

Dead monk gives hope to Chinese catholics

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Matteo Ricci died in Beijing nearly 400 years ago but the Vatican is expressing hope that celebrations marking the life of this extraordinary Jesuit missionary, who spread Christianity and science in the imperial court, might help foster an eventual breakthrough in relations with communist China.

Although Ricci is little known in his native Italy he is still widely admired in China, where he is known as Li Madou, as one of the first foreigners to be accepted into the emperor's Forbidden City and accorded the then unique honour of land granted for his tomb.

Pope Benedict XVI has made restoration of relations with China, broken off after the 1949 revolution, his chief diplomatic goal. A year ago there were signs of progress but still the two sides have failed to overcome an array of complex issues, including who has the final say in appointing bishops and the fate of Church properties confiscated by the state.

As an example of a priest who learned and respected Chinese culture, Ricci's life is being commended by both sides as a "bridge of dialogue".

"It is a very delicate affair," commented Gjon Kolndrekaj, a Catholic Kosovo Albanian who spent 18 months in China and the Vatican writing a book and directing a documentary on the life of Ricci whose 400th anniversary of his death will be celebrated next year, possibly on the path to sainthood.

Father Federico Lombardi, a Jesuit and the Vatican's spokesman, says Pope Benedict wanted to underline how Ricci respected the strong allegiance of Chinese converts to their country, anticipating the Second Vatican Council, which concluded in 1965 with an expression of respect for other religions.

Commenting officially on Mr Kolndrekaj's work, Father Lombardo says the anniversary can provide the occasion for "contacts, studies and a deepening of relations between the Catholic Church and Chinese culture to underline how Christianity can bring a positive contribution to relations between men and culture for constructing a global civilisation based on reciprocal respect and common promotion of good will, justice and peace".

The documentary, says Mr Kolndrekaj, marks the first time that the Jesuit order has given their official seal of approval to such a project. It was also commended by the Chinese embassy in Rome and sent to Beijing. In a symbolic diplomatic gesture, the Vatican intends to invite China's ambassador to Rome to the first preview on June 18.

Mr Kolndrekaj was given rare access in Beijing to complete his work. "They understood I was not a fanatic of the Vatican but sensitive to their culture," he told the FT.

Born in 1552 in Macata in northern Italy, Ricci entered the newly established Jesuit order and arrived in Macao, then a Portuguese enclave, in 1582, bringing a painting of the Madonna that introduced the first example of artistic perspective to China, as well as books, maps, musical instruments and clocks.

After many setbacks, the expert on the Chinese classics was commissioned to draw a map of the world including China, which at the time believed the world to be square. He finally arrived in Beijing in 1601 when he was first imprisoned by powerful court eunuchs but eventually allowed into the Forbidden city. He never actually met Wan Li, the Ming dynasty emperor, bowing instead to an empty throne.

He taught music, baptized families of officials, wrote mathematical works in Chinese, and compiled dictionaries of Chinese in Latin and Portuguese. He was received as ambassador of the western world even at a time when the imperial power of Spain was denied official recognition.

Ricci's greatest contribution was to respect and incorporate Chinese rites into the Roman Catholic liturgy. Sadly, after his death, Pope Clemente XI rejected Chinese rites as irreconcilable with Christianity and missionaries were expelled from China.

For the moment China's communist government does not allow its Catholics to recognize the authority of the Pope, perpetuating a split among China's 8m to 12m Catholics between those holding allegiance to the officially approved Church and an "underground" movement loyal to the Vatican.

The Vatican said in April that the arrest of a prominent Catholic bishop of the "underground" church "creates obstacles to the climate of dialogue... which the Holy Father has called for".



By Guy Dinmore in Rome June 8, 2009