



## **From *Maximum Illud* To the Consecration of China's First Six Bishops**

**Luigi Nuovo, C.M.**  
Province of Italy  
[luigi.nuovo53@virgilo.it](mailto:luigi.nuovo53@virgilo.it)

### **ABSTRACT**

The article reconstructs the process that, beginning with Benedict XV's apostolic letter *Maximum illud* (1919), led seven years later to the episcopal consecration of the first six Chinese bishops. At the center of the analysis is the evolution of the Holy See's reflection on the nature of missions, increasingly less influenced by the nationalist and colonialist rhetoric prevailing at the time and progressively oriented toward the establishment of local Churches endowed with their own clergy and hierarchy. In this framework, the action of Msgr. Celso Costantini, the first apostolic delegate in China, to whom the task of translating Roman indications into practice through the preparation of the first Chinese Plenary Council (1924) and the promotion of stable ecclesiastical structures on the spot takes on particular importance. The episcopal consecration of the first six Chinese bishops - two of whom were Vincentians - is read as a coherent outcome of this path and as a founding moment for the full insertion of the Chinese Church into universal catholicity, in which the Congregation of the Mission played a leading role.

Cet article retrace le processus qui, à partir de la lettre apostolique *Maximum illud* de Benoît XV (1919), a conduit, sept ans plus tard, à la consécration épiscopale des six premiers évêques chinois. Au cœur de l'analyse se trouve l'évolution de la réflexion du Saint-Siège sur la nature des missions, de moins en moins influencée par la rhétorique nationaliste et colonialiste qui prévalait à l'époque et s'orientant progressivement vers la création d'Églises locales dotées de leur propre clergé et de leur propre hiérarchie. Dans ce cadre, l'action de Mgr Celso Costantini, premier délégué apostolique en Chine, à qui incombait la tâche de mettre en pratique les indications romaines à travers la préparation du premier Concile plénier chinois (1924) et la promotion de structures ecclésiastiques stables sur place, revêt une importance particulière. La consécration épiscopale des six premiers évêques chinois – dont deux étaient vincentiens – est considérée comme l'aboutissement cohérent de ce cheminement et comme un moment fondateur pour la pleine insertion de l'Église chinoise dans la catholicité universelle, dans laquelle la Congrégation de la Mission a joué un rôle de premier plan.

El artículo reconstruye el proceso que, partiendo de la carta apostólica *Maximum illud* de Benedicto XV (1919), condujo siete años más tarde a la consagración episcopal de los seis primeros obispos chinos. En el centro del análisis se encuentra la evolución de la reflexión de la Santa Sede sobre la naturaleza de las misiones, cada vez menos influida por la retórica nacionalista y colonialista imperante en la época y orientada progresivamente hacia el establecimiento de Iglesias locales dotadas de su propio clero y jerarquía. En este marco, cobra especial importancia la actuación de monseñor Celso Costantini, primer delegado apostólico en



China, a quien correspondió la tarea de poner en práctica las indicaciones romanas mediante la preparación del primer Concilio Plenario chino (1924) y la promoción de estructuras eclesíásticas estables in situ. La consagración episcopal de los seis primeros obispos chinos —dos de los cuales eran vicentinos— se interpreta como un resultado coherente de este camino y como un momento fundacional para la plena inserción de la Iglesia china en la catolicidad universal, en la que la Congregación de la Misión desempeñó un papel protagonista.

**Keywords:** *Maximum Illud*, Chinese Bishops, Celso Constantini, Vincent Lebbe.

## Background

Before being elected pope, Gregory XVI had been prefect of Propaganda Fide and was well acquainted with the problems the missions had. In 1840 he had published the encyclical *Probe Nostis* on the promotion of Missionary Works, and on Nov. 23, 1845 he had the Instruction *Neminem Profecto* published,<sup>1</sup> an "unusual and courageous document" that touched on several aspects and focused in particular on that of the creation of indigenous clergy, inaugurating a new missionary strategy on the part of the Holy See as colonialism was gaining ground, particularly English and French colonialism.<sup>2</sup> Father Joseph Gabet (1808- 1853) had been among the first to point out the problem of the dangerous intertwining of mission and colonialism.

The First Vatican Council, which brought together bishops from almost all over the world, was scheduled, as per the preparatory outlines, to address the debate concerning evangelization and the difficulties of missions, but the seizure of Rome on Sept. 20, 1870, interrupted the council's work.

In the years that followed 1870, particularly during the pontificate of Leo XIII, there were no major magisterial interventions regarding missions, except for a letter from the same pontiff concerning slavery and another specifically on missions, the encyclical *Sancta Dei Civitas* of December 3, 1880, but these did not constitute a novelty.<sup>3</sup> The pontiff would have liked to establish diplomatic relations with the Celestial Empire, but found hostility from France.

Around those years, alongside the old French presence, there was an increase in missionary activity thanks to the birth and development of numerous communities, both male and female, whose aims included missions *ad gentes*. These communities included the Salesians of St. John Bosco, the Marists, the White Fathers, founded by Cardinal Lavigerie; the Combonians of Msgr. Daniele Comboni, the Verbitas of Arnold Janssen, the Xaverians of Guido Maria Conforti; and the Missionaries of the Consolata, founded in 1901 by St. Giuseppe Allamanno.<sup>4</sup> Among women religious the first were the Daughters of Charity in 1847, the Canossian Sisters, the Sisters of St. Paul of Chartres to be followed by many others.

---

<sup>1</sup> J. Metzler, *The Holy See and the Missions in Church History. From the Missions to the Local Churches (1846 - 1965)*, Edizioni Paoline, Frascati 1988, pp. 36-48.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 64-74.

<sup>3</sup> Leo XIII, *Epistola Enciclica "Sancta Dei Civitas" ad Patriarchas, Primate, Archiepiscopos et Episcopos universos Catholici orbis gratiam et communionem cum Apostolica Sede habentes*, December 3, 1880, in *Acta Sanctae Sedes (ASS)* 13 (1880), pp. 241-248.

<sup>4</sup> J. Metzler, *op. cit.*, pp. 43-48.

I still remember the missionaries of PIME, to which Blessed Paolo Manna (1872-1952) belonged, who had the merit of having done much to sensitize the whole Church to the problem of missions, the promotion of local churches and ecumenism.<sup>5</sup>

There are also lesser-known figures who wrote reports to Propaganda Fide on the problems inherent in the missionary world, particularly on China, where the bloody Boxer Rebellion, which lasted from November 1899 to September 1901, put both Catholics and Protestants and all Chinese Christians to the test. The number of casualties was high. There was a deep-rooted belief among many Chinese that the missionaries were agents of colonialism, which by then everywhere and for years had been tinged in an increasingly exaggerated way with nationalism. The writer and academic of France Fernand Brunetière, in 1902, wrote bluntly that: "In the Far East missionaries are the best informers and the safest agents of our diplomats." The humiliating treaties that Westerners imposed on the Chinese at gunpoint also included ever-expanding privileges for missionary activity. The Boxer Rebellion did not stop the number of Christians; in fact there was a robust growth in numbers within a few years.<sup>6</sup>

### After World War I

The bishops and missionaries present and not in the mission lands were divided into two parts: the first was composed of those who considered the support of the European countries from which they came useful and also regarded their efforts as carriers of civilization, believing it was not yet time to promote Chinese priests to the episcopate. The second part saw the danger and harm involved in this view of things: in other words, it had to be overcome as soon as possible by eliminating outdated methods of appointment.

The problem had become more urgent after the end of the Great War, which had seen the defeat of Germany and the expulsion or internment of German missionaries from the mission lands, which had been partitioned by the victorious powers of World War I, particularly England and France, joined by the United States.<sup>7</sup> Missionaries in the various places were in turmoil and increasingly debated the issue of creating the Catholic hierarchy with the consecration of bishops from China or other peoples of the East, creating a division between those who were against it and those who considered the appointment of Chinese bishops to be no longer postponable.<sup>8</sup> This was not in absolute terms a novelty: already in the 17th century, in fact, a Dominican priest, Luo Wenzao (also known by his Spanish name Gregorio López), Chinese by birth but trained in Manila, had been consecrated = ordained bishop (1685) and vicar apostolic of Nanjing, a position he held until his death (1691).<sup>9</sup> However, it must be stressed that this appointment remained a *unicum* for a long time in a historical, social and ecclesial context completely different from the one analyzed in these pages.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> G. Butturini, *Le Missioni Cattoliche in Cina tra le due guerre mondiali*, Verona, EMI, 1998.

<sup>6</sup> G. Melis, *The Church in China*, in J. Metzler, *op. cit.*, p. 321.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, pp. 328-342.

<sup>9</sup> P.R. Moreno, "Gregorio López (1617-1691): The first Chinese Bishop," in *Journal of Early Modern Christianity*, December 2017, 4(2), pp. 263-268.

<sup>10</sup> Indeed, at the time, the Chinese rituals controversy, which concerned the introduction of Confucian-derived ritual elements into the local liturgy, was particularly alive and well felt. The tolerance shown in this regard by the Jesuits was opposed by the intransigence of the Franciscans and Dominicans: this

Among those who were most convinced that there was a need to break free from the cumbersome umbrella of the French Protectorate and break the link between colonialism and Christianity without further delay were two Lazarist missionaries, Antonio/Anthony Cotta (1872-1957) and Vincent Lebbe (1877-1940),<sup>11</sup> who shared missionary ideals and wrote very strong reports to Propaganda Fide on the formation of indigenous clergy and several other issues that needed reflection so that they could be concretely resolved. They wished to "sinicize the Church in China" and make the Chinese protagonists: their testimonies were appreciated by some and detested by others who considered them fomenters of divisions.

In 1916 the so-called "Laoxikai Incident" had occurred, which erupted when the French consul had tried to forcibly occupy the land around the Catholic Cathedral in Tientsin to include it in his own territory, where Chinese stores and stores were being set up: the Belgian missionary Lebbe himself had supported the Chinese citizens' protest against French imperialism. Vicar Apostolic Paul Marie Dumond had shown neutrality and had Fathers Cotta and Lebbe removed from Tientsin. The episode caused a wide echo, reached as far as Rome, and was not without effect.

On February 6, 1917, a substantial *Memorandum* written by Father Cotta, who-as mentioned earlier-was working in northern China, reached Cardinal Domenico Serafini (1852-1918).<sup>12</sup> With some boldness he described the prejudices existing there, the negative entanglement that had come about, and the reluctance of the faithful to welcome change. The memorial was read by Cardinal Willem Marinus van Rossum,<sup>13</sup> who succeeded the late Serafini in March 1918, and by Pope Benedict XV; both took some significant sentences from it. Other reports were sent by Fr. Lebbe: the topics these dealt with aroused much interest in the new Prefect of Propaganda Fide. A very broad and specific questionnaire was drafted and sent to six Vicars Apostolic including Jean Baptiste Budes de Guébriant<sup>14</sup> (1860-1935), a member of the Paris Society of Foreign Missions and Vicar Apostolic in Canton, Jesuit Henri Lécroart (1864-1940), then coadjutor vicar of the southeastern Tchély region, and Msgr. Jean de Vienne de

---

opposition was exploited by some French bishops belonging to the Society of Jesus who, from a purely colonial and nationalist perspective, aspired to greater control over the missions in China. The episcopal consecration of Wenzao, which they supported and warmly endorsed, proved to serve their purpose, as he was a stalwart defender of positions not in line with his order, but very close to those advocated by the Jesuits. On the basis of these elements, therefore, one can consider this appointment as a child of that same colonial system from which the early twentieth-century Church sought to break free and, therefore, it will not be considered as a significant antecedent to the appointment of the six Chinese bishops that is the main subject of this article.

<sup>11</sup> Vincent Lebbe was born in Ghent in 1877: he had joined the Congregation of the Mission in 1895. Ordained a priest in China, he founded several communities; he left the Congregation in 1927 and died in 1940 after suffering imprisonment. Constantini called him "one of the best missionaries I have known."

<sup>12</sup> Anthony Cotta was born in Cairo in 1872. He entered the Mission Congregation in 1891 and had taken his vows two years later. Ordained a priest on June 4, 1898, he arrived in China in 1906. After the events ~~narrated~~ mentioned above he left the Congregation in 1919 and entered the United States in the Maryknoll Missionaries. He died in 1957. The *Memorandum* is in the Vatican Apostolic Archives, Secretariat of State, Extraordinary Ecclesiastical Affairs, Pos. 111, fasc. 76, ff. 1-47 and has recently been the subject of an interesting study by Fr. John Rybolt C.M. ("Memorandum of Antoine Cotta, C.M. (Apostolic Missionary) concerning the mission situation in China addressed to Cardinal SERAFINI, Prefect of the Congregation of Propaganda Fide, February 6, 1917," in *Studia Vincentiana*, November 2024, 2(3), pp. 243-274).

<sup>13</sup> Willem Marinus van Rossum was born in 1854 in Zwolle and was ordained a priest in 1879. He was created cardinal in 1911 and appointed prefect of the Congregation of Propaganda Fide in 1918, a position he held until his death in 1932. He was the animator of a vast work in the service of the missions.

<sup>14</sup> J. Verenaud, Guébriant (de) in *Dictionnaire d'histoire et de géographie ecclésiastique*, vol. 22, Letouzey et Ané, Paris 1988, pp. 650-652; AA.VV., *Hierarchia Catholica IX*, (H.C. IX), EMP, Padua 2002, p. 169.

Hautefeuille (1877-1957) of the Congregation of the Mission, then vicar of Chi-Li southwest. The responses revealed, among other things, the need for an Apostolic visitation and the sending of an Apostolic delegate. On the issue of episcopal ordination of priests originating from the territory, Lécroart and de Vienne believed that Chinese priests were not yet ready to receive episcopal ordination. Mgr. Ernest Geurts, a Dutchman, wrote instead to defer "animo submisso" to what the Supreme Pontiff would decide.<sup>15</sup>

The great interest aroused by the growing problems prompted Benedict XV, a few months later, to create the Congregation for the Eastern Churches.<sup>16</sup>

On July 22, 1919, the Supreme Pontiff commissioned Msgr. De Guébriant to make an apostolic visitation to the vicariates of China. The prelate, who was held in high esteem, even among the civil authorities, had been in China for about 30 years and was well acquainted with the situation there: he made the visit from Sept. 15, 1919, to March 12, 1920, writing an interesting and well-documented report.

Earlier and illuminatingly, De Guébriant had already written to the Prefect, Card. Girolamo Gotti:

A long citation like this should be indented and without quotation marks.

"Your Eminence, finally, in answer to the last words of the questionnaire concerning the progress of religion in those countries, I beg the Congregation to draw the attention of the Holy Father as soon as possible to the Church of China. This immense country has reached the turning point in its history. The circumstances there are remarkably favorable for a rapid development of Catholicism, a guarantee of a long and fruitful future. The exercise and propagation of religion there enjoy a large measure of freedom. Official religions share the disrepute into which the institutions recently brought down by the revolution have fallen. Confucianism, even when a government act tries to make it a state religion, is but a philosophy and has no hold on the people. Most of the population is not hostile to it. Wherever missionaries are well known and strongly organized, conversions are obtained in large numbers. Many prejudices tend to disappear. Finally, the fifty Apostolic Vicariates of China with their two million Christians and half a million catechumens, their extension over the whole territory and their innumerable works, are beginning to form an imposing whole that supports the admirable hold of certain large missions such as those in Beijing, Shanghai, Tghongking, etc. For several years, the annual growth of the faithful people in China has been reaching or exceeding one hundred thousand. I say that this rate could be doubled, tripled, and that to achieve this grandiose result the most effective means would be a vigorous push by the Holy See. Whatever Religious Society the missionaries of China belong to, their attachment to the Vicar of Jesus Christ is complete, absolute, full of trust and filial love. If the Holy Father would make them feel that he blesses our efforts and takes a joyful interest in their progress, that he shares our hope in the Christian future of China immense,

---

<sup>15</sup> Archives of the Sacred Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples (APF), N.S., *Letter from Msgr. Geurts to Cardinal Van Rossum*, vol. 633, f. 136r.

<sup>16</sup> In 1917, with the *Motu proprio Dei Providentis*, Benedict XV established the Congregation for the Oriental Church (now the Congregation for the Oriental Churches, as renamed in 1967 by Paul VI.). See G. De Rosa, *Benedict XV*, in *Encyclopedia of the Popes*, vol. III, Rome, Treccani 2000, pp. 608-617.

that he realizes the achievements of 10 or 15 years, and looks forward to greater ones still, this "Duc in altum."<sup>17</sup>

It matured in Benedict XV (and the Propaganda Fide milieu), who had worked for many years in the Roman Curia and was fully aware of the many problems of the missionary world, to intervene with a solemn writing. On November 30, 1919, he published the apostolic letter *Maximum illud*.<sup>18</sup> It represented in missionary reality a real revolution, a decisive turning point: on the part of ecclesial authority, nothing was as before. According to the judgment of different scholars, in fact, it was a point of arrival and at the same time of departure.

The Letter was addressed to the entire Catholic world, but in particular it concerned the situation of the Church in China. It was the fruit of the experience and reflections of several people: St. Guido Maria Conforti, Blessed Paolo Manna, Lazarists Antonio Cotta and Vincenzo Lebbe, and of course Cardinals van Rossum (who would become the great animator of PF) and Gasparri, as well as Msgr. Eugenio Pacelli. [The first names should be standardized in this text: Antonio? Antoine? Anthony?]

Costantini would write years later, "The great and holy animator of Propaganda has been in these recent years the Most Eminent Cardinal Van Rossum. He conceived the work of Propaganda, not as an office of ordinary administration, but as an apostolic renewal of the old missionary methods."<sup>19</sup> For this reason, once he came into possession of the documentation produced by missionaries critical of French claims, the new Prefect decided to set to work to determine a new course for the Church in China, also using the writings he had received.<sup>20</sup>

The Pontiff, with far-sighted clarity, using some stinging words and in no uncertain terms called nationalism "pestis teterrima" [translate this into English: "most terrible pestilence,"] and warned,

how deplorable it would be if there were Missionaries who, forgetful of their own dignity, thought more of their earthly homeland than of their heavenly one; and were concerned with dilating the power and glory [of their nations] above all things. This would be one of the saddest plagues of the apostolate, which would paralyze in the Missionary the zeal for souls, and reduce his authority with the natives. For these, though barbarians and savages, sufficiently understand what the Missionary wants and seeks from them, and they know, one would say by sniffing around, whether he has by any chance other aims than their spiritual good.

<sup>21</sup>

Benedict XV thus gave three criteria for renewing missionary efforts: it is not by chance that the subtitle was "On Apostolic Activity in Mission Land." The three criteria were first of all the promotion of indigenous clergy, so that they would be prepared and ready also to receive the Sacrament of Episcopal Order. The second criterion concerned the clear abandonment of the nationalistic and colonialist spirit on the part of the missionaries, who were to represent the universal Church and not their own nation. The third criterion was substantiated by the recognition of the objective value of the

---

<sup>17</sup> Letter from Msgr. De Guébriant to Cardinal Gotti, APF, N.S., vol. 633, ff. 107r-108v.

<sup>18</sup> Benedictus XV, *Epistola Apostolica "Maximum illud" ad Patriarchas, Primates, Archiepiscopos, Episcopos orbis catholici de fide catholica per orbem terrarum propaganda*, November 30, 1919, in *Acta Apostolicae Sedes (AAS)* 11 (1919), pp. 440-455.

<sup>19</sup> C. Costantini, *Last Leaves. Memories and Thoughts*, Tip. Italstampa, Rome, 1953, p. 67.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, p. 39.

<sup>21</sup> Benedictus XV, *op. cit.*

civilization of the evangelized countries: consequently, there could be no A and B clergy.<sup>22</sup>

These three points truly opened a new era in apostolic action, again foreshadowing the future with its difficulties and problems, which were then no small matter. The papal letter was both a turning point and a surprise: some welcomed it, some hesitated but understood that a change of pace was needed. Others, on the other hand, did not welcome such indications because they saw in it a criticism of their own behavior, in particular the difficulty of detaching themselves from the support of the colonial powers, thus ending all political entanglements. Bishop Dumond held the following conviction: "Nous sommes Mission Française et le protégé de la France. Nous ne pouvons prendre position contre elle; d'autre part nous sommes les pères des Chinois, missionnaires en Chine; nous ne devons pas prendre position contre la Chine. Donc, restons neutres."<sup>23</sup> [We are the French Mission and under the protection of France. We cannot take a stand against it; on the other hand, we are the spiritual fathers of the Chinese, missionaries in China; we must not take a stand against China. Therefore, let us remain neutral.]

### **Bishop Celso Costantini**

Pope Benedict XV in 1920 had appointed Msgr. Celso Costantini (1876-1958),<sup>24</sup> from Friuli, an able and zealous man who had gained esteem with the Pontiff, although he had not taken an interest in missionary work up to that time. The death of Benedict XV did not stop the steps already taken, as he had hoped to consecrate some Chinese priests as bishops. His successor, Pius XI, a strong and decisive personality, continued along this line: in June 1922 Msgr. Costantini was informed that the pontiff intended to use him for China. The latter, having overcome his reluctance, agreed.

On Aug. 12, 1922 Pius XI appointed and sent as the first apostolic delegate to China Costantini, whom he encouraged and invited to discreetly reach the predetermined See: on Dec. 29 the prelate was in Beijing. Card. van Rossum had recommended to him: the *Maximum Illud* program must be implemented. The apostolic delegate - at the time the pontiff's representative to the Chinese Church, but not to the state - immediately set to work to get to know the concrete situation, avoiding the support of the Europeans as the pope had recommended before dismissing him. Costantini spoke to several people, priests, religious, lay people, foreign missionaries, Chinese priests; he chose as his secretary a Chinese priest, Father Philip Tchao Huaivi, a friend of Vincent Lebbe, a priest at the Belgian Mission, who had been well convinced for years that the Chinese Church should be entrusted to Chinese priests. The topic was hot, but Costantini pursued this issue tenaciously, choosing a few people ahead of the Chinese synod.

Although he did not have an institutional diplomatic role, already on January 1, 1923, a few months after his arrival in China, Msgr. Costantini was received by President of the Republic Li Yuanhong, who - in the presence of all the ministers of foreign nations - accorded him the highest diplomatic honors, a sign that the Chinese authorities appreciated his presence as an envoy of the Holy See. Indeed, the Delegate's memoirs

---

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> APF, N.S., vol. 630, f.141r.

<sup>24</sup> Celso Costantini, born in Castions di Zoppola in 1876, was appointed by Benedict XV as apostolic administrator of Fiume and sent by Pius XI as apostolic delegate to China in 1922, where he remained until 1933. He was then secretary of Propaganda Fide; created cardinal in the Consistory of Jan. 12, 1953, he died Oct. 17, 1958. See L. Tian Su Ng, *The Contribution of Cardinal Celso Costantini to the Promotion of the Indigenous Clergy*, Doctoral Thesis in Missiology, Pontifical Urbanian University, Rome 1998, 52-55.

read, "the reception made for us alone with the same ceremonial used for the diplomatic corps, in the presence of the corps itself, had a remarkable effect: it should be noted that no one else was received today in such a solemn form."<sup>25</sup>

### China's first plenary council

The delegate set to work with diligence and skill to prepare a plenary council: thus one of the points indicated by de Guébriant and other Vicars in response to the questionnaire sent by Propaganda Fide, and later reiterated in the report drawn up at the end of the Apostolic Visitation<sup>26</sup> would be realized. An important step desired by Pope Ratti [better: Pius XI] was the creation of the first two "indigenous" apostolic prefectures. On December 12, 1923, the pope ~~Pius XI~~ created the new Apostolic Prefecture of Puchi, and on March 21, 1924, he placed Chinese Franciscan Odorico Tcheng Hede, the first local cleric appointed to lead a missionary territory, at its head. Soon after, on April 15, 1924, the operation was repeated with Vincentian Melchiorre Souen Dezhen, chosen to be apostolic prefect of Lihsien.<sup>27</sup>

As early as January 20, 1924 Pius XI had written to the delegate confirming and encouraging the preparation of such a synod. Thus, on May 15, 1924, in Shanghai Cathedral, dedicated to St. Ignatius of Loyola, the first Chinese Plenary Council opened, bringing together all local instances of the Catholic Church.<sup>28</sup>

The Catholic Church at the time consisted of 55 apostolic vicariates, 5 apostolic prefectures, 2,552 priests of whom 1,071 were natives and 2,208,000 faithful. The synod lasted about a month, until June 12: the heterogeneity of the participants' backgrounds clearly showed how much work still needed to be done to make the weight of the local element more relevant. It consisted of 105 people including legates, vicars, prefects, representatives of Chinese clergy and missionary institutes, consultants: 36 French, 19 Italians, 11 Chinese, 11 Belgians, 11 Spaniards, 7 Germans, 5 Dutch, 4 Americans, 1 Portuguese.<sup>29</sup> The Plenary applied the Code of Canon Law and all the principles enunciated in *Maximum illud* to the Chinese situation, primarily the importance of a trained indigenous clergy and a local hierarchy. It thus prepared the ecclesial world of this great Asian nation for the turning point that Pius XI would shortly make by ordaining the first Chinese bishops.

In the light of the encyclical a principle of basic importance was,

The Church therefore will be able to be said to be well founded and the work of the missionary accomplished where there will exist a sufficient number of native clergy, well educated and worthy of their lofty calling. And if ever the storm of persecution should rise up to pull down that Church, there would be no fear that, with such a firm foundation and roots, it could stand victoriously.<sup>30</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> C. Costantini, *With the missionaries in China (1922-1933). Memoirs of facts and ideas*, Unione Missionaria del Clero in Italia, Rome 1946, vol. I, p. 62.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. G. Melis, *op. cit.*, p. 332; C. Soetens, *L'Église catholique en Chine au XXe siècle*, Paris, Beauchesne 1997, pp. 80-84; L. Tian Su Ng, *op. cit.*, pp. 55-57; P. Wang Jiyou, *Le Premier Concile Plénier Chinois (1924). Droit canonique missionnaire forgé en Chine*, Paris, Cerf 2010, pp. 207-211 .

<sup>27</sup> F. Margiotta Broglio, *Pius XI*, in *Encyclopedia of the Popes*, vol. III, *op. cit.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> AA.VV., *Acta Primi Concilii Sinensis, in Primum Concilium Sinense anno 1924 a die 14 maii ad diem 12 iunii in ecclesia S. Ignatii de Zi-ka-wei celebratum*, Typographia Missionis Catholicae (T'ousè-wè), Zi-ka-wei 1929, pp. 10-16.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

In the *Vota et postulata* of the Council of Synaeus, there was also a request to create smaller vicariates, changing their names with the city of residence of the vicar apostolic, no longer using that of the geographical region: this proposal was made in view of the establishment of the ordinary hierarchy. On December 3 of the same 1924 this request was granted and put into practice with the decree of Propaganda Fide *Mutatur denominatio vicariatuum apostolicorum Sinensis regionis*.<sup>31</sup>

Having favorably concluded the Chinese synod, Pius XI sent Costantini a letter of congratulations on the successful outcome.<sup>32</sup> In early 1925 both Propaganda and the Apostolic delegate set to work to study the procedures and create the necessary conditions for the consecration of Chinese bishops. The acts were approved in June 1928 by Propaganda Fide and went into effect the following year.

There was no shortage of resistance and opposition from foreign missionaries, particularly those from communities born in France: the Priests of the Mission [or: Vincentians] and those of the Foreign Missions in Paris felt that the support of their motherland was necessary and felt the weight of the French Protectorate more keenly, as well as the impatient attitudes of young Chinese priests toward them.

Bishop Costantini took advantage of every good opportunity to carry out his program by creating a favorable climate and took into account the remarkable work done in China by the Congregation of the Mission, which held the Apostolic Vicariate of Beijing since 1856: it had a vast territory to evangelize and a good number of missionaries. Recurring the third centenary of the founding of the Congregation of the Mission (1925), Costantini wrote a letter of good wishes to the Superior General of the Vincentians Fr. François Verdier (1850-1933), linking the birth of the local Church in China with the thought of St. Vincent de Paul: "les Fils de Saint Vincent ont joué un grand rôle dans l'évangélisation de la Chine. [...] qu'il me soit permis de signaler seulement deux faits qui sont tout à l'honneur de leur zèle apostolique, à savoir: d'abord la multiplication et l'épanouissement des nouvelles Missions que le Saint-Siège a pu constituer dans les territoires primitivement confiés aux Lazaristes; ensuite, la bonne formation d'un nombreux Clergé indigène. Et, n'est-ce pas là l'esprit, la méthode de Saint Vincent? Convertir les peuples et leur donner des bons et saints pasteurs? [...] La création de la Préfecture Apostolique indigène de Lihsien, atteste l'heureuse issue des efforts de Votre Congrégation en cette région."<sup>33</sup>

### **The creation of the new vicariates and the selection of candidates**

In February 1925, Propaganda sent Msgr. Costantini instructions about the establishment of vicariates to be entrusted to local clergy: first, however, it was necessary

---

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Pius XI, *Epistula "Ante quam" ad R.P.D. C. Costantini, Archiepiscopum tit. Theodosiensem, Delegatum Apostolicum in Sinis, de primo plenario Concilio Sinensi feliciter peracto*, October 12, 1924, in AAS 16 (1924), pp. 460-461.

<sup>33</sup> C. Costantini, *With the missionaries in China, op. cit.*, vol. I, pp. 243-244. ["The Sons of Saint Vincent played a major role in the evangelization of China. [...] Allow me to mention just two facts that redound to the credit of their apostolic zeal, namely: first, the multiplication and flourishing of the new Missions that the Holy See was able to establish in the territories originally entrusted to the Lazarists; and second, the sound formation of a numerous indigenous clergy. And is this not the spirit, the method of Saint Vincent? To convert the people and give them good and holy pastors? [...] The creation of the indigenous Apostolic Prefecture of Lihsien attests to the successful outcome of your Congregation's efforts in this region."]

to carry out a series of surveys and seek opinions from a number of vicars apostolic, all while trying to avoid divisions.

On May 29, 1925, this prelate from Friuli took stock of the situation and sent the plan, received at the end of March and deemed satisfactory, concerning the creation of a vicariate in Taichow drawn up by Msgr. Paul-Marie Reynaud (1854-1926), a Lazarist, vicar apostolic of Ningpo, a bishop pastorally attentive to the changing times.<sup>34</sup>

Costantini, among other things, was already suggesting a candidate to lead it, Fr. Joseph Hou Ruoshan: "it should also be noted that you have in place a candidate to assume the government of the Mission, who offers all the best guarantees. He is Fr. Hou, whom I had as Consultor for the preparatory work for the Plenary Council and at the Council itself. I had already had occasion in Rome, at Propaganda, to see his name pointed out as one of the possible Mission Superiors." Msgr. Reynaud had also recommended him to the delegate, as the latter's memoirs show:

"As Msgr. Reynaud had understood the new China (he had written a valuable book entitled *Une autre Chine*), I believed I could speak to him at the Council of Shanghai about the need to translate into deeds the Pope's wish about the creation of some Chinese bishops. Monsignor's face lit up. - I have a good subject - he told me. - I received him as a child in the seminary, ordained him as a priest and I would be happy to consecrate him as a bishop, he is Fr. Joseph Hou."<sup>35</sup>

The creation of new Vicariates through the detachment of certain territories was in fact problematic: however, the choice of Chinese candidates for the episcopate was taking shape, overcoming some resistance.

Bishop Lécroart was convinced, however, that: "il faut laisser le clergé séculier chinois dans un rôle subalterne. Ils peuvent être chef de district, mais sous l'autorité européenne et ils ne peuvent pas avant longtemps être placés à la tête d'un Vicariat, ni même d'une section de plusieurs districts."<sup>36</sup> ["The Chinese secular clergy should be kept in a subordinate role. They can be district leaders, but under European authority, and they cannot for a long time be placed at the head of a vicariate, or even a section comprising several districts."]

Costantini, on the other hand, pointed out the divergence of views with the Lazarists of the Apostolic Vicariate of Peking for a second project: it was more nuanced with the Vicar of Peking, Msgr. Stanislas Jarlin, but decidedly more pronounced with his coadjutor Joseph Fabrègues. Nevertheless, both were willing to obey what the Pope would decide. The delegate found consensus in two other Vincentians: Msgr. Frans Schraven and Msgr. Nicola Ciceri, as well as in Franciscan Msgr. Agapito Fiorentini (1866-1941) and Jesuit Jules Paris (1846-1931). Msgr. Lécroart, however, continued to be opposed.<sup>37</sup>

On Dec. 20, 1925, the prelate from Friuli sent to Rome the terna for Fenyang, consisting of Franciscan Louis Tchen Huodi, Philip Tchao, his secretary, and Peter Tcheng. He explained Fr. Tchen's proposal considering him a *dignissimus* [most worthy] candidate.

---

<sup>34</sup> H.C., VIII, pp. 278-279.

<sup>35</sup> C. Costantini, *With the missionaries in China, op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 321.

<sup>36</sup> APF, N.S., vol. 630, f.142v.

<sup>37</sup> APF, N.S., vol. 630, ff. 140-155.

On Feb. 28, 1926, Pius XI's encyclical *Rerum Ecclesiae*<sup>38</sup> reiterated the missionary lines given by *Maximum illud* and marked a further milestone in the Pope's determined desire to organize the missions independently of any foreign diplomatic protection.<sup>39</sup> In particular, the Pontiff referred to the importance that the local clergy were to play, even occupying positions of responsibility: "We call your attention to how important it is that the natives be ascribed to the priesthood: if this is not done as much as possible, we believe [...] too long a hindrance and delay will come of it to the establishment and organization of the Church in these regions [...] for then having the Roman pontiff entrusted to you and your coadjutors the office of preaching Christian truth to the pagan peoples, you must not believe that the native priests are made only to assist the missionaries in ministries of lesser account."

Pope Ratti also justified his position from a decidedly more strategic and political perspective: "Suppose that because of a war or other political events in the territory of a mission one government is supplanted by another and the removal of foreign missionaries from a particular nation is demanded or decreed; suppose further [...] that the natives, having attained a higher degree of civilization and therefore such a civil maturity, wish, in order to make themselves independent, to expel from their territory governors, soldiers and missionaries of the foreign nation on which they depend."

Interestingly, in 1926 itself, the Congregation of the Mission had a presence in China with 12 Apostolic Vicars, 1 Apostolic Prefect, some 280 priests and 23 coadjutor brothers.<sup>40</sup> The foreign and Chinese Vincentian missionaries had a vast territory and were pastorally and concretely involved in multiple works and services and spiritually cared for the Daughters of Charity.

On July 30, Joseph Hou Ruoshan, a Vincentian, was appointed titular bishop of Theodosiopolis; on August 10, the Holy See created the Apostolic Vicariate of Taichow (taking the territory from Ning-Po), and Fr. Hou appointed vicar<sup>41</sup>. On the same day Fr. François Verdier, superior general, wrote to van Rossum to assure his congregation's help to the new vicar apostolic: "nous serons heureux, Eminence, d'aider du mieux possible Monseigneur Hou, comme nous avons aidé Monseigneur Souen."<sup>42</sup> [We will be delighted, Eminence, to help Bishop Hou as best we can, just as we helped Bishop Souen.]

### **The Consecration of the six Chinese Bishops**

On April 25, 1926, Pope Pius XI gave an acceleration to the course of events, announcing that on October 28, the Solemnity of Christ the King, he himself would confer episcopal ordination on the Chinese bishops in St. Peter's Basilica.<sup>43</sup>

---

<sup>38</sup> AAS 18 (1926), pp. 65-83.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> AA.VV., *Catalogue des maisons et du personnel de la Congrégation de la Mission*, Congregation of the Mission, [s.l.] 1926.

<sup>41</sup> See AAS 18 (1926), p. 344, 346; Pius XI, *Litterae apostolicae "Supremi apostolatus"*, August 10, 1926, in AAS 19 (1927), pp. 51-52. The Chinese foreign missionaries had a vast territory and were pastorally and concretely involved in multiple educational and charitable works and services, also taking spiritual care of the Daughters of Charity.

<sup>42</sup> Letter from Fr. François Verdier to Card. van Rossum dated August 10, 1926, in APF, N.S., vol. 909, f. 439r.

<sup>43</sup> Archbishop Achille Damiano Ratti had been consecrated bishop in Warsaw on October 28, 1919 by Card. Alessandro Kakowski.

The candidates presented, three for each vicariate, were ranked according to the following adjectives: *dignissimus*, *dignior*, *dignus*. [most worthy, worthier, worthy] After due information about practice and comparisons, the first six bishops-elect who would receive episcopal ordination in Rome were chosen: Philip Tchao Huaiji (1880-1927), a diocesan priest, as Vicar Apostolic for the Vicariate of Suanhwafu; the second candidate was Father Joseph Hou (1881-1962), belonging to the Congregation of the Mission, as Vicar Apostolic for Taichow; the third candidate was Father Simon Tsu (1868-1960), of the Society of Jesus, for the Vicariate of Haimen; the fourth candidate was Father Odorico Tcheng (1873-1928), belonging to the Friars Minor Observant, as Apostolic Prefect for Pu-chi; the fifth candidate was Father Melchior Souen (1869-1951), belonging to the Congregation of the Mission, as Apostolic Prefect for Lihsien; and the sixth was Louis Tchen (1875-1930) of the Friars Minor Observant, Apostolic Vicar for Fenyang. In the public Consistory of June 24, 1926, Philip, Odorico and Melchior received the appointment of bishop.<sup>44</sup>

On Sept. 10, 1926 Bishop Costantini and the six ordinands embarked in Shanghai on the U.S. ship "President Adams," deliberately chosen to avoid either a French or an Italian ship, thus reaffirming full independence from any political power, and arrived in Naples on Oct. 16, from which they proceeded quickly to Rome by a wagon put at their disposal. Still a few days before the celebration there was some discreet interference from the French government, which expressed some reservation about the appointment of Chinese priests as bishops: Msgr. Costantini's response was an invitation not to worry.

On Oct. 28, 1926, a date that also marked the seventh anniversary of the Supreme Pontiff's episcopal consecration, the ordination of Filippo Tchao Huaiji as Vicar, Odorico Tcheng as Prefect, Lodovico Chen as Vicar, Melchior Souen as Prefect and Simone Tsu as Vicar had taken place in St. Peter's with great solemnity. The co-consecrators were Celso Costantini and the Pope's almoner, Carlo Cremonesi (1866-1943). Msgr. Lorenzo Perosi directed the Pontifical Musical Chapel. Everything was experienced as a memorable event and with joyful emotion: a great historical event of ecclesial life had been accomplished. The Basilica was filled with the faithful, men and women religious, confreres of the ordained bishops, including Fr. Lebbe.

Pius XI, the Pope of the Missions, as he was now rightly called, gave a short speech entitled "*Iam finis*" :

"For we called you to this City, center of the Christian Religion, to consecrate in the august sanctity and majesty of this temple dedicated to Peter, you, who as the first fruits and new shoots of the Chinese Episcopate, bestowed with episcopal dignity and honored by the sacred *infulae* [ribbons on the miter], from here you must return to your regions; from here, we say, whence springs the source of every apostolate. You have come, Venerable Brethren, to see Peter, indeed you received from him the pastoral staff, which you must make use of in your apostolic wanderings and to gather the flock. And Peter with such affection received you, who offer no small hope of spreading the Gospel truth to your fellow citizens. ... [And he concluded] - Sustain therefore the episcopal dignity and the labors joined with it, so as to correspond to the expectation of Ours and of your countrymen and to generate new and generous offspring for the Church. The word of Christ the Lord may, in this solemn hour, rightly be repeated to you also, by the Vicar of Christ: "*Lift up your foreheads and behold the regions--those vast regions of yours--that are already white with harvests*"; and again, "*Go ye also into my vineyard*"; and

---

<sup>44</sup> AAS 18 (1926), pp. 525-526.

further, "Go, preach, teach, baptize, bless. For I have chosen you that you may go and procure fruit, and may your fruit be lasting. Fiat, fiat! [Let it be. Let it be!]"<sup>45</sup>

## Conclusion

Seven years after Benedict XV's *Maximum illud*, a great turning point had occurred for the Catholic Church in China thanks to the work of Pius XI, assisted by two formidable collaborators: Card. Willem van Rossum and Msgr. Celso Costantini, not to mention the many others who had raised awareness. Awareness-raising and concrete action had to continue; opponents were not lacking with their prejudices and narrow horizons.

In this regard, in a reflection a few years later, Costantini acknowledged that most of the foreign missionaries were most worthy in view of their sanctity of life and apostolic zeal: however, "they believed in good faith that the good of their own Order was the good of the Church; here lies the fatal error. The Order is not the Church, it is not a Church within the Church; it is an association at the service of the Church."<sup>46</sup> He emphasized in this way that everyone is at the service of the Church.

The ordination of Chinese bishops started a movement that nothing would stop: in the same pontificate of Pius XI, the ordinations of the first native bishops in Japan, Vietnam, Korea, Sri Lanka and Egypt would soon take place; at the death of Pope Ratti, forty ecclesiastical circumscriptions were entrusted to local clergy in mission lands. The Catholic Church was becoming more and more universal. A Chinese minister in Beijing said on that occasion, "Until now, the catholicity of the Church was a difficult theory to understand. Now it is a clear fact."

## References

AAV = Vatican Apostolic Archives,

Archives of the Sacred Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, APF:

N.S., vol. 630, ff. 140-155

N.S., vol. 633, ff. 107r-108v.

N.S., vol. 633, ff. 136r.

N.S., vol. 909, f. 439r.

AA.VV. 1963. *Annals of the Mission 1963 - Special Issue*, Alberoni College, Piacenza.

AA.VV. 1929. *Acta Primi Concilii Sinensis, in Primum Concilium Sinense anno 1924 a die 14 maii ad diem 12 iunii in ecclesia S. Ignatii de Zi-ka-wei celebratum*, Typographia Missionis Catholicae (T'ousè-wè), Zi-ka-wei. 10-16.

AA.VV.1926. *Annals of the Mission 1926*, Collegio Alberoni, Piacenza.

---

<sup>45</sup> AA.VV., *Annals of the Mission 1926*, Collegio Alberoni, Piacenza 1926, pp. 209-213.

<sup>46</sup> B.F. Pighin, *Il cardinale Celso Costantini tra memoria e profezia*, Marcianum Press, Venice 2019, p. 52.

- AA.VV. 1926 *Catalogue des maisons et du personnel de la Congrégation de la Mission*, Congregation of the Mission, [s.l.].
- AA.VV. 1978. *Hierarchia Catholica VIII*, EMP, Padua.
- AA.VV. 2002. *Hierarchia Catholica IX*, EMP, Padua.
- Acta Apostolicae Sedes (AAS) 18. 1926. Tip. Poliglotta Vaticana.
- v.d. Brandt, J. 1936. *Les Lazaristes en Chine 1697-1935. Notes biographiques*, Imprimerie des Lazaristes, Pei-p'ing.
- Benedictus XV. 1919. *Epistola Apostolica "Maximum illud" ad Patriarchas, Primates, Archiepiscopos, Episcopos orbis catholici de fide catholica per orbem terrarum propaganda*, November 30, in AAS 11 (1919), pp. 440-455.
- Butturini, G. 1998. *Le Missioni Cattoliche in Cina tra le due guerre mondiali*, EMI, Verona.
- Costantini, C. 1946. *With the missionaries in China (1922-1933). Memoirs of facts and ideas*, vol. I, Unione Missionaria del Clero in Italia, Rome [Italian language original.]
- Costantini, C. 1953. *Last Leaves. Memories and thoughts*, Tip. Italia stampa, Rome.
- De Rosa, G. 2000. *Benedict XV*, in *Encyclopedia of the Popes*, [Italian-language original title] vol. III, Rome, Treccani.
- Ferreux, O. 1963. *Histoire de la Congrégation de la Mission en Chine (1699-1950)*, Maison-Mère de la Congrégation de la Mission, Paris.
- Giovagnoli A. 2005. - Giunipero E., (ed.), *Catholic Church and the Chinese World. Between colonialism and evangelization*, Urbaniana University Press, Rome.
- Leo XIII. 1880. *Epistola Enciclica "Sancta Dei Civitas" ad Patriarchas, Primates, Archiepiscopos et Episcopos universos Catholici orbis gratiam et communionem cum Apostolica Sede habentes*, December 3, in Acta Sanctae Sedes (ASS) 13 (1880), pp. 241-248.
- Margiotta Broglio, F. 2000. *Pius XI*, in *Encyclopedia of the Popes*, vol. III, Rome, Treccani.
- Melis, G. 1988. *The Church in China*, in Metzler, J. (ed.), *History of the Church. From the Missions to the Local Churches (1846 - 1965)*, Edizioni Paoline, Frascati.
- Metzler, J. (ed.). 1988. *The Holy See and the Missions in Church History. From the Missions to the Local Churches (1846 - 1965)*, Edizioni Paoline, Frascati.
- Moreno, P.R. 2017. *Gregorio López (1617-1691): The first Chinese Bishop*, in *Journal of Early Modern Christianity*, December, 4(2), pp. 263-268.
- Pighin, B.F. 2024. *Cardinal Celso Costantini and China. Builder of a bridge between East and West*, Marcianum Press, Venice.
- Pighin, B. F. 2019. *Il cardinale Celso Costantini tra memoria e profezia*, Marcianum Press, Venice.
- Pius XI. 1924. *Epistula "Ante quam" ad R.P.D. C. Costantini, Archiepiscopum tit. Theodosiensem, Delegatum Apostolicum in Sinis, de primo plenario Concilio Sinensi feliciter peracto*, October 12, in AAS 16 (1924), pp. 460-461.

- Pius XI. 1926. *Litterae apostolicae "Supremi apostolatus,"* August 10, in AAS 19 (1927), pp. 51-52.
- Secretariat of State, Extraordinary Ecclesiastical Affairs, Pos. 111, fasc. 76, ff. 1-47.
- Soetens, C. 1997. *L'Église catholique en Chine au XXe siècle*, Paris, Beauchesne.
- Tian Su Ng, L. 1998. *The contribution of Cardinal Celso Costantini to the promotion of indigenous clergy*, Doctoral Thesis in Missiology, Pontifical Urbanian University, Rome.
- Touze, L. 2005. "The Absolute Need for an Indigenous Clergy in China. The figure of Fr. Vincent Lebbe (1877-1940)," in Martínez Ferrer - Guiducci (ed.), *Fontes. Fundamental Documents of Church History*, St. Paul's, Rome, pp. 588-594;
- Verenaud, J. 1988. *Guébriant (de) in Dictionnaire d'histoire et de géographie ecclésiastique*, vol. 22, Letouzey et Ané, Paris.
- Wang Jiyou, P. 2010. *Le Premier Concile Plénier Chinois (1924). Droit canonique missionnaire forgé en Chine*, Paris, Cerf.