

MATTEO RICCI AND JESUIT MISSION VAGLIANO'S MISSION

Missionary work was the initial impulse of the Jesuit program. While Loyola was busy organizing the new society, Francis Xavier, another noble Basque among the **group's founder members**, was already on his way to India. But on arriving there in 1542, Xavier was annoyed by the colonial Portuguese ascendancy in Goa, and by the skin-deep Christianity of the converts, who knew next to nothing about the Christian faith. Furthermore, he was dismayed by the colonial **establishment's** complete ignorance **of the natives'** languages, and by the inaccuracy of the translators, who, knowing nothing about Christianity couldn't be relied on at all for the transmission of a religious message. He gathered from this experience the conviction that linguistic competence was a prerequisite for missionary work, and that evangelizing had to proceed according to a plan that took into consideration the cultural values of those to be converted.

Xavier then moved to Japan, praising the Japanese as "the best people that has as yet been discovered", and then tried to enter China. He was convinced that the conversion of China would be made easier by the fact that it was ruled by a single sovereign and that the great prestige of the Middle Kingdom made its conversion the necessary prerequisite for the conversion of the East as a whole. But Xavier died of fever in 1552 on the small island of Shangchuan in South China waters, while waiting for permission to enter China.

Three years after Francis **Xavier's death at China's door**, another Jesuit, Mendez Nuñez, arrived in Macau from Goa, and he stayed for some months. The letter that he sent to his Jesuit brethren presents China as an extremely rich and well organized country that would never convert unless its mandarins did so. He also stresses the fact that the biggest difficulty for preaching Christianity among the Chinese lies in the fact that they lack basic religious notions: they know nothing of a God Creator or of the immortality of the soul.

Another element stands out from Nuñez' report: it clearly depicts the trade between Macau and Japan, and the growing importance of the Jesuits in it. The exchanges between Japan and Macau had been intense since the very early days. As we have

already seen, China needed silver to deal with the changes introduced in its monetary system, while the feudal division of Japan multiplied the number of clients wishing for Chinese luxury items. But by the mid-16th century, direct contacts between China and Japan had been severed by both sides and all the traffic went through intermediaries: Macau quickly became the most active of these. The Jesuit presence in Macau was highlighted from the very first moment: **the imposing Saint Paul's cathedral and the St. Paul's college** ensured their visibility on the outskirts of China. But as was always the case with the Jesuits, they needed to enter in business to sustain themselves and their imposing religious and educational structures. They became the backbone of the Macao-Nagasaki trade. More often than not one of the three procurators who supervised this trade was a Jesuit.

The Jesuit involvement in Japan was further reinforced in 1578 by the arrival of the newly appointed Visitor for the Oriental Indies, Alessandro Valignano, an Italian of aristocratic ascendancy and an exceptional talent for political and organizational matters. He had been granted an extraordinarily wide range of powers to oversee and govern an enormous territory that extended from the Cape of Good Hope to Japan. Valignano immediately proposed a program of cultural accommodation that followed the main lines proposed by Xavier: linguistic competence, and accommodation to the cultural values of those to be converted.

Once in Japan, Valignano was delighted to find that some daimios of the southern island of Kyushu, who were closely entrenched with the Portuguese trade, had already converted. And that this in turn had entailed the conversion of all those placed under them. Valignano decided to use this achievement for an unprecedented propaganda operation: in 1582 he sailed for Papal Rome with an embassy of four noble Japanese youths, to draw public attention to the success of the Jesuit mission in the Far East.

The Japanese were received at the highest level of Catholic Europe, by the Pope and by Phillip II of Spain, but meticulously kept away from any contact with the Protestant half. The image of a Papal undisputed authority could not be tarnished. For more than half a century the Jesuits will be able to conceal the religious split that had divided Europe. Valignano, who had remained in Goa, returned with the four Japanese in 1588, only to find that in the meantime, Hideyoshi had unified Japan and viewed with great suspicion the concentration of Christians and Portuguese in some of the vital ports of southern Japan. In 1597 the Japanese dream approached its end with the crucifixion of 26 Christians in Nagasaki.