

"He was consistent in his desire to follow Jesus Christ"

In his 31 May general audience, Pope Francis continued his catechetical cycle on apostolic zeal, speaking about Venerable Matteo Ricci.

05/31/2023

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

We are continuing these catecheses speaking about apostolic zeal, that is, what the Christian feels in order to

carry out the proclamation of Jesus Christ. And today I would like to present another great example of apostolic zeal: we have spoken about Saint Francis Xavier, Saint Paul, the apostolic zeal of the great zealots; today we will talk about one – Italian, but who went to China: Matteo Ricci.

Originally from Macerata, in the Marches, after studying in the Jesuit schools and entering Society of Jesus in Rome, he was enthused by the reports of missionaries whom he had listened to and he grew enthusiastic, like so many other young people who felt the same, and he asked to be sent to the missions in the Far East. After the attempt by Francis Xavier, another twenty-five Jesuits had tried to enter China, without success. But Ricci and one of his confrères prepared themselves very well, carefully studying the Chinese language and customs, and in the end, they managed to settle in the

south of the country. It took eighteen years, with four stages through four different cities, to arrive in Peking, which was the centre. With perseverance and patience, inspired by unshakeable faith, Matteo Ricci was able to overcome difficulties and dangers, mistrust and opposition. Think that, in that time, on foot or riding a horse, such distances... and he went on. But what was Matteo Ricci's secret? By what road did his zeal drive him?

He always followed the way of dialogue and friendship with all the people he encountered, and this opened many doors to him for the proclamation of the Christian faith. His first work in Chinese was indeed a treatise *On friendship*, which had great resonance. To enter into Chinese culture and life, he first dressed like the Buddhist bonzes, according to the customs of the country, but then he understood that

the best way was to assume the lifestyle and robes of the *literati*. The intellectuals dressed like university professors, and he dressed that way. He studied their classical texts in depth, so that he could present Christianity in positive dialogue with their Confucian wisdom and the customs of Chinese society. And this is called an attitude of inculturation. [In the early centuries of the Church] This missionary was able to “inculturate” the Christian faith, as the ancient fathers had done in dialogue with Greek culture.

His excellent scientific knowledge stirred interest and admiration on the part of cultured men, starting from his famous map of the entire world as it was known at the time, with the different continents, which revealed to the Chinese for the first time a reality outside China far more extensive than they had thought. He showed them that the world was

even larger than China, and they understood, because they were intelligent. But the mathematical and astronomical knowledge of Ricci and his missionary followers also contributed to a fruitful encounter between the culture and science of the West and the East, which went on to experience one of its happiest times, characterized by dialogue and friendship. Indeed, Matteo Ricci's work would never have been possible without the collaboration of his great Chinese friends, such as the famous "Doctor Paul" (Xu Guangqi) and "Doctor Leon" (Li Zhizao).

However, Ricci's fame as a man of science should not obscure the deepest motivation of all his efforts: namely, the proclamation of the Gospel. With scientific dialogue, with scientists, he went ahead but he bore witness to his faith, to the Gospel. The credibility obtained through scientific dialogue gave him the

authority to propose the truth of Christian faith and morality, of which he spoke in depth in his principal Chinese works, such as *The true meaning of the Lord of Heaven* – as the book was called. Besides doctrine, his witness of religious life, virtue and prayer: these missionaries prayed. They went to preach, they were active, they made political moves, all of that; but they prayed. It is what nourished the missionary life, a life of charity; they helped others, humbly, with total disinterest in honours and riches, which led many of his disciples and friends to embrace the Catholic faith. Because they saw a man who was so intelligent, so wise, so astute – in the good sense of the word – in getting things done, and so devout, that they said, “But what he preaches is true, because it is part of a personality that witnesses, he bears witnesses to what he preaches with his own life”. This is the coherence of the

evangelizers. And this applies to all of us Christians who are evangelizers. We can recite the Creed by heart, we can say all the things we believe, but if our life is not consistent with this, it is of no use. What attracts people is the witness of consistency: we Christians must live as we say, and not pretend to live as Christians but to live in a worldly way. Be careful of this, look at this great missionary – and he was an Italian, wasn't he – looking at these great missionaries, see that the greatest strength is consistency: they were consistent.

In the last days of his life, to those who were closest to him and asked him how he felt, "he replied that he was thinking at that moment whether it was greater the joy and gladness he felt inwardly at the idea that he was close to his journey to go and savour God, or the sadness that leaving his companions of the whole

mission that he loved so much, and the service that he could still do to God Our Lord in this mission,” (S. De Ursis, Report on M. Ricci, Roman Historical Archive S.J.). This is the same attitude of the Apostle Paul (cf. *Phil 1:22-24*), who wanted to go to the Lord, to find the Lord, but to stay “to serve you”.

Matteo Ricci died in Peking in 1610, at 57, a man who had given all his life for the mission. The missionary spirit of Matteo Ricci constitutes a relevant living model. His love for the Chinese people is a model; but the truly timely path is coherence of life, of the witness of his Christian belief. He took Christianity to China; he is great, yes, because he is a great scientist, he is great because he is courageous, he is great because he wrote many books – but above all, he is great because he was consistent in his vocation, consistent in his desire to follow Jesus Christ. Brothers and

sisters, today we, each one of us, let us ask ourselves inwardly, “Am I consistent, or am I a bit ‘so-so’?”. Thank you.

pdf | document generated automatically from <https://opusdei.org/en-lk/article/he-was-consistent-in-his-desire-to-follow-jesus-christ/> (01/29/2026)