

ORIENTIS AURA

MACAU PERSPECTIVES IN RELIGIOUS STUDIES

No. 5 | 2020



聖若瑟大學
UNIVERSITY OF
SAINT JOSEPH

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Orientis Aura | Macau Perspectives in Religious Studies

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Publication Date: December 2020

Publisher: University of Saint Joseph, Macau SAR (China)

ISSN 2519-5417

USJ Journals Website: <http://journals.usj.edu.mo>

Email: library@usj.edu.mo

Sponsoring Institutions: Fundação Macao

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**MINIMISING *MAXIMUM ILLUD*:
EARLY RESISTANCE TO MISSIONARY INCULTURATION IN CHINA**
小看了「夫至大」: 抵制傳教本地化的早期勢力

Cyril J. Law, Jr. 劉偉傑*

ABSTRACT

Maximum Illud, the magna carta of Catholic mission in the modern world, aimed at rooting out narrow nationalistic mentality from among the missionaries of the universal reign of God. The exhortations contained in the letter reveal certain principles, chief of which is an openness to all nations beyond any self-serving interests and other influences from secular sovereign entities. One of the most practical consequences would be the growth in prominence of the local clergy. In the case of China, unanimous applause towards this call did not come spontaneously; rather, some felt uneasy with its urging. It was Ma Xiangbo (1840–1939), the venerated Chinese Catholic doyen who took the initiative to translate *Maximum Illud* into Chinese and published it in the form of pamphlets by means of private funding. The more conscientious Chinese clergy and faithful, as well as evangelisation pioneers like Vincent Lebbe (1877–1940) and Celso Costantini (1876–1958) welcomed the document as the sign of a second spring for the integral development of Catholicism with authentic Chinese characteristics.

Keywords: Benedict XV; China Mission; Colonisation; Evangelisation; French Protectorate; Inculturation; Ma Xiangbo; Propaganda Fide

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INTRODUCTION

The first word in the title chosen for this article (minimising) is a veiled reference to those agents in China who showed less than enthusiastic zeal towards the letters and spirit of *Maximum Illud* (known in Chinese as 「夫至大」宗座牧函). This document has been hailed as the magna carta of Catholic mission in the modern world. And one of the most practical consequences intended by this apostolic letter, supported by succeeding pontiffs, would be the promotion of local vocations to the priesthood and religious life and the eventual establishment of an ecclesiastical structure with indigenous leadership. But among those who expressed misgivings towards the new direction indicated in the letter were missionary bishops and religious superiors who had strong ties with the French territorial protectorate in China. Their passive, and sometimes reactionary sentiments were in quite stark contrast with promoters of the cause such as Vincent Lebbe, Ma Xiangbo, Ying Lianzhi, and Celso Costantini.

In terms of the materials used for this short research, it has to be said that it is not easy to peel away the multiple layers of historical, political, religious, and personal factors involved in the complex of reactions towards *Maximum Illud*. The resistance to the realisation of *Maximum Illud's* broad vision took different forms. It would be helpful to use the following identifiers for the complicated issues at stake. A cluster of things which I would call “the P factors”:

- Players: Portuguese Padroado, Protectorate, Pope, Propaganda Fide
- People: Portuguese, French, Belgians, Italian, German, Spanish, American, Chinese, etc.
- Personages: Jean-Baptiste de Guébriant, Vincent Lebbe, Antoine Cotta, Benedict XV, Pius XI, Celso Costantini, Ma Xiangbo, Ying Lianzhi, among others.
- Places: Rome, Paris, Canton, Shanghai, Tianjin, Peking
- Problems: Power, Prestige, Pride, Peer Pressure

In trying to unpack the dynamics of these “P factors” surrounding *Maximum Illud*, first a brief overview of the apostolic letter itself is in order (what was the letter about), followed by a survey of some of the resisting efforts against it (who said what, who did what), and finally some discussions on the ongoing issues created by the misgivings about *Maximum Illud*. In other words, is there still resistance to *Maximum Illud* today? Have we moved beyond the quarrels over the need for an autochthonous clergy for evangelisation?

BACKGROUND OF *MAXIMUM ILLUD*

The apostolic letter *Maximum Illud* was issued by Pope Benedict XV on 30 November 1919. In sum, it deals with the state and vision of Catholic missionary activities after the First World War. It called for the promotion of the local clergy and a renewed missionary awareness and cross-boundary collaboration. The training of local candidates for sacred ministry was the core issue at heart:

In this policy lies the greatest hope of the new churches. For the local priest, one with his people by birth, by nature, by his sympathies and his aspirations, is remarkably effective in appealing to their mentality and thus attracting them to the Faith. Far better than anyone else he knows the kind of argument they will listen to, and as a result, he often has easy access to places where a foreign priest would not be tolerated.¹

The Church sought to encourage the growth of local Churches and indigenous hierarchies rather than relying exclusively on foreign-led missionaries. But we all know too well, this is easier said than done, yet the goal is set. *Maximum Illud* also offered fresh perspectives in favour of the active involvement of local elements for universal evangelization, ridding Catholicism from colonial politics, especially from the grip of consuls and secular officials.

Benedict XV, being the Pope who had to confront the reality of the First World War, showed his conviction to affirm the autonomy of the Church when certain nationalistic mentality was dominating international relations. Although China was not specifically mentioned in the text, contemporaries were quick to identify salient features of the letter that spoke directly to the given situation in the China mission. And it is to this aspect of *Maximum Illud* that we will turn our attention.

As for the time frame, the “early” resistance to *Maximum Illud* refers to the years 1920 to 1926. The temporal demarcation between those two years was set on account of the preparatory stage for the commissioning of the first Apostolic Delegate, Monsignor Celso Costantini, to China and two subsequent monumental events. First, there was the Shanghai Synod of 1924. Second, 1926 was the year the consecration of the first batch of six Chinese bishops by Pope Pius XI took place. The latter event marked a watershed in the development of the Catholic Church in China in terms of its outward presentation, future orientation, and spiritual interiorisation, and indeed confirmation of its inherent, full-fledged Chinese Catholic identity.

¹ Benedict XV, Apostolic Letter *Maximum Illud* (30 November 1919) para. 14. (English translation provided on the Vatican website). An example of what is alluded to in the last sentence of the quote would be those sacred sites in certain countries, like the lulik house in the tribal regions of East Timor, where access is strictly denied to foreigners. Cf. Bovensiepen, Judith and Frederico Delgado Rosa, “Transformations of the Sacred in East Timor,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 58, no. 3 (2016): 664–93.

But let us backtrack a little to the two decades before *Maximum Illud*. In order to have a taste of the kind of French sponsored “ecclesial superiority” (as distinct from “racial supremacism”) over and against the indigenous though half-foreign Chinese/Manchurian reality, let us listen to how the Vicar Apostolic at Peking, Monsignor Alphonse Favier, described his preferred church-state dynamics at work in his mission. Writing immediately after the Boxers’ Revolution in 1900, Monsignor Favier reflected:

Once again we have seen the necessity of French protection of the Catholic missions as it has always been exercised and which the church has never wanted to end. Accordingly, one will always see a consulate next to a church. The building where the French tricolor flies will always protect the Catholic cross.²

Imagine this is the very Catholic bishop of the capital of China whose painful experience of having to resist the invasion of the Chinese boxers expressed an even deeper conviction in perpetuating the presence of protection of the Chinese missions by a civilly-torn European nation. France was at that time the Third Republic which vacillated often between pro-royalist and republican politics. It is highly ironic that while the French legislature itself was encroaching upon the Catholic Church’s rights and properties internally, popularly known as the laïcité policy of aggressive secularism, here in China in the Far East we hear appeals from leading Catholic missionary leaders asserting, lauding, yearning, if not downright clutching on to the French legation’s power in protecting the Church’s interests against the capricious manoeuvrings of the Qing imperial court and against local anti-western, anti-Christian, resentment. We may justify the kind of conviction held by people like Favier by saying that perhaps exigencies called for the adoption of this attitude, wherein the fragile status of the Chinese Catholic mission caught between multiple conflicts of interests required a strong and stable ally. The most convenient and proven one at hand was indeed none other but the system of the French Protectorate, despite all the shortcomings that such a reliance on secular power would have entailed.

However, when this attitude of reliance born out of a contingent circumstance got hardened into a doctrinaire stance, it would tend to obscure, if not overturn the proper soteriological objectives of evangelisation, causing obstacles and misunderstanding to arise. The stirrings which occasioned *Maximum Illud* and the further stirrings that followed the apostolic letter were not merely historical and missiological phenomena tainted with some lacing of colonialism and international interwar political intricacies. The whole saga betrays a deep developmental birth pang in ecclesiology, the very theological understanding of the nature and vocation of the Church. Was the Church seen as a spiritualisation of the political Christendom or was the Church awakening to a self-realisation of being really the baptismal community of the People of God, gathering in all nations into the one flock *sub Petro*? Mission means being sent. Sent by whom? By royal commission

² Pierre-Marie-Alphonse Favier, *Peking, histoire et description* (Beijing: Imprimerie des Lazaristes au Pé-T’ang, 1900), 269.

by the French or German emperor? Or a loyal discipleship of fellowship in union with the Prince of the Apostles?

The striking warning from Benedict XV in *Maximum Illud* rings maximally stern in tone:

Suppose it becomes clear that he [the missionary] is involved in worldly schemes of some kind, and that, instead of devoting himself exclusively to the work of the apostolate, he is serving the interests of his homeland as well. The people immediately suspect everything he does. And in addition, such a situation could easily give rise to the conviction that the Christian religion is the national religion of some foreign people and that anyone converted to it is abandoning his loyalty to his own people and submitting to the pretensions and domination of a foreign power.³

But lest we fall into a simplistic view on the matter, we should also recall that mission chiefs in China like Favier were also among those who championed for advantageous reforms such as expansion of pastoral care for the vast swathes of the non-baptised, increased attention to galvanising the clergy under their supervision, and wider cooperation among the vicariates themselves. It is not the purpose of this study to portray the labourers in the vineyard solely as the villains. *Maximum Illud* contains some rather negative review on certain unfruitful missionary strategies, and it is haunting still to hear these lamentable words:

And yet it is a deplorable fact that, even after the Popes have insisted upon it, there still remain sections of the world that have heard the Faith preached for several centuries, and still have a local clergy that is of inferior quality...there are countries that have been deeply penetrated by the light of the Faith, and have, besides, reached such a level of civilization that they produce eminent men in all the fields of secular life – and yet, though they have lived under the strengthening influence of the Church and the Gospel for hundreds of years, they still cannot produce Bishops for their spiritual government or priests for their spiritual guidance. From these facts it is obvious that in some places the system ordinarily used in training future missionaries has up to now been feeble and faulty.⁴

³ *Maximum Illud*, para. 19.

⁴ *Maximum Illud*, para. 17.

RECEPTION & REACTIONS

The nature of the resistance to what *Maximum Illud* represents was not purely religious. Other factors such as political, diplomatic, and even commercial interests played a part in brewing the mistrust towards the new Roman policy.

The following are samples of some of the reactions to *Maximum Illud* by several missionaries in China. Father Henri Gilot, the Jesuit superior of the Jiangnan mission, said:

The Holy Father is badly informed. His apostolic letter is harsh in its formulation and wrongful in its essence. The missions until now have done all that they could; they are doing all that they can, and it is vain to ask more for them. The pope's letter will be injurious to the Catholics of Europe, to the priests and to the Chinese Christians.⁵

Father Gilot's excited comment could be justified with good reasons. The Jesuit Jiangnan mission was remarkably successful with years of hard-earned results. Zikawei in Shanghai was literally the crown jewel of Catholic China with multiple establishments that incorporated solid local participation among its clerical co-operators and religious and lay associates.⁶ But *Maximum Illud* was not written to congratulate those wonder workers who yielded a hundredfold. Rather, it had to issue a clarion call to break those largely unbroken seeds sown among the thorns and thistles choking them to desiccation.

Another Jesuit, Father Joseph Verdier, superior of the mission in Jiangsu, was reported by Vincent Lebbe as having said the following:

How could we obey this order! We can't endure it. What is *Maximum Illud*?... We know there is an urchin whose words can be found phrase for phrase in *Maximum Illud*. How could we endure that? This is truly unbearable for us.⁷

The "urchin" mentioned in the criticism credibly refers to Antoine Cotta, the controversial Lazarist turned Maryknoll missionary whose memoirs formed part of the basis for the drafting of the text of *Maximum Illud*. The provicar of the East Zhejiang vicariate even denounced *Maximum Illud* as "unjust" and sowing "destruction and discouragement."⁸

One of the principal relators whose role was to act on behalf of the Holy See and the China mission was Bishop Jean-Baptiste-Marie de Guébriant, appointed Apostolic Visitor the same year just before the issuing of *Maximum Illud* to investigate and report on the missionary status of China. Bishop de Guébriant a

⁵ Quoted in Ernest P. Young, *Ecclesiastical Colony: China's Catholic Church and the French Religious Protectorate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 213. Young's book is a well-documented resource which the author of the present article shall chiefly refer to for citations on this subject.

⁶ The case of Zikawei still generates scholarly interests beyond ecclesiastical circles. See, for example: Wei Mo, "Assessing Jesuit Intellectual Apostolate in Modern Shanghai (1847–1949)," *Religions* 12, no. 3 (2021): 159.

⁷ Young, *Ecclesiastical Colony*, 215, 329.

⁸ *Ibid.*

caught between a rock and a hard place. As a member of the Parish Foreign Mission that enjoyed papal favour, he was supposedly the person entrusted to bridge the differences and ease things up between the Holy See and the those many pockets of missionary enclaves with varying degree of variance in ideals and tactics. But the sudden publication of *Maximum Illud*, which arrived in February 1920, right in the middle and before the conclusion of his apostolic visits, was considered untimely in de Guébriant's view, at least for the touchy atmosphere in China. Vincent Lebbe recorded the frustrated outburst of de Guébriant who had said: "Rome handles matters in this fashion, without informing me; they have me make an investigation and don't even wait for my report on the matter. That's how they handle matters!" The "they" imply almost without need for qualification the *Propaganda Fide* headed by Cardinal Willem Marinus van Rossum.

Another typical critique was recorded to have come from Bishop Paul Reynaud, a Lazarist missionary, who said: "For the purposes of his encyclical, the pope has been ill informed; and then he reproaches us for engaging in politics. It is not we who engage in politics in China; it is they who do it in Rome."⁹

CATEGORISING THE RESISTANCE

Having given samplings of the reactions, what follows is an attempt at categorising the forms of resistance to *Maximum Illud*.

First, by sweeping under the carpet the apostolic letter itself. This is achieved through muting its impact by not promoting the widespread circulation of its text. Less than enthusiastic commentaries were seen often enough to create an overall atmosphere among the higher-ranking missionary prelates that was doubtful of its prudence. An important indicator reflecting the level of reception of *Maximum Illud* in China can be gauged by a simple fact: its publication. "The only missionary journal in China that was reported to have printed the full text was *Sacerdos in Sinis*"—in Latin.¹⁰ And it was Ma Xiangbo who translated it into Chinese and published it and circulated it using his own private means. Most missionary periodicals in China in the 1920s played down *Maximum Illud*, basically reducing it to mere extracts with mostly unappreciative commentaries or some token acknowledgement of its plausibility. We may attribute this reluctance on the part of the old guards partially as a form of hesitance motivated by fear of disturbing the status quo of mission affairs amidst the uncertainty of the new Chinese Republic sinking into a splintered state dominated by the war lords.

⁹ Ibid., 217.

¹⁰ Ibid., 229. According to the sinologist Patrick Taveirne, "The letter was not published in missionary journals, except the magazine of the American Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers, *The Field Afar*, which discussed *Maximum illud* in its editorials." Patrick Taveirne, "Go into the whole world and preach the gospel to all creation (on the Centenary of the Apostolic Letter *Maximum illud* by Pope Benedict XV)," *Sunday Examiner*, October 21, 2019.

The resistance to *Maximum Illud* also took the form of the effort at containing the influence of certain personages who were considered reformists and agitators. These people were progressive priests such as Antoine Cotta, Vincent Lebbe and later Monsignor Celso Costantini who actively advocated for the indigenisation project broadly in line with the letter and spirit of *Maximum Illud*. Cotta and Lebbe were stranded in Europe and their desire to return to the China mission were stifled at every turn. There was almost a concerted effort by both their religious superiors and even certain cautious-minded officials at *Propaganda Fide* to delay or derail their return. The fear was that their charism and enthusiasm would be misappropriated in alliance with the popularist Catholic faction especially in Tianjin, bolstered by the influential lay-run newspaper *Yishibao* (益世報) founded by Ying Lianzi. The case of Lebbe was particularly poignant because he was viewed as an advocate for Roman policy in opposition to the French domination in China; whereas Rome's attitude was ambiguous and diplomatic regarding its support for Lebbe because it could not afford fully backing Lebbe the simple idealistic priest at the expense of upsetting the entire French missionary hierarchy in China. In some sense *Propaganda Fide* was partly the cause for arousing the resistance towards *Maximum Illud* because the letter seemed to have sent out mixed signals to those doubtful of its positions on the one hand and to those too hopeful of its promises on the other.

The third form the resistance took was the perpetuation of the old mindset which carried on the strategy of maintaining missions under the aegis of the colonial protectorates. This bespeaks of an attitude that almost vaunt the prowess of the protectorates through taking advantage of the privileges enjoyed by this church-embassy cooperation guaranteed by former unequal treaties. It is under this aspect of political consideration that we can appreciate the apprehension harboured by the French authorities in China towards the stealth-like arrival of the Papal delegate Celso Costantini in Hong Kong in November 1922. The French consul-general in Guangzhou warned: "From every indication, the mission of the apostolic delegate marks a dangerous turning-point for the exercise by France of the Protectorate of Catholic missions in this country." The French consul-general in Shanghai corroborated his colleague's observation: "All our missionaries without exception—including especially the Jesuits—look on the arrival of the apostolic delegate with anxiety."¹¹ It is no surprise therefore that the office and residence of the Apostolic Delegate in Beijing was not built with the support of those missionary prelates but by the private funds donated by Chinese Catholic laymen rallied by none other than Ma Xiangbo, the almost ultramontane ex-Jesuit grandee who translated *Maximum Illud*.¹²

¹¹ Young, *Ecclesiastical Colony*, 225.

¹² Ma Xiangbo, "教廷使署志 [Commemoration of the Establishment of the Apostolic Nunciature] (1929)," in Li Tiangang 李天綱, ed., 馬相伯卷 [Ma Xiangbo Juan (Collected Works of Ma Xiangbo)] (Beijing: Renmin University Press, 2014), 429.

EFFORTS AT MAKING *MAXIMUM ILLUD* KNOWN BY WORDS AND DEEDS

Apart from the general dismay expressed in the foregoing quotes from missionary bishops and diplomats in China towards the Pope's new policy, another highly problematic feature resulting from the news of *Maximum Illud* was the spread of hearsay and speculations surrounding the implementation or even retraction of the letter. Ernest Young's research revealed that Father Antoine Cotta heard in Paris that there had been rumours about the Pope himself who felt misinformed about the circumstances in China. Others even thought "[t]he encyclical was held to be unworkable...and if it was put into effect, it would result in the disowning of the Protectorate, the summoning of Chinese priests before magistrates, the seizure of church property, and the departure of European missionaries...."¹³

Many Chinese clergy and faithful, especially the progressivists in Tianjin, welcomed *Maximum Illud* as a gesture of the Holy Father vindicating their rightful aspirations, but the elation was only to the extent of those who actually managed to get a hold of its copy and knew what had actually been said in the document. In fact, except for two journals, hardly any of the major Catholic publications operated by foreign mission bodies carried the full text or full translation of *Maximum Illud*. As had been mentioned before, it was Ma Xiangbo, the revered eighty-year-old icon of the Chinese Catholic intelligentsia who took the initiative to translate it into Chinese.

Father Vincent Lebbe, the Belgian Vincentian missionary who labored tirelessly behind the scenes advocating for the evangelical attitudes which Benedict XV adopted, took the points of *Maximum Illud* further by completely identifying himself as a Chinese and acted solely for the welfare of the people: he changed his nationality from Belgian to Chinese, brought about the ordination of the first batch of six Chinese bishops, founded two local Chinese religious congregations, started Chinese newspapers that had a wide readership even among non-Catholics, spreading the positive message of how reasonable it is to be fully Chinese and fully Catholic at the same time, organized war-relief teams to aid the masses in the frontline of the battlefield, etc. His exemplary model was well complemented by the Apostolic Delegate to China, Celso Costantini, who made it his primary task to implement *Maximum Illud* unreservedly. Costantini himself founded yet another local Chinese congregation, the Congregation of the Disciples of the Lord, set up regional major seminaries and eventually saw the establishment of the full Catholic Hierarchy in China in 1946.

An angle to capture the *mens legislatoris* of *Maximum Illud* was the cautionary attitude of Pope Benedict XV himself and of the principal motor behind the movement, Cardinal Van Rossum, the head of *Propaganda Fide*. The Roman Pontiff, Giacomo della Chiesa (related to Bernardino della Chiesa, OFM Ref, bishop of Peking in the seventeenth century), and the Red Pope (the sobriquet for the Cardinal Prefect of *Propaganda Fide*) were both apprehensive of too radical a

¹³ Young, *Ecclesiastical Colony*, 217.

changeover of the mission in China to an entirely local Chinese episcopate. That means even the Holy See and the European missionary bishops in China were both on the same page regarding a conservative promotion of Chinese bishops based on the uncertainty of their qualifications.

Eventually the Holy See took the most affirmative step possible towards the realisation of its new approach to the China mission by sending its first Apostolic Delegate to China to take the helm of the country's evangelisation. With some artistic licence, it could be said that Archbishop Celso Costantini was *Maximum Illud* incarnate. His very person, penchants and presence is the embodiment of *Maximum Illud*. His initiatives and directives were pivotal in guiding the course of development of post-*Maximum Illud* Chinese Catholicism and even the world over when he later became the Secretary of *Propaganda Fide* himself.

EXCURSUS: THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF PEKING:

A FORERUNNER CASE TO *MAXIMUM ILLUD*

There was an interesting historical precedence that illustrated how a shrewd choice of nationality and organisation for a missionary project managed to correspond responsibly to the admonition of *Maximum Illud* to avoid even the appearance of nationalistic missionary superiority. I am referring to the setting up of the Catholic University of Peking. Back in 1912, immediately after the birth of the Republic of China, two leading lay Catholic intellectuals, Joseph Ma Xiangbo and Vincent Ying Liangzi jointly petitioned Pope Pius X to establish a Catholic university in the ancient Chinese capital. Incidentally, Ma Xiangbo, on the one hand, is an ethnic Han Chinese from the Jiangsu province and descendant from an old Catholic family lineage tracing back to the time of Matteo Ricci; whereas Ying Liangzi is a Manchurian from Peking and convert to Catholicism. They form a fascinating pair when one considers the comradeship of these two Catholic representatives of two different cultural strands, one south, one north, one Han, one Manchurian, one seasoned catholic, one fresh convert, but both avant-garde and steadfast in their common goal in programmatically raising the quality of Catholic influence. Now how does their joint petition to launch a Catholic university in Peking turns out to be a perfect demonstration of perspicacity in obviating the stereotypical accusation of planting yet another western imperial entity on Chinese soil? The answer lies in a providential combination of two apparently unrelated and innocently innocuous entities: the United States of America and the Benedictine Order. As it turns out, the Holy See's call for this new mission in Peking was answered by the Benedictine Archabbey of St. Vincent in Latrobe, Pennsylvania, USA.

To Ma Xiangbo's delight, it was a beam of light. First, the United States had no aggressive territorial ambitions in China, meaning that although it maintained

commercial interests like others, unlike France or the UK or Spain, the Americans were far less competitive in setting up colonies in China. Second, the Benedictine Order, being a millennial old foundation with its fine track record of conservation of humanistic and spiritual cultural heritage, duly transcends any particular native association with modern nation states.¹⁴ For example, it had already become extremely hard to mentally or culturally disassociate the religious congregations from their respective national provenance. For instance, the Lazarists from their predominantly Franco-Belgian roots, the Dominicans from the Spanish, the SVDs from the Austro-Germanic, the MEPs from the French, or the PIME Fathers from the Italian. One could hardly think of a congregation and not immediately add one of those several imperial national titles to it. And sometimes such imaginative associations were fed and nourished until the middle of the last century by publications with suggestive titles such as *Religião e Patria* (religion and the fatherland) under the patronage of the Portuguese *Patroado* overseeing Macau.

But the Benedictine Order, born before the concept of modern nation states, seemed to have been saved from this unhelpful labelling. And the relatively benign impression that America had on the Chinese populace of the new-born Republic was helpful in ushering a good start for the University in Peking which was eventually known as the Fujen Catholic University (re-founded in Taipei). Although Fujen had to overcome some financial hurdles in its founding, its operation concretely implemented the *Maximum Illud* programme such as inculturation of Christian and Chinese artistic expressions and an integration of higher learning and standard canonical training in its priests' college for the local Chinese clergy (司鐸書院).

A COMPLEX ANALYSIS

In analysing the resistance to *Maximum Illud* of 1919 in the confined situation in China, it would be useful to draw some parallel with the reaction sparked by the issuing of another contemporaneous document which, like *Maximum Illud* also represented a kind of Roman ecclesiastical centralisation. What I mean was the Code of Canon Law of 1917. Prior to the codification of canon law, bishops and vicars in dioceses and missions across the world enjoyed relatively greater degree of juridical and pastoral autonomy. Some of the reasons for this phenomenon were the retarded speed in global communication due to physical distances, and also because of the dominance of national protectorates and those religious congregations dependent upon them. The promulgation of the Code of Canon Law was a concrete step taken by the Holy See to bring uniformity to practices. Roman centralisation could be one way of describing the effect of this process, but it would

¹⁴ Ma Xiangbo, "美國本篤會士創設北京公教大學宣言書稿 [Draft of the Manifesto of the Catholic University of Peking Founded by the Benedictines of America] (1925)," in Ma Xiangbo Juan, 395.

also be more justifiable to say that this was a measure to strengthen the spiritual realm of the Church over and above the fracturing scene or sometimes even dissident state of the missions overly reliant on the prowess of temporal powers, as the lessons from the rise and fall of the Papal State itself could amply attest.

Prior to the 1917 Code, it was estimated that nearly one-third of the bishops in the world were not directly nominated by the Roman Pontiff but were rather candidates proposed by secular powers or powerful religious congregations, especially in mission territories over which *Propaganda Fide* did not exercise immediate control. Thus the 1917 Code and *Maximum Illud* of 1919 were like a two-part drama unfolded to tell the tale of a battle of wills between a global Roman, but centralised vision vis-à-vis the expanding but conservative factions of European nationals. The pawns, so to speak, of these opposing players, to adopt a kind of caricaturistic parlance, seemed to be the indigenous people in the mission lands waiting to be propped up or dropped by one party or the other.

For the sake of argument, a mere historicist or even reductionistic view of the negative reaction to *Maximum Illud* in China could perhaps be cast in this form: that *Maximum Illud* represents the Vatican's declaration of war against the entrenched French protectorate system. It is Roman Catholicism versus the secular French imperial foreign agenda. It is religion coming head-to-head with politics. Hence, the predominantly French bishops who sided with the interests of their motherland France were basically challenging Papal authority. Now all of the above models or caricatures are not entirely false, but the reality reveals more layers of factors at play in the background and in the heart of the matter.

There was the huge question of the evolving sense of national ethos of the Chinese people learning to rule themselves democratically for the first time in its history. Warlords, monarchists, republicans, upstart socialists, educated overseas returnees, and homegrown literatis were all discerning and scrambling to chart a new course in a chaotic fashion for the new China that was so vastly monolithic yet so delicately fragile at the same time. The essential question is, do the quarrels and qualms between the Holy See and those dissenting missionary bishops even touch upon the plight and pangs of the new nation desperately in need of a strong moral guiding force towards true self-strengthening? The deep inferiority complex of the majority ethnic Han Chinese under Manchurian dynastic rule had been liberated, and how come, it seems to me, the missionary hierarchy had not the prophetic vision of seizing this golden opportunity to show themselves as a loyal ally to the cause of the remaking of a strong and stable China? The prevailing mentality, unfortunately, was a direction towards ecclesial self-preservation by sheltering themselves under residual European forces that had been forged through unequal treaties with the already toppled Qing dynasty. Had the Catholic mission hierarchy in China thrown itself head over heels in support of the indigenisation project of the clergy, such generosity of spirit would eventually earn the appreciation of the wider society. Risking the flowering of the missions in the wake of the birth of a new country by not abjuring the Church's political ties with foreign colonial powers was clearly what *Maximum Illud* cautioned to avoid.

Maximum Illud was not a political manifesto or battle cry by the Holy See against her own dedicated missionaries around the world. Nor was *Maximum Illud* calculated to cause the intended effect of escalating tension between the Vatican and those national protectorates. In fact, the Vatican acted very cautiously. The commissioning of Celso Costantini to China was carried out with tact and absence of even an appearance of an affront or brute assertion of papal authority. *Maximum Illud* was essentially an evangelical guide that aimed at curbing excesses and at raising awareness to better harness the God-given potentials of the local people.

Needless to say, despite the pejorative reading and cold reception of *Maximum Illud* by the missionary hierarchy in China, scores of genuine missionaries, both religious and laity, made tremendous effort in their daily evangelising of the masses through catechising, education, charitable services and other sundry wholesome projects. Their charity was evident. Their zeal unquestioned. But the purpose of this brief survey is to identify those symptoms of reluctance to embrace the new apostolic strategy of integrated indigenisation, so that the same mistakes do not repeat themselves again. In sum, mistrust of the quality of indigenous talents, and the fear of the collapse of the mission establishments without colonial and military support, betray a fundamental flaw—that is, overcalculated human considerations left not enough room for the power of the Spirit to invigorate the soul of the people whom the missionaries were meant to serve and evangelise, not to subjugate and dominate.

The true face of missionary service was unfortunately smudged at times by putting a brave front in conjunction with colonial authorities who fell short of providing due encouragement for the authentic character-building of the local populace. Like Matteo Ricci, who made friends with his interlocutors, missionaries should also treat the locals whom they serve as partners on equal footings as fellow redeemed sons and daughters of God. The pitfall of colonialism is precisely that it easily loses sight of the value of human dignity of the personhood. A colonial church risks mutating racial supremism into what I have already referred to as a nationalistic ecclesial superiorism, which is in practice the creation of second-class Catholics by race or nationality. Naturally, there is always the nuanced contrarian argument that claims that equality is a false notion when one should appeal to the more objective criterion of competence rather than to factor race or gender into the equation.

We must learn from history. Historical variables come and go, but the constant invisible features that continue to menace us remain: the “three Ps”— power, pride and peer pressure. How much of this is attributable to ideological strife? How much is plain work of the devil disrupting the work of God? What were perhaps a careless or unconscious lack of attention to heeding the urgent directives of the Apostolic See for more respect for the locals might have had been the cause of untold subsequent sad sagas down the road of the development of Chinese Catholicism. It is almost a well-known unwritten secret that many of the leaders of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association in the 1950s were clerics or ex-seminarians who were resentful to what they perceived as unequal treatment

suffered under some foreign missionaries. So, it is unfortunate to say, the heightened behaviour of patriotism of some missionaries may have had backfired and led to the rise of a reactionary Chinese patriotism among some Catholics who did not appreciate those earlier behaviour they witnessed.

I wish to draw from a remark I made when reviewing D.E. Mungello's captivating book, *The Catholic Invasion of China*, which I think serves as an appropriate commentary here on the general reactive ethos exhibited by those who felt the "sting" of *Maximum Illud*:

If this book reads like an exposé of Catholic and Imperial blunders or mishaps in China, it is because the consecutive chapters present the vicissitudes of a hugely invested missionary movement struggling to blend a host of apparently incongruous blocks of institutional prejudices, cultural clashes, political interference, and inevitable human foibles (e.g. racism) into one. And in the process of piecing together this unachievable medley, the impression that seems to have emerged is that 'Invasion' has overshadowed the 'Mission' – the Conquest of Culture over the Salvation of Souls. Has evangelising 'invasion' devolved into 'aggression'?¹⁵

A CENTURY AFTER *MAXIMUM ILLUD*: LEGACY OF TRAGEDY?

Perhaps the following fact would enlighten (or embarrass) us when attempting to answer the question above: the Chinese text of *Maximum Illud* never found its way to any official publication, and even today, in 2019, there is not an official modern Chinese translation available by either the Vatican or by any of the Chinese speaking conferences of bishops in China, Macau, Hong Kong, or Taiwan. The only version which is most difficult to retrieve even in this digital age remains the one done by Ma Xiangbo in very formal classical literary Chinese which unfortunately many today find it hard to comprehend.¹⁶

Have those resistant tendencies to the injunctions of *Maximum Illud* perdured or trickled down to our very own day in China, Macau, Hong Kong, or Taiwan? Has pride or hubris been the principal culprit of the shortcomings in evangelisation; has it been just a matter of insufficient mutual cultural appreciation? Or has a narrow, utilitarian, pragmatic self-serving mentality for immediate quick-fix results overtaken the primacy of planning for long-term eventual self-evangelisation by the locals? Of course, *Maximum Illud* should not just be seen like those condemnatory encyclicals, such as *Lamentabili sane exitu* or the *Syllabus of Errors* detailing problems to be remedied. But *Maximum Illud* does call for a conversion of hearts to heed the Apostolic call earnestly in obedience. To be fair, the Holy See itself should

¹⁵ Cyril Jerome Law, Jr., "The Catholic Invasion of China: Remaking Chinese Christianity by D.E. Mungello (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015)," *Heythrop Journal* 59, no. 2 (2018): 393–94.

¹⁶ Subsequent to the delivery of this paper in November 2019, several modern Chinese translations started to circulate through various ecclesiastical channels.

take the lead in better coordinating the missionary effort, especially with the advancement of global communication and transport. The fact that we even have to entertain the question of ordaining married men to the priesthood in the recent Amazonian Synod after more than 100 years of *Maximum Illud* clearly indicate some jarring distance between the ideal and the reality of contemporary Catholic mission. What went wrong? I would say it is the same old resistance to the grace of daily conversion both on the part of some in the hierarchy and those in the frontline.

A worthwhile missiological topic to explore would be to compare the rate and scale of successes and failures on the implementation of *Maximum Illud* between China and say Japan for example. Intra-continental and inter-continental parallels could be drawn to test theories and measure reality. Generally speaking, in other parts of the world, we witness optimistic results under the guiding inspiration of *Maximum Illud*. Many former mission territories have managed to break free from colonial interference and painstakingly became mature local churches with virtually 100% indigenous episcopate, such as India and most of Africa. Inculturated evangelisation has also become a worldwide normative principle in church development and theological intercourse. So, it is justifiable to say that the foundational principles laid down by *Maximum Illud* made their impact palpably felt today, especially with the renewed incentives instilled by the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council for the whole Church.

We may be tempted to ask this question today: how can we measure up to the standard expected of the missionaries laid down by *Maximum Illud*, with respect to the case of China in particular? I would venture to answer this theoretical question by a risky, if not even borderline anachronistic approach by putting forward the example of Matteo Ricci and the famous convert Paul Xu Guangqi. Granted that Ricci was a pioneer rather than a vicar or bishop, it may be wrong to claim that Ricci is the prime model of a *Maximum Illud* kind of a missionary. Also, Xu was not a member of the clergy but an abled and learned layman, which seem to also fall outside of the purview and principal concerns of the apostolic letter. However, what I wish to point out is that, in my estimation, it would not be farfetched to say that what *Maximum Illud* wanted to achieve were things that the approach and spirit of Ricci and Paul Xu had somehow captured and even later better understood and promoted by people like Ma Xiangbo, Lebbe, Costantini and the like, two centuries later. The *modo soave*, the sweet or soft or gentle approach, is the path of friendship, trust, and mutual respect. Truly one of service, not of conquest; of ministry, not might.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This article was originally a paper presented as part of an academic initiative entitled “Evangelisation by Local Missionaries – *MAXIMUM ILLUD* LECTURE SERIES” organised by the Faculty of Religious Studies of Saint Joseph University, which was delivered at the Gratia Hall of Saint Joseph Seminary, Macau, on 13 November 2019. I am grateful to Professor Franz Gassner, Dean of the Faculty, who encouraged me to submit this paper for publication.