

Matteo Nicolini-Zani, *Monaci cristiani in terra cinese: storia della missione monastica in Cina*, Magnano (Bi) [Biella, Italy], Edizioni Qiqajon, Comunità di Bose, 2014, pp. 609.

Matteo Nicolini-Zani is a monk of the monastic Community of Bose (Biella, Italy) and a Sinologist, mainly concerned with the past and present history of Christianity in China. His last effort, *Monaci cristiani in terra cinese*, written in Italian, is an outline of the history of Christian monasticism in China. This story is told and should be read primarily as a reflection on the missionary value of the Chinese Christian monastic experience but more widely as a story of cultural encounter and exchange.

The book starts with a short preface and a very rich introductory chapter, followed by six chapters and three appendixes; it has a very rich bibliography organized by subject and a detailed nominative index. The accurate footnotes, along with several plates showing historical photographs, definitely enrich the book and help to give a lively image of the narrated facts.

In the first part, the author reflects on what he calls “monastic missiology” (p. 12), emphasizing how, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Holy See increasingly called for the missionary engagement of monastic orders. Nicolini-Zani makes it very clear in the very first pages that the missionary dimension of monasticism has peculiar characteristics and differs from the active apostolate; the monastic role in mission lands was crucial in three aspects: to provide a spiritual support to the missionaries through prayer; to give an example of Christian life through the coenobitic and contemplative model; and to spread and implant Christian monasticism in mission territories. The challenge faced by Christian “missionary monasticism” in moving to China was double-faced: the first concern was to preserve its monastic identity, in terms of detachment from the world and life in community; the second concern, and the hardest challenge, was that the monks had to find a way to abandon their Western “cultural identity” and become Chinese. This struggle between the preservation of the monastic spiritual identity and its inculturation is the fundamental paradigm in which the author retraces the birth and the development of a Chinese Christian monasticism.

The first chapter recalls the earliest encounter between Christianity and China, which occurred during the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD, and which saw the Christian monks from Eastern Syria moving to the China of the Tang dynasty. This short chapter partially summarizes the previous book by Nicolini-Zani, *La via radiosa per l’Oriente* (Qiqajon, 2006), and introduces the very first attempt at Christian inculturation in China,

showing how the “Luminous Teaching” was presented to the Chinese through the borrowing of concepts and words from Buddhism, Taoism and Manichaeism. In this period, we can hardly assume that a Chinese Christian monasticism was already born, since the communities were only composed of foreign monks and believers; but still, Eastern Christian monasticism flourished for some centuries in the Chinese empire, from the Tang period up to the 14<sup>th</sup> century, i.e. the period of the Mongolian rulers of the Yuan dynasty.

The second chapter describes the monasteries of Discalced Carmelite nuns and one male Carmel, founded in China between 1869 and 1950. The main figures of the Carmelites in China were women, both Western and Chinese, and this part of the story depicts the efforts of both sides to know and understand each other, in order to become sisters and brothers of a same family. This story of Carmel in China, however, does not take into consideration the fact that some male Carmelites were sent to China by Propaganda Fide during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when they are said to have established at least two communities, and to have published the first pieces of Christian monastic literature in Chinese. It would be interesting to investigate this historical period more in depth, in order to better evaluate the contribution of these first Carmelites.

The third chapter is dedicated to the Trappist enterprise in China, started by a group of French monks in 1883 with the first monastery in Yangjiaping and a second one founded in 1928 at Zhengding, both in the province of Hebei, which surrounds the capital, Beijing. The Yangjiaping monastery gathered more than one hundred monks, most of whom were Chinese; after 1947, the monks of the two Trappist communities were arrested, dispersed or killed during the civil war, and only some members of Zhengding survived and eventually moved to Hong Kong.

Even if Cistercians in China always remained very tied to the European style of the monastic life, a certain degree of indigenization, some prominent Chinese monks, along with the so-called Sino-Christian architecture of their monasteries all testify to the beginning of inculturation of Christian monastic spirituality in China.

The theme of the fourth chapter is again the question of inculturation. The establishment of the Benedictines in China is narrated in three separate sections, respectively dealing with Benedictine groups from America, Belgium, and Germany. The American Benedictines founded the Catholic University of Peking (lately known as Furen University) in 1924, and two monastic communities in Beijing and Kaifeng, which moved to Taiwan in 1949 because of the civil war. The Belgian group is presented through some prominent personalities who made the Belgian Benedictines the most vivid example of the struggle between the preservation of monastic identity and indigenization. The Belgian monk Jehan Joliet (1870-1937), founder and first prior of the monastery in Xishan (Sichuan province), powerfully promoted the emancipation of Chinese monasticism from the “European cage” and firmly proposed some important changes to monastic life, for example, to discard the study of Latin by novices. His views are offered to the reader in the first two appendices of the book, which translate into Italian some of the documents written by this Belgian Benedictine. Joliet’s farsighted ideals were considered unacceptable by his superiors at the time, and

could only partially be achieved by his successors, which gradually realized a blend of Christian monasticism and Chinese spirituality. In this regard, the personalities of three important Chinese Benedictine monks, namely Thaddée Yang, Pierre-Célestin Lu and Pierre Zhou, are emblematic in the extent that any of them realized his own syncretism of Christian monastic spirituality and Chinese religious and philosophical thought. Lastly, the author makes a reference to the German Benedictine monks and nuns who were based in North-East China since 1928, and who mainly provided spiritual and health care for local Catholics, most of whom were of Korean ethnicity.

The fifth chapter concerns the famous Belgian missionary Fr. Vincent Lebbe (1877-1940), who entered China as a Lazarist but who eventually founded two monastic orders, one of monks and one of nuns, and ended up in obtaining Chinese citizenship and becoming a monk. He was one of the most strenuous promoters of the formation of a native clergy in China, and he always remained very critical towards the missionary approach as a whole, claiming the need to discard imperialistic attitudes and to reach a balance between Western and Chinese spiritualities and cultures. This kind of social and political concern was also reflected in the newspaper *Yishibao* (*Social Welfare*), founded by Lebbe in 1915 in Tianjin. The third appendix of the book translates into Italian a draft of the Rule written in Chinese by Lebbe for a community of Brothers, and offers to the reader a clear image of his brilliant and revolutionary personality.

The sixth and last chapter provides a comprehensive synopsis of the Chinese Christian monastic literature, from Tang East-Syrian monasticism and the occasional monastic topic inserted in 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century Jesuit publications, up to the publications by Chinese monasteries in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the most important Chinese academic researches on the history of Christian monasticism in general, and on Chinese Christian monasticism in particular.

It is probable that some works identified by the author and labeled as “lost” are still in some libraries or archives in China or Europe. For instance, the library of our Pontifical University Urbaniana (PUU), which is the heir of the illustrious “Bibliotheca Missionum” founded by Pope Pius XI after the Missionary Exposition of 1925, surely holds some of those works. They should soon be available for the author or for later scholars who intend to fill the gaps by taking in account these important documents.

This new book by Matteo Nicolini-Zani successfully portrays the birth and development of Christian monasticism in China. The author, in this sense, accomplished a task that nobody ever attempted: a comprehensive overview of all of Chinese Christian monasticism throughout the centuries. Besides the academic value of this new research, the reader will surely perceive the sincere hope expressed by the author, that this “small history” could be a little spark, capable of lighting a new fire of Christian monasticism in China.

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