



# The Holy See

---

**MESSAGE OF POPE JOHN PAUL II  
TO THE PARTICIPANTS  
IN THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE  
COMMEMORATING THE FOURTH CENTENARY  
OF THE ARRIVAL IN BEIJING  
OF FATHER MATTEO RICCI**

*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, S.I.*

1. It gives me great joy to address you, distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, on the occasion of the International Conference commemorating the four hundredth anniversary of the arrival in Beijing of the great Italian missionary, humanist and man of science, Father Matteo Ricci, a celebrated son of the Society of Jesus. My greeting goes in a special way to the Rector of the Pontifical Gregorian University and the Directors of the Italian-Chinese Institute, the two institutions which have sponsored and organized the Conference. In welcoming you, I also extend a cordial greeting to the scholars who have come from China, Father Ricci's beloved adopted country.

I am aware that this Conference in Rome is taking place in a certain continuity with the important International Symposium recently held in Beijing (October 14-17) on the theme *Encounters and Dialogue*, with special reference to the cultural exchanges between China and the West at the end of the Ming Dynasty and the beginning of the Qing Dynasty. There too, scholarly attention was directed to the singular work of Father Matteo Ricci in China.

2. Today's meeting takes us in mind and heart to Beijing, the great capital of modern China and the capital of the "Middle Kingdom" in Father Ricci's time. After twenty-one long years of avid and intense study of the language, history and culture of China, Father Ricci entered Beijing, the city of the Emperor, on 24 January 1601. Received with every honour, held in high regard and frequently

visited by men of letters, mandarins and those desiring to learn the new sciences of which he was an acknowledged master, he lived the rest of his days in the imperial capital, where he died a holy death on 11 May 1610, at the age of 57 years, almost twenty-eight of which had been spent in China. I am pleased here to recall that when Father Ricci arrived in Beijing, he wrote a *Memorial* to the Emperor Wan-li, in which he introduced himself as a celibate religious who *sought no privilege at court*, asking only to be able *to place at the service* of His Majesty his own person and the expertise in the sciences which he had acquired in the "great West" from which he had come (cf. *Opere Storiche del P. Matteo Ricci S.I.*, ed. P. Tacchi Venturi S.J., vol. II, Macerata, 1913, 496ff). The reaction of the Emperor was positive, and this gave greater significance and importance to the Catholic presence in modern China.

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.

As I had occasion to mention on the occasion of the International Congress of Ricci Studies held to commemorate the fourth centenary of Matteo Ricci's arrival in China (1582-1982), his merit lay above all in the realm of *inculturation*. Father Ricci forged a Chinese terminology for Catholic theology and liturgy, and thus created the conditions for making Christ known and for incarnating the Gospel message and the Church within Chinese culture (cf. *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, vol. V/3, 1982, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1982, 923-925). 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.

3. Four hundred years after the arrival of Matteo Ricci in Beijing, we cannot fail to ask what is the message he can offer to the great Chinese nation and to the Catholic Church, to both of which he felt ever deeply bound and by both of which he was and is sincerely valued and loved.

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.

From his first contacts with the Chinese, Father Ricci based his entire scientific and apostolic methodology upon two pillars, to which he remained faithful until his death, despite many difficulties and misunderstandings, both internal and external: *first*, Chinese neophytes, in embracing Christianity, did not in any way have to renounce loyalty to their country; *second*, the Christian revelation of the mystery of God in no way destroyed but in fact enriched and complemented everything beautiful and good, just and holy, in what had been produced and handed down by the ancient Chinese tradition. And just as the Fathers of the Church had done centuries before in the encounter between the Gospel of Jesus Christ and Greco-Roman culture, Father Ricci made this insight the basis of his patient and far-sighted work of inculturation of the faith in China, in the constant search for a common ground of understanding with the intellectuals of that great land.

4. 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 defence 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.

As Father Ricci wrote precisely in Beijing, when in the last two years of his life he was editing that pioneering work which is fundamental for an understanding of China by the rest of the world and which is entitled, *On the Entry of the Society of Jesus and Christianity into China* (cf. *Fonti Ricciane*, a cura di Pasquale M. D'Elia S.I., vol. 2, Roma 1949, No. 617, p. 152), so too today the Catholic Church seeks *no privilege* from China and its leaders, but solely the resumption of dialogue in order to build a relationship based upon mutual respect and deeper understanding.

5. Following the example of this great son of the Catholic Church, I wish to say once more that the Holy See regards the Chinese people with deep affection and close attention. It is familiar with the significant advances made in recent times in the social, economic and educational spheres, as also with the difficulties that remain. Let it be known to China: the Catholic Church has a keen desire to offer, once more, her humble and selfless service for the good of Chinese Catholics and of all the people of the country. In this regard, may I recall at this point the outstanding evangelizing commitment shown by a long line of generous missionaries — men and women — as well as the works of human development which they accomplished down the centuries. They undertook many important social initiatives, particularly in the areas of health care and education, which were widely and gratefully welcomed by the Chinese people.

History, however, reminds us of the unfortunate fact that the work of members of the Church in China was not always without error, the bitter fruit of their personal limitations and of the limits of their action. Moreover, their action was often conditioned by difficult situations connected with

complex historical events and conflicting political interests. Nor were theological disputes lacking, which caused bad feelings and created serious difficulties in preaching the Gospel. In certain periods of modern history, a kind of "protection" on the part of European political powers not infrequently resulted in limitations on the Church's very freedom of action and had negative repercussions for the Church in China. This combination of various situations and events placed obstacles in the Church's path and prevented her from fully carrying out — for the benefit of the Chinese people — the mission entrusted to her by her Founder, Jesus Christ.

I feel deep sadness for these errors and limits of the past, and I regret that in many people these failings may have given the impression of a lack of respect and esteem for the Chinese people on the part of the Catholic Church, making them feel that the Church was motivated by feelings of hostility towards China. For all of this I ask the forgiveness and understanding of those who may have felt hurt in some way by such actions on the part of Christians.

The Church must not be afraid of historical truth and she is ready — with deeply-felt pain — to admit the responsibility of her children. This is true also with regard to her relationship, past and present, with the Chinese people. Historical truth must be sought serenely, with impartiality and in its entirety. This is an important task to be undertaken by scholars and is one to which you, who are particularly well-versed in Chinese realities, can also contribute. I can assure you that the Holy See is always ready to offer willing cooperation in this research.

6. At the present moment, the words written by Father Ricci at the beginning of his *Treatise on Friendship* (Nos. 1 and 3) take on a new timeliness and significance. Bringing into the heart of late sixteenth-century Chinese culture and civilization the heritage of classical Greco-Roman and Christian reflection on friendship, he defined a friend as "the other half of myself, indeed another 'I'"; and therefore "the *raison d'être* of friendship is mutual need and mutual help".

And 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.

Historically, in ways that are certainly different but not in opposition to one another, China and the Catholic Church are two of the most ancient "institutions" in existence and operating on the world scene: both, though in different domains — one in the political and social, the other in the religious and spiritual — encompass more than a thousand million sons and daughters. It is no secret that the Holy See, in the name of the whole Catholic Church and, I believe, for the benefit of the whole human family, hopes for the opening of some form of dialogue with the Authorities of the People's Republic of China. Once the misunderstandings of the past have been overcome, such a dialogue

would make it possible for us to work together for the good of the Chinese people and for peace in the world. The present moment of profound disquiet in the international community calls for a fervent commitment on the part of everyone to creating and developing ties of understanding, friendship and solidarity among peoples. In this context, the normalization of relations between the People's Republic of China and the Holy See would undoubtedly have positive repercussions for humanity's progress.

7. Expressing once more my happiness at the timely celebration of such a significant historical event, I hope and pray that the path opened by Father Matteo Ricci between East and West, between Christianity and Chinese culture, will give rise to new instances of dialogue and reciprocal human and spiritual enrichment. With these good wishes, I gladly impart to all of you my Apostolic Blessing, imploring God to grant you every gift of happiness and well-being.

*From the Vatican, 24 October 2001*

**IOANNES PAULUS II**