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A Sign of Great Penitence: Food, Fasting and the Dilemmas of Evangelization in Early Modern Chinese and Japanese Missions

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From their very first entry into the Ming empire during the Early Modern period (Jesuits in the 1580s, Franciscans and Dominicans in the 1630s), Christian missionaries produced an extensive body of documents on this little known territory: *relationes* (reports to their superiors on the state of the mission), chronicles, voluminous epistolography, and a vast variety of accounts on Chinese history, philosophy, nature, culture, creeds and cults, society and people, including their dietary and culinary habits and choices. In all these texts, the missionaries describe their first-hand experience with the Chinese kingdom. Not only do they report about “things Chinese”; they also interpret this unknown country for their European readers, explaining the alien culture using familiar European terms.

My original intention was to analyse how these first missionaries understood Chinese food and food culture. The general assumption – in anthropology, sociology and even in cultural history – is that food is one of the most salient cultural factors, in the sense that it can disclose sets of beliefs, moral values, traditions, and rules of behavior held in common by a community. Food is perceived as an expressive metaphor for both the individual sense of self and a society’s social and political relations. It is closely related to personal and even ethnic and national identity, to gender and body. With special relevance to the evangelization enterprise, it conveys crucial religious and spiritual meanings. From this point of view, food is

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an excellent showcase to exhibit the difference, the Otherness of the Chinese Kingdom in the early modern perception. Indeed, one of the founders of the Jesuit mission in China, Matteo Ricci (1552-1610), speaks about local food in terms of Otherness, comparing the Chinese and the European ways of preparing and presenting food:

The Chinese eat about everything that we do, and their food is well-prepared. They do not give much attention to any one particular kind of food that might be served, as their dinners are rated by the variety rather than by the kind of courses offered. At times the table will be covered with dishes of food, large and small. They observe no particular order for courses of fish and meat as we do, but serve them indiscriminately.¹

In a similar vein, the *Annual Account of the endeavours that the Fathers of the Society of Jesus carried out in the Oriental Indies and Japan in 1600 and 1601*, a compilation of Jesuit annual letters gathered by the Portuguese Jesuit Fernão Guerreiro and published in Spain in 1604, includes the *Account of the Things Chinese* by the Jesuit Diego de Pantoja (1571-1618), one of the collaborators closest to the famous Matteo Ricci. Pantoja's *Account* is, in fact, an extensive letter, written in 1602 to Luis de Guzmán, the Father Provincial of Toledo, in which Pantoja offers a lengthy description of the geography, history, government, and culture of China. In its time, the epistle represented one of the most comprehensive accounts of the Chinese empire written by a European, and, unsurprisingly, it included several details on eating habits of the Chinese.

“With the exception of rich Mandarins”, Pantoja writes,

...and some others who have big fortunes, they do not habitually eat meat neither fish, but rather salted vegetables, and herbs which do not cost much, and their main sustenance is rice or millet, eaten in abundance [...]. They have many types of wine, all of them made with rice, but it cannot be compared to that of our lands. Be that wine or water, they always drink it hot. They are very neat in eating because they do not touch anything with their hands, and therefore they do not use nor napkins nor tablecloths.²

Pantoja then describes the habit of eating with chopsticks, which he finds very convenient and full of advantages; “whoever tries it”, he states, “finds it delightful, and so it is used by all our brethren in Japan and in Macao”.³

These seem to be very straightforward remarks on the differences in habits, customs and general otherness of the Chinese culture. If we, how-

1 English translation in Louis J. Gallagher, *China in the Sixteenth Century: The Journals of Matteo Ricci*, New York (NY): Random House 1953, 67.

2 Fernão Guerreiro, *Relación anual de las cosas que han hecho los Padres de la Compañía de Jesus en la India Oriental y Iapón*, Valladolid: Luys Sánchez 1604, 617.

3 *Ibid.*, 618.

ever, read carefully the coetaneous missionary testimonies, we realize that certain descriptions of food represent more than a way of mediating the idiosyncrasy of Chinese culture, a picture of the Other, so to speak; in certain contexts, food tends to embody a compelling symbolic image of the encounter of Christianity with alien cultures. To put it in other words, food is no mere symbol of the exoticism of the Chinese world; it also reflects the inevitable difficulties in the interaction of Christianity with Chinese cultural, religious, and spiritual Otherness. This is particularly manifested in the practice of ecclesiastical fasting due to its immediate religious meanings and connotations.

In this article, I set out to examine food and fasting as phenomena through which we can discern the essential dilemmas of the early modern Apostolate. To do so, I have selected a set of reports from the Franciscan and Jesuit missions to China and Japan (together with some documents from the Philippines), written either by the missionaries themselves in European languages, or re-elaborated on later in secondary edits of European compilations, *historiae*, and chronicles of the missions, which circulated extensively in printed form in Europe.⁴ These testimonies reveal the nature of the premodern inter-religious or inter-faith dialogue in a conspicuous way, providing a glimpse into the extremely ambiguous interactions of the Christian message with Chinese (and Japanese) culture, polarized as it is between adaptation and resistance. They also illustrate the multiple ways in which the agents of evangelization, the missionaries, engaged in this interaction, and their sometimes conflicting approaches towards evangelization. Finally, these testimonies also unveil the specific problems of the Early Modern conversion of *gentiles*, the idea of which built upon contemporary moral theology and, in particular, on the correlation between the purity and authenticity of faith and its inner experience, on the one hand, and its outer manifestation, on the other.

4 The limited extent of this article does not allow for a discussion of contemporary Chinese traditions of fasting, albeit in interaction with Christian thought. I focus, basically, on the Christian missionary perspective and testimonies, and on how these provide a glimpse into the controversial aspects of evangelization, as seen by the European missionaries.

Methodology

Traditionally, East-West encounters have largely been examined by historiography. They have also been objects of literary studies and anthropology (especially in the study of indigenous cultures), and investigated by means of various interdisciplinary approaches, such as postcolonial studies. Postcolonial theory, in particular, has been very fruitful in assessing the Western interaction with newly-discovered territories in the East. When applied to missionary narratives, and particularly to early modern missionary narratives, however, these methodologies present important deficiencies. The missionary narrative is highly specific, because it describes the encounter with the *New Worlds* from the perspective of the evangelization enterprise and, in premodern Asia, is not associated with military and imperial power, which is in contrast with colonial encounters, “in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict.”⁵

One methodology that fits better with the characteristics of the missionary discourse is, in my view, Otherness, an exceptionally broad interdisciplinary perspective.⁶ Like postcolonial theory, Otherness resorts to the antagonism of Us-Them, but it perceives it rather in reciprocity and not so much as a hierarchical opposition. In this sense, it focuses on the ways in which the view of the Other is conditioned by the nature of the I/Us. How is the understanding of the Other determined by the cultural categories, preconceptions, and assumptions of the I/Us?

Comparable dynamism is characteristic of transculturality, an approach that grew out of the postcolonial perspective,⁷ but perceives culture as an ongoing process of interaction, circulation, and reconfiguration, and, consequently, emphasizes the necessity to treat any cultural exchange (“beyond real or perceived borders”) as “constantly changing, moving, adapting”.⁸ Instead of dealing with polarities and simple binaries, transculturality focuses on “diverse and scalar relationalities”.⁹ This approach is

5 Laila Abu-Er-Rub – Christiane Brosius – Sebastian Meurer et al. (eds.), *Engaging Transculturality: Concepts, Key Terms, Case Studies*, London: Routledge 2019, xxiv.

6 For Otherness applied to medieval accounts, see for example: Jana Valtrová, *Středověká setkání s „jiným“*. *Modloslužebníci, židé, saracéni a heretici ve středověkých misionářských zprávách o Asii*, Praha: Argo 2011. Otherness has been also used to assess the particular topic of food. See, for example, David M. Freidenreich, *Foreigners and Their Food: Constructing Otherness in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Law*, Berkeley (CA): University of California Press 2011.

7 L. Abu-Er-Rub – Ch. Brosius – S. Meure et al., *Engaging Transculturality...*, xxiii.

8 *Ibid.*, xxiii, xxvi.

9 *Ibid.*, xxiii.

particularly useful in assessing missionary documents in which the simple opposition “Us/Them” is unsustainable, due to the complex nature of adaptation, accommodation, and inculturation (or, alternatively, resistance to any kind of religious syncretism or hybridization) of the Christian message.

Related to transculturality is the methodology of transcultural translation,¹⁰ which emerged in translatology. Despite its apparently purely linguistic focus, it is highly relevant for any analysis of transcultural encounters, because it conceives translation not as a bilingual “conversion”, but rather in terms of cross-cultural communication and transmission of knowledge. It focuses on the processes of rendering culture-specific or culture-bound terms and, importantly, on the act of mediation – that is, on ways in which the inherent categories and values of a culture can be communicated.

The perspective of transcultural translation is exceptionally useful, particularly the idea that the act of translation, in Umberto Eco’s words, implies the translation of whole encyclopedias.¹¹ Translation brings about the mediation or transference of a whole cultural system, with its inherent values, beliefs, and metaphysical and religious categories, into another cultural system – or, in other words, the transference of a particular worldview and of a particular epistemic tradition into another one.¹² This is exactly the case of the evangelical enterprise, which must mediate the Christian message with its intrinsic spiritual and religious contents. This mediation calls for a methodology that would illuminate the process of rendering the Western vision of the divine and its relationship to humanity, its cosmology, and the underlying metaphysical and spiritual assumptions. The study of Early Modern missionary documents, in sum, requires a methodology that can account for this act of “rendering faith”, which includes a potential shift in the doctrinal contents of the Christian dogma. Such a shift has been studied, for example, in the translation of European religious concepts such as *Deus* (God) into Asian languages.¹³ It is self-

10 See for example, Karen Seago, “Transcultural Translation: Let’s Engage”, in: Juliet Steyn – Nadja Stamselberg (eds.), *Breaching Borders: Art, Migrants and the Metaphor of Waste*, London: IB Tauris 2013, 123-139.

11 Umberto Eco, *Mouse or rat – translation as negotiation*, London: Weidenfel and Nicholson 2003, 82.

12 Cf. Wang Wenlu’s paper entitled “Rendering Faith into Knowledge: Epistemic Hybridization in Early Modern Japanese and Chinese Christian Texts” at EAJS2021: 16th International Conference of the European Association of Japanese Studies [abstract online], <<https://nomadit.co.uk/conference/eajs2021/paper/61338>>, [1. 3. 2023].

13 Cf. Sangkeun Kim, *Strange Names of God: The Missionary Translation of the Divine Name and the Chinese Responses to Matteo Ricci’s «Shangti» in Late Ming China, 1583-1644*, New York (NY): Peter Lang 2005.

evident that what is being translated, in this one single term, is not the word in itself, but Christian (or directly Catholic) theology in general, a particular view of *numen* and a particular cosmology.

The process of rendering faith could be, in my view, called *translatio*, because it preserves all the connotations of the original Latin term; firstly, translation into another language; secondly, “transferring” or “transporting”; and, finally, “a transfer of meaning”. The *translatio*, indeed, transcends a purely linguistic or cultural performance, and turns to the process of rendering doctrine and its subsequent meaning-making in an alien cultural system. Importantly, the *translatio* is not limited to the *reception* (and potential transformation) of the Christian message, but also relates to the agents of this mediation, the missionaries, the Chinese neophytes, converts, and *literati*, whose mutual understanding and interaction evolved over time and, sometimes, introduced a shift or even a transformation in their experience of the Christian faith and of the Other.¹⁴

It is not my aim to fully devise such a methodology; I only want to point towards gaps and potential pitfalls in assessing Early Modern missionary accounts, and to exemplify this methodological deficiency in the particular case of food and fasting in the missions. As a matter of fact, only limited scholarly attention has been paid to the topic of food in Early Modern missions,¹⁵ as most studies focus on colonial encounters. In the framework of colonial projects, food and foodways have been examined as highly symbolic elements which can be related, for example, to the physical and bodily experience of colonialism.¹⁶

14 For the extremely rich and complex interplay of influence among the agents of the Apostolate, cf. Willard J. Peterson, “Reviewed Work: *Handbook of Christianity in China. Volume One: 635-1800* by Nicolas Standaert”, *The Catholic Historical Review* 89/1, 2003, 131-135: 135: “[All of these generalizations concern] who was doing what to whom, and when. Were missionaries converting literati, were literati converting themselves, and, we might even ask, were literati converting missionaries? Were missionaries manipulating emperors? Were emperors manipulating missionaries? And then put commoners into these questions. And then account for changes over time.”

15 The topic has been assessed, to some extent, in Latin American missions. See, for example, Marcy Norton, “Tasting Empire: Chocolate and the European Internalization of Mesoamerican Aesthetics”, *The American Historical Review* 111/3, 2006, 660-691; Etta Madden, “Savory Bites: Books on Eating in Early America”, *Early American Literature* 50/2, 2015, 495-514; Rebecca Earle, “‘If You Eat Their Food...’: Diets and Bodies in Early Colonial Spanish America”, *The American Historical Review* 115/3, 2010, 688-713; Maria João Dodman, “‘Nem Comem Senão Desses Inhames’: The Significance of Food in the Early Days of Brazil”, *Luso-Brazilian Review* 52/1, 2015, 42-60.

16 Cecilia Leong-Salobir, *Food Culture in Colonial Asia: A Taste of Empire*, London: Routledge 2011; Rebecca Earle, *The Body of the Conquistador: Food, Race and the Colonial Experience in Spanish America, 1492-1700*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2012.

As a matter of fact, symbols are an exceptionally suitable interpretative tool, because they can bring together different, even contrasting images. According to symbolic anthropology, culture represents a system of shared symbols, and the symbol is perceived as “a means of communication”,¹⁷ able to convey complex meanings “at levels of reality not accessible through immediate experience or conceptual thought [...]. These meanings are often complex and of different layers.”¹⁸ I want to exploit this interpretative potential of symbols in this study; I aim to explore food and, in particular, fasting as a surprisingly telling symbolic image and representation of essential dilemmas in the inter-cultural and inter-faith encounter between Christianity and the Chinese and Japanese cultures.

Fasting

One phenomenon related to food in which this symbolic potential is especially manifest is, paradoxically, not the consumption of food, but rather voluntary and spiritually-driven abstinence during ecclesiastical fasting. Fasting is an important part of the religious experience, and it is probably the alimentary form that is most connected with spirituality; it tends to be explored in historiography precisely in relation to devotional practices.¹⁹ Fasting, or *ieuinum*, has been a Christian practice since the early days of the Church and it represents an important part of the Church calendar. Within Christian dogma, it has several purposes: It is a form of sacrifice, giving up an earthly pleasure in the name of God. It is a means of repentance, either atoning for sin or seeking forgiveness. It is a practice of self-control intended to nurture spiritual growth by denying the flesh. It is a way of intensifying prayer. And it is preparation for a feast.²⁰

The Dominican Silvestre Mazzolini (1456-1523), one of the Early Modern authorities on the doctrine of fasting (built, principally, on *Summa*

17 Mari Womack, *Symbols and Meaning: A Concise Introduction*, Berkeley (CA): AltaMira Press 2005, 1.

18 *Ibid.*, 1.

19 See, for example, Veronika Grimm, *From feasting to fasting, the evolution of a sin: attitudes to food in Late Antiquity*, London: Routledge 1996; Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy feast and holy fast: the religious significance of food to medieval women*, Berkeley (CA): University of California Press 2010. For a discussion of the meanings of fasting and abstinence in Christianity, see also Claudio Ferlan, *Venerdì pesce. Digiuno e cristianesimo*, Bologna: Mulino 2021. See also Steve H. Mathews, *Christian Fasting: Biblical and Evangelical Perspectives*, London: Lexington 2015; Scot McKnight, *Fasting: The Ancient Practices*, Nashville (TN): Thomas Nelson 2010.

20 Paul Fieldhouse, *Food, Feasts and Faith. An Encyclopedia of Food Culture in World Religions*, Santa Barbara (CA): ABC-CLIO 2017, 184.

of the ‘Doctor Angelicus’) differentiates between fasting as an act of grief, on the one hand, where the purpose is to redeem past sins and to prevent future ones, and, on the other, fasting as an exaltation of the mind in elevation towards God.²¹

The history of fasting in the Christian Church is especially complex, since it was first based on the biblical tradition, and was then further elaborated on by the Early Church Fathers (particularly by Tertullian and Saint Jerome), and finally codified by the most important medieval Church authority, namely by St. Thomas Aquinas.²² In the Old Testament, fasting often represents a way of controlling or avoiding desire, and in this way it is clearly linked to an ascetic identity and the image of the religious recluse. Similarly, in the New Testament, it is related to strict ascetic behaviour, but even more importantly to resisting temptation.

Christian theology distinguishes between four different forms of fasting: spiritual, moral, natural, and ecclesiastical. Natural fasting is conceived of as abstinence from all food; spiritual fasting is understood as abstinence from all unholy pleasures. Moral fasting is the habitual regulation of one’s food for the right reasons and within the limits of necessity. Fasting *stricto sensu*, as a highly organized Church practice, is ecclesiastical fasting – that is, abstinence from meat and certain other kinds of food, when only one meal is eaten each day and only after a given hour. Catholic doctrine establishes several exemptions from this rather strict routine, which include young age, physical weakness (in the case of sick and delicate persons), demanding labour, and, finally, piety – that is, when the want of food stands in the way of the perfect fulfillment of any duties of devotion.

As an important part of the organization of Christian life, the practices of fasting were included in the Commandments or Precepts of the Church, and their importance was equally present in the overseas missions. Instructions on fasting appear already in the *Christian doctrine in Chinese, composed by the Dominican ministers of the sangleyes (Doctrina Christiana en letra y lengua china, compuesta por los padres ministros de los sangleyes de la Orden de Sancto Domingo)*, a sort of doctrinal manual for the Chinese in the Philippines, the first book published (in xylographic print) in Manila, in 1593. It explains the very basic formulas of the practice: all Christians should fast at least nine days in a year. To not fast at all

21 Silvestro Mazolini, *Sylvestrinae summae, quae Summa summarum merito nuncupatur. Pars prima*, Lugduni: Apud Mauricium Roy and Ludouicum Pesnot 1553, 4.

22 For a detailed Early Modern exposition of these regulations, see, for example, Juan Enríquez, *Compendio de casos morales ordinarios*, Sevilla: Francisco de Lyra 1634, 121: “On the fourth commandment, that is, on fasting according to the precepts of our Mother Church”.

is a sin. Anyone desiring to fast more than stipulated is allowed to do so. On fasting days, one is not allowed to eat breakfast; only lunch is permitted, and in the evening, one can have some fruit or a glass of wine but nothing else can be eaten. The sick, those in old age or those engaged in demanding work, pregnant women or those who have to nurse a child, and finally those under twenty-one years of age do not sin if they do not practice fasting.²³

Fasting and Casuistry

In the framework of the evangelization enterprise, such strict regulations were quite problematic, because they were often unsustainable for the neophytes, due to the idiosyncrasy of their native culture. Consequently, *new worlds* created new and unsuspected problems and dilemmas in daily pastoral and liturgical practice. This is the case of fasting, but also of other ecclesiastical obligations, such as the observance of religious festivities. The Franciscan José Navarro, even as late as in 1705, reported on the visitation of Cardinal Tournon in China and on the fasting practices of his parishioners: “Fasting days and festivities are observed according to the privileges established; yet, since almost all the peasants are extremely poor, their daily fasting is only vegetables and herbs.”²⁴

In Catholic moral theology, controversial liturgical and moral questions were discussed and resolved in the body of casuistry, based especially on Thomist theology and, in the Early Modern period, on the authorities of second scholasticism. As the Apostolate progressed, moral theology had to react to the highly specific problems of overseas missions, which were dealt with in an extensive body of “missionary casuistry”.²⁵ It habitually consisted of lists of so-called *dubia* (polemic issues) or *quaesita* (controversial questions), challenging problems from the point of view of pastoral or confessional practices, sent by the missionaries to the Church authorities back in Rome, and resolved in the form of decrees or “replies” (*responsia*) by the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, or even by the Pope himself.

23 *Doctrina Christiana en letra y lengua china, compuesta por los padres ministros de los sangleyes de la Orden de Sancto Domingo*, Con licencia, por Keng yong, China, en el parian de Manila 1593, ff. 29a-30a.

24 Fortunatus Margiotti (ed.), *Sinica Franciscana*, Vol. VIII, pars prior: *Relationes et epistolas fratrum minorum Hispanorum in Sinis qui a. 1684-92 missionem ingressi sunt*, Romae 1975, 382.

25 For a discussion of Jesuit casuistry in the particular context of their early modern Japanese context, see Antoni J. Ūçerler, *The Samurai and the Cross. The Jesuit Enterprise in Early Modern Japan*, Leiden: Brill 2022.

Unsurprisingly, the missionary *quaesita* are oftentimes related to the local political, religious, or social circumstances of the mission. In China, for example, many of them concern Chinese traditional ceremonies and rites (public *cultus*), such as the veneration of ancestors or reverence paid to Confucius. Others involve liturgical questions, such as: How is the Sacrament of Holy Communion and that of Anointment to be administered to Chinese women, since they are extremely reserved and any touch (of the minister) would provoke a scandal among the new converts? Should the minister actually touch them, or should he use a specific tool?²⁶ How are the polemic issues of usury, polygamy, or concubinage, so customary in China, to be addressed?

The missionary *quaesita* were published in print in separate volumes; they were also often included in contemporary works of moral casuistry,²⁷ or in accounts and chronicles of the overseas missions. This is the case of *Tratados históricos, políticos, éticos, y religiosos de la monarchia de China* (Historical, political, ethical, and religious treatises on the monarchy of China) of Domingo Fernández Navarrete, a Spanish Dominican missionary who arrived in China in 1659. In 1664, after a great persecution of Christians was unleashed and Christianity was prohibited, Navarrete was detained in Canton, together with fellow Jesuits and Franciscans. During their captivity (1666-1671), the missionaries discussed their relatively conflicting approaches towards evangelization in China at the “Canton Conference” (December 1667 until January 1668).²⁸

During his later stay in Europe, Navarrete wrote his *Treatises*, an extensive account of China and its culture, history, and customs, of his own travels and, principally, of the state of Christianity in the empire. The book became extremely popular and was translated into various European languages, but it also caused enormous controversy because Navarrete expressed a fairly critical view of the Jesuit attitude to the Chinese Rites Controversy.

26 Cf. Domingo Fernández Navarrete, *Tratados históricos, políticos, éticos, y religiosos de la monarchia de China*, Madrid: Imprenta real 1676, 495-496; Cf. Marina Torres Trimállez, “Finding Norms for the Chinese Mission: The Hat Controversy in the Canton Conference of 1667/1668”, in: Manuel Bastias Saavedra (ed.), *Norms Beyond Empire: Law-Making and Local Normativities in Iberian Asia, 1500-1800*, Leiden: Brill 2022, 285-328.

27 For example, Tomás Hurtado de Mendoza, *Resolutiones orthodoxo morales scholasticae, historicae, de vero, unico, proprio & Catholico Martyrio Fidei*, Coloniae Agrippinae: Apud Cornelium ad Egmond 1655, contain ‘*Quaesita missionariorum Chinae, seu Sinarum, Sacrae Congregationi de propaganda fide exhibita, cum responsis ad ea*’.

28 On Navarrete, see the seminal study of John S. Cummins, *A Question of Rites. Friar Domingo Navarrete and the Jesuits in China*, Aldershot: Scolar Press 1993.

The last and seventh part of the *Tratados* lists several *quaesita* and *dubia* sent by the missionaries (Jesuits and other orders) in China to the Sacred Congregation from 1649 onwards – that is, long before the Canton Conference. Navarrete quotes the original question (*propositio*) and its resolution (*responsum*) in Latin and then comments on it, providing a telling image of the most problematic issues of the Chinese mission and the antagonistic attitudes of the different orders.

The very first proposition concerns fasting and the observation of festivities: “Are the Chinese Christians obliged to conform to the positive law [*ius positivum*, that is, law enacted by the duly entitled Church authorities and distinguishable from natural law], in regards to fasting, to confess once a year, to receive communion, to observe the festivities in the same manner as the Indians in New Spain and the Philippine islands?”²⁹

The judgment of the Congregation’s *qualificatores* is that the Chinese neophytes must observe the positive law in these practices, and must be informed by the missionaries accordingly,³⁰ but attending to the quality of the region and of the particular person, an exemption or indult (*dispensatio*) can be granted by the Pope, in accordance with Pope Paul III’s constitution (probably papal bull *Altitudo divini consilii* issued in 1537,³¹ which provides instructions regarding the conversion of the peoples of the Southern and Western Indies and grants them different indults; the bull was subsequently extended to the Chinese mission). Analogously, the neophytes must receive the Sacrament of Confession at least once a year, and the missionaries must notify them about this obligation. The same resolution is repeated, almost verbatim, in the later *Responsa Sacrae Congregationis* from 1656 to the *dubita* presented in Rome by the Jesuit missionaries,³² but here we can also learn the reason for the inquiry; the Jesuits explain that the Chinese are accustomed to eating only lightly and three times a day, which, allegedly, makes fasting for them very difficult.³³

Navarrete, in his commentary, refutes these claims. He argues that the food in China is abundant and in no case can the meals be described as *levis cibus* (a light meal); moreover, there is plenty of fish suitable for the periods of fasting, and the Chinese eat three times a day not because of the

29 D. F. Navarrete, *Tratados históricos ...*, 451. For a discussion of the contemporary Dominican views of obligations in matters of fasting in China, see Eugenio Menegon, *Ancensors, Virgins, and Friars: Christianity as a Local Religion in Late Imperial China*, Cambridge (MA) – London: Harvard University Asia Center 2009.

30 D. F. Navarrete, *Tratados históricos ...*, 451.

31 The original document can be accessed here: <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/b/b3/Altitudo_divini_consilii_%28Papal_Bull_of_Pope_Paul_III%29_-_WDL2965.png>, [1. 3. 2023].

32 D. F. Navarrete, *Tratados históricos ...*, 460.

33 *Ibid.*, 463.

lightness of the meals, but rather because it is an established custom, exactly like the customs in Europe. Furthermore, if the *levitas cibi* were really a problematic issue, then the missionaries would also be exempted from fasting, even more so than the Chinese, because the Europeans are more used to rich meals.³⁴ Finally, concludes Navarrete, the argument of the Jesuits is not valid because in the Philippines or in the Indies, the local “indios” eat only twice a day.³⁵

In spite of this seemingly inflexible attitude, Navarrete is aware of the local customs. In the last of the four *dubia* on fasting, out of twenty-five questions presented in 1654 by Navarrete himself to the Congregation, he requests that the Chinese be exempted from fasting on the day of their birthday.³⁶ The response of the Congregation is negative. Navarrete, though, objects to this decision, noting that “it is an extremely common custom in China to celebrate the birthday with supreme solemnity. Every birthday is like the Christmas Day for the Chinese, during which all family members, friends and acquaintances gather together, and the ‘banquets, feasts and dinners’ are extremely rich and important.”³⁷

“In my opinion”, concludes Navarrete, “if the birthday of a [Chinese person] happens to be on the day of Lent, on the Eve of Lent or on Friday, they should be exempted not only from fasting, but also from the abstinence of meat.”³⁸

Fasting and Faith

From what has been said so far it might seem that the *quaesita* and the *dubia* set forth by the missionaries, both by Jesuits and other orders, were motivated chiefly by the pragmatic or purely formal aspects of liturgic and missionary practice, as in one allegation by the Jesuits. This claim, reproduced by Navarrete, states that the Chinese are often obliged to work on days that are considered festivities by the Christians, and it is, therefore, impossible for them to confess on this day or to celebrate Christian festivities.³⁹ Navarrete then adds that the Chinese think highly of the practice

34 *Ibid.*, 467.

35 *Ibid.*, 468.

36 *Ibid.*, 504.

37 *Ibid.*, 504. Cf. Roel Sterckx (ed.), *Of Tripod and Palate: Food, Politics, and Religion in Traditional China*, New York (NY): Palgrave 2005, where the offering of sacrifices, the banqueting of guests, and the ritual preparation, prohibition or consumption of food and drink are analyzed not only as social phenomena, but rather as central elements in each of ancient China's three main religious traditions.

38 D. F. Navarrete, *Tratados históricos...*, 504.

39 *Ibid.*, 463.

of fasting, to the extent that when they ask missionaries about the “Holy Law”, they immediately inquire about fasting: “In order to facilitate their entrance [into Christianity]”, Navarrete explains, “we tell them that we have only a few [rules] on fasting and these are fairly bearable.” Surprisingly, this does not lead to a bigger acceptance of Christianity, quite the contrary, because “they do not see it as appropriate.”⁴⁰

It might seem, in sum, that the moral and theological dilemmas of the missions were related, firstly, to the pragmatic adaptation to the local culture and, secondly, to the conversion strategy or policy. Ecclesiastical obligations had to be explained bearing in mind the local culture, because otherwise they might have repelled or discouraged the aspirants to Christianity or Christian neophytes. “If [the decision] were in my hands, I would not exempt the Chinese from any fasting,” concludes Navarrete.⁴¹

This extremely pragmatic attitude has been traditionally attributed to the Society of Jesus, as we can see, for example, in the *Responsio* (1640) of Francisco Furtado, written in reply to Manila’s Dominicans’ criticism of the Jesuit attitude in China towards matters of fasting, baptism, confession, and the worship of Confucius. The Dominicans, according to Furtado, blamed the Jesuits for not obliging the Chinese Christians to observe the positive law in matters of fasting; they further called into question the Jesuits’ requirements concerning the attendance of mass on Sundays and holy days, annual confessions, communions, and abstaining from meat on the vigil on Saturday in preparation for Easter Sunday.

In his response to these accusations, Furtado (a Jesuit himself) argues that the Chinese Christians are not able to follow all these obligations. Moreover, the Society of Jesus enjoys several papal privileges concerning the promulgation of positive law. More importantly still, he asserts, the Church must work prudently in all things and use means only insofar as they lead to the desired aim. These ecclesiastical precepts, he claims, were established in order to guide men in their way towards salvation. However, due to the yet insufficiently mature disposition of the neophytes, an overly strong adherence to the precepts could drive them to destruction. He then recommends caution and gentleness (*suavitas*) when introducing the Church precepts to those new in faith. They must be promulgated in due time, so that the neophytes gradually become accustomed to them.⁴² For

40 *Ibid.*, 84. He repeats the same argument at page 468.

41 *Ibid.*, 468.

42 Francisco Furtado, *Responsio P. Francisci Furtado, vice-provincialis Sinensis Societatis Jesu ad duodecim quaestiones a P. F. Joanne Baptista de Morales Ordinis S. Dominici Manilensi, propositas patribus Soc. Jesu laborantibus in praedicatione Sancti Evangelii in Imperio Sinarum anno 1640*, in: *Informatio Antiquissima de praxi missionariorum Sinensium Societatis Jesu, circa ritus Sinenses, data in China, jam*

this purpose, he explains, the Jesuits provided the newly converted with a list of all fasting days, Sundays, and festivities of the year, arranged according to the days of the lunar month. The intended effect was already seen, as he adds, “for many fast on the first Sunday of the Lent, to which others add the Saturday in honor of the Blessed Virgin.”⁴³

One might infer from Francisco Furtado’s argumentation that the Jesuit *suavitas* was really motivated by the pragmatic demands of evangelization, but this interpretation should be reconsidered in light of other *quaesita* and debates among the missionaries in China. For example, the Congregation’s reply to the *dubium* on whether Chinese Christians can feast in honor of a dead emperor stipulates that it is not licit. Navarrete adds then that fasting is not a political act, “despite what they say”,⁴⁴ and this remark leads us directly into the heart of the so-called Chinese Rites Controversy,⁴⁵ a conflict which became manifest during the aforementioned Canton Conference, but whose origins date back to the early stages of evangelization in China and back to the Jesuit policy of accommodation. Chinese ritual practices of honoring ancestors were at the heart of the debate, as well as the veneration of Confucius, and other imperial rites; were they to be qualified as religious, and therefore forbidden for Christians? The Jesuits maintained that these were secular acts and, consequently, compatible with the Catholic doctrine. In contrast, the Franciscans and the Dominicans defined them as religious, and hence idolatrous and illicit for Christians.

Importantly, the rites controversy should not be framed only in relation to the definition of Chinese traditional rites and practices. Underlying the controversy was tension over the Jesuits’ willingness to conform the conversion process to the autochthonous culture, together with their admiration for Confucian thought and tradition, which was seen as possibly leading to subversive syncretism and potential contamination of the Christian doctrine with idolatry. In my view, the contemporary debates about food, fasting, and other ecclesiastical obligations in the missions can disclose the latent doctrinal dilemmas at stake. Instead of examining it in the context of the practical demands of the Church, fasting can be related to essential theological questions about the truthfulness of faith and conversion. In this

ab annis 1636 & 1640 a P. Francisco Furtado antiquo Missionario, & Vice Provinciali Sinensi ejusdem Societatis, Parisiis: apud Nicolaum Pepie 1700, 2-3.

43 *Ibid.*, 3.

44 D. F. Navarrete, *Tratados históricos...*, 506.

45 The scholarship on the topic of the Chinese Rites Controversy is fairly extensive; see the classical study by David Mungello (ed.), *The Chinese Rites Controversy: Its History and Meaning*, Nettetal: Steyler Verlag 1994; and Ines G. Županov – Pierre Antoine Fabre (eds.), *The Rites Controversies in the Early Modern World*, Leiden: Brill 2018.

sense, the reticence of the Franciscans and the Dominicans should not be seen as an expression of dogmatic rigidity; it must be rather considered in terms of the authenticity of faith and its manifestation in both external and internal acts (*actus internus* and *actus externus*).

As a matter of fact, the resolutions of the Congregation refer explicitly to these complex theological issues, as in a *quaesitum* concerning the food used during funeral ceremonies: “Is it licit for a Christian, or a Christian minister, to put food and drinks in front of the house, or in the street?” It is an old “custom of the Chinese [gentiles]”, according to the text of the *quaesitum*, “who believe that the soul of the dead will feed in this way on its journey.”⁴⁶ The response of the Congregation is, despite the explication, fairly categorical, stating that it is not licit *sine protestatione publica*,⁴⁷ that is, without the public declaration of faith.⁴⁸

This public declaration of faith, *confessio fidei*, is one of the most intricate problems of moral theology and, unsurprisingly, its casuistry became even more abstruse in the challenging circumstances of the missions, wherein an open profession of Christianity could lead to immediate death or persecution.⁴⁹ Importantly, many manuals of European moral casuistry, in the section devoted to the first precept of the Decalogue where the *confessio fidei* is analyzed, also examine the question of food and fasting, as in Tomás Sánchez’s *Opus morale in praecepta decalogi* (1623), one of the guidebooks especially relevant for the overseas evangelization effort.⁵⁰ Sánchez’s exposition is focused primarily on the correct behaviour of Christians in Protestant lands and among infidels and heretics, but it shows the importance of the fasting regulation and of food culture in the confrontation of Christianity with other creeds and beliefs. The question, *casus*, is posited in the following way: “Is it permissible for the faithful to eat forbidden foods in the places of infidels or heretics or while passing through them [...], such as meats on the forbidden days? Being that if they reject those foods, they might disclose themselves as Christians, and therefore be

46 D. F. Navarrete, *Tratados históricos...*, 479.

47 “*Protestari fidem* is to make one’s faith known. It is an expression frequently used by St. Thomas Aquinas.” José R. Villar, “Faith and Sacraments in Aquinas and the Second Vatican Council: Current Perspectives”, *Angelicum* 92/3, 2015, 379-402.

48 D. F. Navarrete, *Tratados históricos...*, 480.

49 For the casuistry of the *confessio fidei* in the particular context of the overseas missions, see Rômulo da Silva Ehalt, “Theology in the Dark: The Missionary Casuistry of Japan Jesuits and Dominicans during the Tokugawa Persecution (1616-1622)”, in: Manuel Bastias Saavedra (ed.), *Norms Beyond Empire: Law-Making and Local Normativities in Iberian Asia, 1500-1800*, Leiden: Brill 2022, 249-284: 251, note 10.

50 R. da Silva Ehalt, “Theology in the Dark...”, 251, note 10, lists European treatises on moral doctrine and scholastic *summas* that were most relevant for the missionary work.

in danger of great damage, imprisonment, torture, loss of property or of life.”⁵¹

In this correlation with *confessio fidei*, the act of the public declaration of faith or, eventually, its concealment, food consumption and fasting practices are associated with the most important tenets of the Christian doctrine. They become symbolic vehicles for the declaration of one’s true belief, the manifestation of the true faith, and the piety of the neophytes.

It can be seen, for example, in the aforementioned compilations of Jesuit annual letters from the missions, Fernão Guerreiro’s *Annual Account of the endeavours that the Fathers of the Society of Jesus carried out in the Oriental Indies and Japan in 1600 and 1601*, which connects fasting practices explicitly to the piety of the new converts. When recounting the advancements of the Jesuits in the city of Meaco (today’s Kyoto), Guerreiro refers to several noblewomen, who would “exert themselves continuously in pious and charitable works.”⁵² They also confess and take communion frequently. In one part of the city, the Jesuits constructed the House of Mercy, and there they often celebrate gatherings (*conferencias*), during which the fathers answer questions from the neophytes. Guerreiro considers these meetings particularly edifying, because during them, “the fathers preach about the things that have to be done for the benefit of the souls [...] and about the Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ.”⁵³ In fact, it is recorded that the new Christians “shed many tears” and their fervour was growing.⁵⁴ The chronicle then refers to their fasting habits: “During the Lent, many of them would not eat salt, which for them is a sign of great penitence, others would not drink wine, Cha [tea], or hot water. These are the most habitual beverages for them, and to give them up for so many days represents undoubtedly great penitence and mortification.”⁵⁵ Later on in his account, Guerreiro mentions one Japanese nobleman who: “...was to receive communion on the day of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, while he was staying the night before at the court of a local governor. He was continuously bothered by [...] a Gentile, who was trying to make him drink; nevertheless, the gentile did not succeed, thanks to the nobleman’s reverence for the Holy Communion that he was to receive the day after.”⁵⁶

51 Tomás Sánchez, *Opus morale in praecepta decalogi*, Lugduni: sumpt. Iacobi Cardon et Petri Cavellat 1623, 96.

52 F. Guerreiro, *Relación anual...*, 382.

53 *Ibid.*, 384.

54 *Ibid.*

55 *Ibid.*

56 *Ibid.*, 392.

Another nobleman, for the same reason, did not want to obey the governor's orders to come to court, because he understood that he would have to eat there, and he did not want to take the risk of breaking his fast.⁵⁷

When speaking about evangelization in the kingdom of Fingo, Guerreiro explains that the local Buddhist clergy was particularly hostile to Christianity and that they would invent many lies to hinder its progress. Regarding one Jesuit Father, the Buddhist clergy claimed that he would gouge out eyes in order to work magic with them and unearth the dead to prepare a poison with their liver, and that the Jesuits came to Japan in order to eat children. In this hostile environment, nevertheless, Christian devotion and the number of conversions grew significantly, reports Guerreiro. One of the noblemen in Iabe, Jorge Iasindono, together with the people from his household, made a vow to spend an hour in prayer every day, and to fast for many days.⁵⁸ Lastly, Guerreiro narrates the history of an old Buddhist *bonzo*, the principal monk of a temple of idols with many people under his service, who pursued the Christians without mercy, making up false accusations. One day he came to listen to the Catechism lectures, and he suddenly converted.

He did not want to return home; he asked to be baptized and he gave up all his Idols and all the things related to the dignity of a bonzo. He got baptized on Ash Wednesday, and he started to fast during the whole period of Lent, without breaking the fast even on Sundays, claiming that for those who offended their Creator all days of their past lives, it was not a great penitence to fast throughout the whole Lent including the Sundays.⁵⁹

In a similar vein, the European chronicle of the Jesuit mission in South Asia, based on their annual letters (regular reports), *History and Annual Account of Things Accomplished by the Fathers of the Society of Jesus in the Orient... in the Years 1607 and 1608*, quotes a letter presumably written by a Japanese woman to a missionary Father, in which she describes her fervour and Christian piety.⁶⁰ She claims that she had received a small book of prayers and an agnus from the Jesuits, and she hopes they will help her in her salvation. She also writes that she already knows the general confession and several prayers by heart, and she reads the other prayers continuously throughout the day and night. "Now I know how much my

57 *Ibid.*

58 *Ibid.*, 316.

59 *Ibid.*, 317.

60 Unfortunately, the limited extent of the article does not allow for a thorough discussion of the gender dimension of the practices of fasting. Cf. Nadine Amsler, *Jesuits and Matriarchs: Domestic Worship in Early Modern China*, Seattle (WA): University of Washington Press 2018.

heart was in error before, since it was the devil himself who prevented me from receiving the baptism with greater promptness. I am much grateful to the divine providence that brought Your Reverence here in those happy circumstances, to baptise me.”⁶¹

Importantly, she also asks the missionary to send her, in written form, a list of days of fasting.⁶²

In sum, in all these testimonies, fasting embodies an important sign of “true conversion”, a firm inner commitment, and truthfulness of faith. It also represents an expression of penitence for the errors of the past and a promise to repent in the future. It is, in a sense, one of the outer manifestations of inner conviction and of Christian zeal. It is, furthermore, an expression of sometimes highly unexpected Christian piety:

Among those who got baptized there was a man in the service of the governor of the islands of Xiqui. He penetrated so genuinely into the matters of faith, and with such devotion that within four months of his baptism, he became a vivid example of the old Christians; during the Lent he made great penitence, and with extraordinary roughness [*asperezas raras*]. He would fast during the whole period of Lent without drinking tea [...] or other drinks, with the exception of hot water of his rice. He would further prostrate himself in front of the church, so that he would get stepped over by those who were entering or going out. Finally, he showed great penitence and engaged in so many acts of mortification that the Father had to admonish him.⁶³

The relevance of ecclesiastical fasting as a telling sign and an image of “true conversion” stems from its theological concept. As already mentioned, one of the main authorities on the subject is St. Thomas Aquinas (in his *Summa theologica*), who includes fasting among the virtues of *temperantia* (temperance) and specifies three reasons for practicing it: firstly, to conquer lust; secondly, to allow for the mind to “arise more freely to the contemplation of heavenly things”; and, lastly, to atone for our sins.⁶⁴ Importantly, before the exposition of fasting itself, Aquinas reminds us of the nature of the virtuous act, declaring that its virtue is always related to the *intention* with which it is executed, and it is virtuous if it is “directed by reason to some virtuous good”.⁶⁵

61 Christóval Suárez de Figueroa, *Historia y anal relacion de las cosas que hizieron los padres de la Compañia de Iesvs por las partes de Oriente y otras en la propagacion del Santo Euangelio los años passados de 607 y 608*, Madrid: Imprenta real 1614, 308.

62 *Ibid.*, 308.

63 *Ibid.*, 247.

64 *Summa*, 2B, question 147, accessible (in Latin with English translation) at: <<https://isidore.co/aquinas/summa/SS/SS147.html#SSQ147OUTP1>>, [20. 2. 2023].

65 “Respondeo dicendum quod ex hoc aliquis actus est virtuosus, quod per rationem ordinatur ad aliquod bonum honestum” (I answer that an act is virtuous through being directed by reason to some virtuous good). *Ibid.*

This emphasis on intention is relevant for the question of fasting in particular, but it shapes the whole Christian moral casuistry in general, bringing about the correlation and the correspondence between the inner disposition and its external manifestation. As such, it appears, in fact, also in the missionary *dubita* and *quaesita*, as, for example, in the ninth proposition presented by Navarrete in 1674: “Can the Mandarins celebrate *externe* [externally, by external acts] ceremonies while venerating *interior cordis* [in the innermost part of their hearts] the true God and the Cross?” Similarly, in the following question, “can the gentiles carry out sacrifices and ceremonies, if they do so with the intention *ad verum Deum ordinantes* [performed with the intention directed at the veneration of the true God]?”⁶⁶ The same idea appears in the *quaesitum* about the veneration of ancestors (*in honorem Progenitorum*) which, according to the Congregation, was not permitted.⁶⁷ It cannot be allowed even if a cross is placed in a position of reverence for the deceased and the *intentio* of the Christian is directed at it (*collocando aliquam Crucem in Altari praefatorum Defunctorum dirigendo ad illam suam intentionem*).⁶⁸ According to the Congregation, these are illicit and superstitious acts in themselves (*actus de se illicitos, & supersticiosos*) and cannot be redeemed even if the intention is directed at the veneration of the true God.

In his article on the Early Modern dispute about the baptism of Chinese vegetarians (mainly Buddhists),⁶⁹ Thierry Meynard clarifies that in Asia the European missionaries encountered “a very different kind of fasting that was rooted in the teaching of Buddhism and had spread to all segments of society. This fasting consisted in abstinence from specific foods, such as meat, garlic, onion, leeks, as well as from wine.”⁷⁰

Both Jesuit missionaries and Chinese converts refuted this kind of fasting as superstitious. As Meynard points out, there was no definite rule to deal with this question, and the missionaries sometimes allowed these fast

66 D. F. Navarrete, *Tratados históricos...*, 485.

67 *Ibid.*, 455.

68 *Ibid.*, 456, emphasis added by the author.

69 Navarrete also describes this Buddhist practice of fasting, cf. D. F. Navarrete, *Tratados históricos...*, 82.

70 Thierry Meynard, “Could Chinese vegetarians be baptized?: The Canton Conference and Adrien Grelon SJ’s report of 1668”, *Archivum Historicum Societatis Iesu* 87/173, 2018-I, 75-145: 75. For a discussion of fasting practices from the local Chinese (or Japanese Christian) perspective (not only the missionary point of view), with an extensive bibliography on this subject, see Antonio De Caro – Zhenxu Fan – Thierry Meynard, “A Concealed Reading for Early Chinese Christians: Text, Context, and Circulation of the Discourse on Vegetarianism (Su shuo) in the Early Modern Period”, *Archivum Historicum Societatis Iesu* XCI/181, 2022, 121-158.

participants to be baptized.⁷¹ Meynard then analyzes Prospero Intorcetta's report on fasting (written before the end of the Canton Conference), in which this famous Jesuit missionary in China claims that "the fasters need only to declare publicly that they are fasting not to worship an idol, but for God as penance for their sins",⁷² bringing attention again to Doctor Angelicus' emphasis on the purpose of the virtuous act. The practice of fasting, in itself, does not contribute to the three actions pointed out by Aquinas (purification, penance, contemplation); *in itself*, it is *not* a virtuous act if not accompanied by the intention of penance.

The same was acknowledged by the Congregation. "Four doubts about fasting" (*De ieiuniis quatuor dubia*) demand that "all the superstitions of the gentiles concerning fasting, as required for the baptized, must be abolished";⁷³ and that those who practice this kind of superstitious fasting should not pursue it, even if they are driven by fear of demons.⁷⁴

Ecclesiastical fasting, in sum, is related to essential debates about the authenticity of one's faith. This is even more true in the framework of the mission, where it immediately leads to questions concerning the truthfulness of the conversion and the real intentions of the neophytes. In the context of an alien culture, fasting must be purified of any suspicion of being associated with superstitious acts. Significantly, the idea of true intentions also corresponds to the degree of apprehension of the Christian doctrine; to what extent do new Christians understand, intellectually, the tenets of their new faith and its basic dogmatic principles? And even more importantly, how do they grasp the kind of knowledge that, in the Christian view, transcends intellectual apprehension and reason itself as the mystery of faith?

71 T. Meynard, "Could Chinese...?", 75. Navarrete, though, claims that "all the missionaries agree that those who observe the superstitious fasting should not be baptized".

D. F. Navarrete, *Tratados históricos...*, 504.

72 T. Meynard, "Could Chinese...?", 77.

73 D. F. Navarrete, *Tratados históricos...*, 504.

74 *Ibid.*

The Symbol of Eucharist

One of the objections from the Franciscans in their confrontation with the evangelization approach of the Society of Jesus in China focuses precisely on the refusal of the Jesuits to unveil or communicate to the neophytes the mysteries of the faith.⁷⁵ In his report (1595) on the progress of Christianity in Japan, the Franciscan Jerónimo de Jesús (life dates unknown) outlines the activities of his own order in the Philippines and praises particularly the use of the sublime virtues of the Holy Sacrament of Eucharist: “we know by experience”, he asserts, “that wherever the Holiest Sacrament was used in the lands of new conversion, the attacks of the devil ended and many other wonders were made by the Lord”.⁷⁶ He goes on to explain that in the city of Manila, after bringing in the Sacrament of the Eucharist, “the great wind storms and flooding that destroy the earth ceased completely.”⁷⁷ However, he adds, they had to “face yet other storms”, those of the Jesuits who disagreed with this holiest of work. Here, Jerónimo de Jesús refers to the Jesuit refusal to immediately familiarize the newly converted with the meaning and the symbol of the Eucharist. The decision to abandon the use of the sacrament was adopted, explains the Franciscan, and since then, “all things of the faith went into decline”.⁷⁸ He then offers the arguments of the Jesuits who, presumably, recalled the episode with one of the kings of Japan who, “while watching the Communion in the church, would tell them: ‘bring it to me, since I want to see the God you adore’.”⁷⁹

According to the report, then, the Jesuits were aware of the potential literalization of the Eucharistic liturgy on behalf of the infidels, of the perils implied in attempts to elucidate to the gentiles or even to the neophytes one of the deepest mysteries of the Christian doctrine: the transub-

75 The explanation of the mysteries of faith in the context of evangelization represents an extremely problematic issue: it has to do with the tradition of intellectual speculation in the scholastic tradition and with the dilemma on how to convey their meanings in the translation. Cf. Trent Pomplun’s study on the efforts of the famous Jesuit missionary Ippolito Desideri (1684-1733) to translate the terminology *and* the mystery of the Holy Trinity into Tibetan language: Trent Pomplun, “The Holy Trinity in Ippolito Desiderios Ke Ri Se Ste an Kyi Chos Lugs Kyi Snying Po”, *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 29, 2009, 117-129.

76 P. Lorenzo Pérez, “Fr. Jerónimo de Jesús. Restaurador de las misiones del Japón. Sus cartas y relaciones”, *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum* 18, 1925, 559-584: 563.

77 *Ibid.*, 564.

78 *Ibid.*

79 *Ibid.* For a discussion of the understanding of the eucharist on behalf of Chinese Christians, see Hongfan Yang, *Ite Missa Est: Ritual Interactions around Mass in Chinese Society 1583-1720*, Leiden: Brill 2022, 30-38.

stantiation.⁸⁰ According to the teachings of the Catholic Church, the Eucharist entails the change of the whole substance of bread into the substance of the Body of Christ and of the whole substance of wine into the substance of the Blood of Christ, while the outer characteristics of the “eucharistic species” remain unaltered. This is an extraordinarily complex image because it combines the symbolic and spiritual with the presumably real transmutation of matter. The Jesuits, insofar as can be inferred from the commentaries of the Franciscan Jerónimo de Jesús, had a clear insight into the difficulties in mediating the intricacy of a transformation through which bread and wine remained bread and wine while, at the same time, became the body and blood of the Saviour.⁸¹

This particular episode, even if taken with extreme caution as far as its historical authenticity is concerned, shows very well the challenges of the transcultural translation of the Christian message: the problematic and often burdensome encounters of Christian spirituality and doctrine with other cultural and religious idioms. These challenges become particularly manifest when cultural and religious categories, in our case food and fasting practices, assume sacred meanings and come to entail connotations of piety, devotion, the public declaration of the faith, religious fervour, the authentic conversion of neophytes, and even the deepest mysteries of Christian dogma.

Conclusion

Fasting and food in general constitute a symbolic “opening” through which we can gain valuable insight into the painful conflicts present in any transcultural and transreligious encounter. In the particular case of missionary documents from China and Japan, the imagery of fasting reveals oftentimes opposing attitudes regarding the evangelization strategies of different orders and, additionally, the challenges inherent in the mediation

80 For the analysis of the Jesuit translation of the concept of body in the sacrament of Eucharist for a general audience in the multilingual and transcultural missionary contexts, see Antje Flüchter – Giulia Nardini, “Threefold translation of the body of Christ: concepts of the Eucharist and the body translated in the early modern missionary context” [online], *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 7, 2020, <<https://www.nature.com/articles/s41599-020-00566-z>>, [5. 1. 2023].

81 Jerónimo de Jesús then mentions another case of literalization of the Christian sacrament, that of confession: a certain local king in Japan “called the Christians and told them to confess with him, in the same way they would confess with the ministers”, probably in an act of erroneous transference of the holy authority of the Christian minister to his own earthly power. P. L. Pérez, “Fr. Jerónimo de Jesús...”, 564.

of the Christian message in the specific spiritual and cultural contexts of these kingdoms.

In the case of the Chinese Apostolate, indeed, the controversy among the orders should not be understood only in relation to the nature – either political or religious – of traditional Chinese ceremonies. The underlying dilemmas concern rather the ways in which the Christian faith and dogma could and should be communicated in new lands; the act of *translatio* entails obvious linguistic difficulties but, more importantly, it includes a negotiation of ecclesiastical and liturgic obligations and the process of rendering the correct understanding and appropriation of the Christian dogma to the neophytes, together with the articles and mysteries of the faith.

In the framework of this *translatio*, fasting as an act of purification becomes a telling image of the need to maintain the purity of the doctrine so that the Christian message does not become corrupted.

As I have tried to show, missionaries (especially the mendicants) were concerned with more than the formal or pragmatic aspects of fasting practices, even though these were sometimes difficult to maintain in the local circumstances. What pained them was the potentially superficial comprehension of the Christian message and the lightweight observance of the Church obligations and liturgic practices, in opposition to the deep understanding of the doctrinal reasons, motivations, and purposes behind them, epitomized in the *intention* mentioned by St. Thomas Aquinas. This is what motivated the missionaries' quest for orthodoxy and their sometimes excessive rigidity in doctrinal matters, because, allegedly, too relaxed an attitude could result in the corruption of the credo. What might become of the Christian message if the mysteries of the faith were not explained, or not understood properly? What would become of the mystery of the Eucharist if apprehended only literally?

The symbolically powerful images of food and fasting in the mission display the essential dilemmas of Early Modern evangelization and of the inter-faith encounter, polarized as it was between the necessary adaptation to the Other, on the one hand, and the potential loss of the purity and authenticity of the Christian message, on the other.



SUMMARY

A Sign of Great Penitence: Food, Fasting and the Dilemmas of Evangelization in Early Modern Chinese and Japanese Missions

Since their very first entry into the Ming empire (Jesuits 1580s, Franciscans 1630s), Christian missionaries produced an extensive body of testimonies on this exotic and unknown territory, in which they described Chinese history, philosophy, nature, culture, religions, society, and people, including Chinese food, culinary practices, and habits. This extensive corpus of missionary documents not only discussed “things Chinese” but also interpreted this unknown country for their European readers in a process our current scholarship has deemed as “transcultural translation”, during which the foreign culture is explained using familiar European terms.

In my article, I focus on one particular aspect of food intake, or rather its voluntary absence: the practices of ecclesiastical fasting. I analyse how the first Jesuit and Franciscan missionaries understood fasting in the particular context of Chinese and Japanese culture and, more importantly, what obstacles and dilemmas they had to face in establishing it in their missionary work. I then relate these doubts and questions to contemporary missionary casuistry and moral theology. Finally, I explore ecclesiastical fasting as a compelling symbol of Christianity’s encounter with the alien spiritual and cultural idioms of China (and Japan). I argue that it exemplifies the nature of the inter-cultural and inter-religious confrontation, displaying the inevitable difficulties inherent in rendering the Christian message.

As far as the methodology is concerned, I explore some central assumptions of transculturality, transcultural translation, and Otherness, though I also point out the potential flaws and deficiencies of these perspectives when applied to this textual material. However, I do not aim at establishing an unambiguous methodology for dealing with these sources; my intention is rather to emphasize the absence of a reliable methodological approach for Early Modern missionary documents.

Keywords: Early Modern missions in Northeast Asia; Franciscans; Jesuits; fasting; *confessio fidei*; authenticity of faith

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