problems.<sup>8</sup> In Catholic liturgy, the Jesuits accepted many of the rituals, something that aroused suspicion and alarm among ecclesiastic hierarchies. The Jesuits in China had advanced ideas and open minds.

As professor Hosne details, after studying the Chinese classics, Ricci concluded that ancient Confucians were monotheists. This was because they had revered God in the figure of the heaven (tien) or the Lord of the Heights (Shang di), who with omniscience and omnipotence would reward virtue and punish evil. Under this conviction, Ricci was to fight to rescue elements of a supposed ancient monotheistic Confucianism that, in his opinion, had become distorted by the presence of *neo-Confucianism*, with strong Buddhist and Taoist foundations.

Thus, for Ricci the real God was not unknown to the Chinese, who had allegedly been the recipients of divine revelation. This is why Ricci and his successors would speak of the True Lord of Heaven (Tian zhu) along with the term Lord of the Heights (Shang di). They recognized a Supreme Being, while the emperor was in charge of the rites and sacrifices to the spirits of the mountains, rivers, and ancestors.

This was not a problem for Ricci, given that all these spirits were subordinated to the Supreme Being. Ricci and some of the Jesuits who followed him based themselves on the fact that the essence of the rites, which included the worship of ancestors, the emperor and Confucius, was not religious. And they were very aware that if they opposed them they could expect few converts. But, as the debates of the 17th century show, the issue of the rites was to become truly fundamental to closing that chapter of the Jesuits in China.

### **Vindication of Ricci and connections with today's China**

Thus, one can conclude that Ricci conceived of Christianity in China in the context of its harmony with the Confucian precepts that had been molding society and the state in imperial China for centuries. And

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<sup>7</sup> [http://www.tendencias21.net/Ricci-un-esfuerzo-por-inculturar-ciencia-y-religion-en-la-China-Imperial\\_a4418.html](http://www.tendencias21.net/Ricci-un-esfuerzo-por-inculturar-ciencia-y-religion-en-la-China-Imperial_a4418.html)

<sup>8</sup> Ana Carolina Hose. *“Usar la razón para condenar la herejía: El catecismo (1603) del jesuita Matteo Ricci en la China de los Ming tardíos”* In: Revista del Programa de Historia de América Latina. Vol. I. Primera Sección: Vitral Monográfico, Nro. 1. Instituto Ravignani, Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, Universidad de Buenos Aires. Buenos Aires, 2008.

that is the reason why his work is vindicated today and it acquires new meaning, especially when Confucius's thinking and his figure have also been revived in contemporary China.

In his message organized in 2001 to commemorate the 400th anniversary of Matteo Ricci's arrival in Beijing, Pope John Paul II strongly emphasized that contemporary projection of the work done by the Jesuit missionary, a text that – over several paragraphs – contains trends and approaches to the Vatican's vision of the ties that must be forged with China in the 21st century:

*“For four centuries China has highly esteemed Li Madou, 'the Sage of the West,' the name by which Father Matteo Ricci was known and continues to be known today. Historically and culturally he was a pioneer, 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...Father Matteo Ricci made himself so "Chinese with the Chinese" that he became an expert Sinologist, in the deepest cultural and spiritual sense of the term, for he achieved in himself an extraordinary inner harmony between priest and scholar, between Catholic and orientalist, between Italian and Chinese...”*

*"One of the aspects that make Father Ricci's work in China original and enduringly relevant is the deep empathy which he cultivated from the first towards the whole history, culture and tradition of the Chinese people. His short Treatise on Friendship (De Amicitia – Jiaoyoulun), which had great success from the first edition produced in Nanking in 1595, and the wide and intense network of friendships which he constantly built up during his twenty-eight years in the country, remain an irrefutable testimony to his loyalty, sincerity and fellowship with the people who had welcomed him. These sentiments and attitudes of the highest respect sprang from the esteem in which he held the culture of China, to the point of leading him to study, interpret and explain the ancient Confucian tradition and thus offer a re-evaluation of the Chinese classics."*

*"The Chinese people, especially in more recent times, have set themselves important objectives in the field of social progress. The Catholic Church for her part regards with respect this impressive thrust and far-sighted planning, and with discretion offers her own contribution in the promotion and defense of the human person, and of the person's values, spirituality and transcendent vocation. The Church has very much at heart the values and objectives which are of primary importance also to modern China: solidarity, peace, social justice, the wise management of the phenomenon of globalization, and the civil progress of all peoples...It is with this renewed and deeply-felt friendship towards all the Chinese people that I express the hope that concrete forms of communication and cooperation between the Holy See and the People's Republic of China may soon be established. Friendship is nourished by contacts, by a sharing in the joy and sadness of different situations, by solidarity and mutual assistance. The Apostolic See sincerely seeks to be a friend to all peoples and to collaborate with persons of good will everywhere in the world."<sup>9</sup>*

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<sup>9</sup> [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/speeches/2001/october/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_spe\\_20011024\\_matteo-ricci\\_sp.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/speeches/2001/october/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_20011024_matteo-ricci_sp.html)

Pope Francis sent a new sign of rapprochement from South Korea, in August 2014. There, according to the EFE Agency, he paved the way for the expansion of Catholicism in Asia by suggesting the establishment of diplomatic relations to countries such as China and North Korea.

“The message was conveyed on the fourth day of his visit to South Korea before a group of about 70 Asian bishops at the Shrine of Haemi (West). Although the Pontiff did not mention any country in particular, the unanimous interpretation is that his words were directed at the Beijing Government, with which the Holy See holds strained relations”.

“I earnestly hope that those countries of your continent with whom the Holy See does not yet enjoy a full relationship, may not hesitate to further a dialogue for the benefit of all ”, said the Pope.

The Vatican does not have relations with China, North Korea, Laos, Burma, Bhutan and Brunei, but the first contacts and agreements regarding the appointment of Bishops were initiated with Viet Nam.<sup>10</sup>

“*Do I want to go to China? Of course, tomorrow!*” answered the Pope to the journalists on in-flight conference during his return trip from South Korea.

“*We respect the Chinese people; it is just that the Church seeks freedom for her mission, for her work; no other condition*”, he added in that press conference, where he also remarked that on the way to South Korea, when the plane overflew Chinese airspace, he prayed hard “for that great and noble Chinese people, a wise people.”

He expressed similar terms in the letter he decided to send President Xi Jinping via two special emissaries in early September. Despite being informed, this gesture was handled in a low profile manner. In the handwritten letter he invited the Chinese President to visit him at his home in Santa Marta so they could meditate together for world peace and expressed his willingness to travel to China, "tomorrow".

In Beijing, three days later, the Chinese Government designated one of its diplomats with broad Latin American experience, who has organized the visits of President Xi Jinping to our continent, and has the President's total confidence, to receive the letter – an official document from the Vatican, sealed and stamped – from the hands of Ricardo Romano, leader of Argentina's Justicialist Party, and José Luján, representative of the Chinese Academy of Sciences to the Mercosur<sup>11</sup>

A communication of this nature was considered to be an unprecedented event.

In sum, steps were taken, gentle, subtle, but with prospects. The relationship between China and the Holy See can move onto another stage in the framework of the seeds planted by Father Matteo Ricci 400 years ago.

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.laopinion.com/papa-francisco-china-corea>.

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.infobae.com/2014/09/16/1595168-un-enviado-argentino-llevo-una-carta-del-papa-francisco-al-presidente-china>

