

# **Two thousand years of the Church's mission in Asia: waves of evangelization, holiness and martyrdom**

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## INTRODUCTION

Standing at the threshold of the third millennium, we are invited to look back to the two thousand years behind us, not only to “remember” –which is so Christian– but also to draw lessons for a future open to the hope we have to share. And we do this in a Church which enters a new and amazing human era, and that, therefore, is expected to exhibit characteristics different from those of the first and second millennium, always, of course, within the continuity which the identity demands: the same Church, same mission, but in a new Asia, with a new way of being Church.

We shall focus on the “waves of evangelization,” with special attention to martyrdom and holiness. The analogy of “waves” makes sense, since we detect in the events themselves the phenomenon of high and low levels of missionizing and Christian life, observing periods of high tide of Christian presence in vast territories, followed by a low tide of Christian recess, leaving a barren ground to begin all over again. This phenomenon has no equal in other continents. History is not an “exact science”; therefore the division into periods is a question of convenience which does not exclude other choices. We have divided this whole history into five segments, which we call: Foundational wave, the first millennium, the so called “*Pax Mongolica*”, the Age of Discoveries and, finally, our own time.

## FOUNDATIONAL WAVE: THE APOSTLES AND POST-APOSTOLIC EVANGELIZERS

We call “foundational” the age of the Apostles until the establishment of local churches, with an identity of doctrine, governance and cult still discernible today. All started in Asia: Jesus is the absolute source of all missions, although he was not a missionary; mission, as we understand it here, was only possible after the coming of the Holy Spirit.

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From Jerusalem, the Apostles fanned out to neighboring countries and to far away lands. The great patriarchal churches, Antioch, Alexandria, Rome, were founded by unknown evangelizers; the see of Edessa –outside the Roman boundaries– claims to have been founded by Addai, one of the 72 disciples of the Lord. History does not know the regions where most of the Twelve preached; only traditions seem to remember that Matthew evangelized the Persians and Parthians (though another tradition has him martyred in Ethiopia); that Thomas worked also in those regions and is buried in Edessa, while other tradition brings him to India and puts his tomb in Chennai; that Jude taught in Armenia and was martyred in Persia; one tradition links Bartholomew with Armenia and India; Simon the Zealot is also believed to have died in Persia. Whatever the historicity of those traditions – and the evidence for St. Thomas in India is very strong<sup>1</sup> we want to emphasize one point: that the Gospel moved toward the east with as much energy as towards the west: most of the Apostles died in Asia. In fact, by the third century, there were more Christians in Asia (in what today we call Middle East) than in Europe.

While the Romans were still persecuting Christianity, Osrhoene, in territory of today's Syria and Irak, became the first Christian county, with the conversion of king Abgar IX, in 206; its capital, Edessa, became an important center of Christian intellectual life and the most powerful missionary hub until the age of European expansion. Gregory the Illuminator evangelized his home county, Armenia, and in 295 baptized king Tiridates II and became the first *Catholicos* of that church. During the time of Constantine, ca.330, Georgia became Christian, through the agency of the legendary woman St. Nino.

It was Edessa that launched the mission to Asia. Missionaries reached Arbela in Adiabene, which became also a center of missionary expansion. Syrian culture promoted commerce, rather than agriculture; in that mindset the monks were also wandering evangelizers. At the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century there are mentions of Christians in Bactria, which is now Afghanistan. The *Chronicle of Arbela* (written in the 6<sup>th</sup> c.) recounts that by the 225, when the Parthian dynasty fell to the Sassanids of Persia, there were Christian communities all over the Middle East, from the Euphrates to the Hindu Kush. In 325, in the council of Nicaea, there was a bishop of Persia, “John the Persian,” who claimed contacts with India.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. C. V. CHERIYAN, *A History of Christianity in Kerala*, Kottayam: Kerala Historical Society C. M. S. Press 1973; L.W. BROWN, *The Indian Christians of St. Thomas*, Cambridge Univeristy Press, New York 1982.

In the mid fourth century a string of monasteries extended along the Persian shores from Basra to India, uniting the Thomas Christians with Edessa.<sup>2</sup> There were Christians among the Arab tribes, mainly in Tylos (today's Bahrain). Then, as the Roman persecutions stopped in the west, the Persian persecutions began, especially under Shapur II (340–401).

These Christians were the so-called Nestorians and Jacobites, considered heretics by the Chalcedonian churches. The Persian authorities made sure that no Christian in their empire would pay allegiance to the Roman (Byzantine) enemy. This Church of the East was Aramaic speaking, with patriarchal structure and a liturgy of Syrian origin, plus a theology more and more based upon Theodore of Mopsuestia.

For us here, it is enough to consider the fact that, by the 5<sup>th</sup> c., churches were well established all over the Middle East, Persia, India and possibly Sri Lanka. The roots were well planted, only that they would grow separated from the rest of Christianity.

#### FIRST MILLENNIUM

The East Syrian Church fared reasonably well under the Sassanid and Muslim domination in Persia, despite sporadic persecutions and status of tolerated minority (*dhimmis*). “The missionary spirit of the East Syrian community in the third and fourth centuries, with its center at Edessa, was remarkable,”<sup>3</sup> spreading the Gospel to the north (Armenia), and east (Arabia and India).<sup>4</sup> In 410, the Patriarch had under him 5 metropolitans and 38 bishops; by 650 (Islamic conquest) he had 9 metropolitans and 106 bishops. In 497 the Sha Kavad was overthrown and fled to the Huns; with him were Nestorian Christians, lay and clergy. The clergy stayed for 7 years and the 2 laymen for 30, as missionaries with great fruit.<sup>5</sup> Christian communities were established along the “Silk Road” among Turks, Tartars and Mongols; they preached in Tibet and, probably, all the way to Indonesia.<sup>6</sup> Under Patriarch Timothy (780–823) –roughly contemporary of Charlemagne–

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. S. H. MOFFETT, *A history of Christianity in Asia*, Maryknoll, Orbis Books, New York 1998, p. 94.

<sup>3</sup> JOHN PAUL II, Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia*, no. 9.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. IDEM, Apostolic Letter *for the 1700th anniversary of the Baptism of Armenian People*.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. S. H. MOFFETT, *A History*, cit., p. 208.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. J. STEWART, *Nestorian Missionary Enterprise. The Story of a Church on Fire*, Gorgias Press,

the East Syrian Church was the most extended and numerous in Christendom. By the year 800, Nisibis and Gundeshapur<sup>7</sup> were brilliant centers of learning to a level Europe would not reach until the 13<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>8</sup> But the most remarkable missionary feat of this period is the evangelization of China. The famous “Nestorian Stele,”<sup>9</sup> of 781, records the arrival to the Tang capital of the monk Alopen in 635 (when Rome was evangelizing central and northern Europe). They thrived for a while: in the 8<sup>th</sup> century there were Nestorian churches nearly in all provinces; but soon they suffered persecutions from the Buddhists; in 845 the emperor Wu-tsung outlawed Christianity, making it an “un-Chinese” religion. By the fall of the Tang dynasty (907) Christians had vanished; the causes nobody knows.<sup>10</sup>

It is interesting that Buddhism was then missionizing China, and was also considered as “non-Chinese” religion. In fact, bishop Adam, who probably composed the Xi’an Tablet, helped a Buddhist monk to translate Sanskrit sutras into Chinese. After a time, Buddhism became “Chinese” while Christianity remained “Syrian” or “Persian.”

#### THE “PAX MONGOLICA”

The second missionary wave took place during the so called *pax Mongolica*, expression which reads like an oxymoron, for few times in history have seen such display of barbarism, violence and wars. When in 1219 Genghis Khan launched his conquest of Muslim west, taking Samarkand and slaughtering Merv (1221), Christian lands, such as Armenia and Georgia were also devastated (1236). His grandson, Hulegu, perpetrated a

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Piscataway, New Jersey 2006 (from the 1928 edition); A. S. ATIYA, *A History of Eastern Christianity*, University of Notre Dame Press, Indiana 1968.

<sup>7</sup> Gundeshapur is variously transcribed as Gund-ī Shāh Pūr, Gondeshapur', Jondishapoor, Jondishapur, and Jondishapour, Gundishapur, Gondêshâpur, Jund-e Shapur, Jundê-Shâpûr, etc., in Syriac: Beth Lapat and in Greek Bendosabora.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. J. P. JENKINS, *The Lost History of Christianity: the thousand-year golden age of the church in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia – and how it died*, HarperCollins e-books, New York 2008, p. 7.

<sup>9</sup> This monument contains 1,756 Chinese characters and 70 Syriac words, telling the warm reception of the “Religion of Light” by the T’ang Emperor; on this stele. Cf P. PELLIOTT, *L’inscription nestorienne de Singan-fou*, ed. avec suppléments, Antonino Forte, Kyoto et Paris 1996; J. P. JENKINS, *The Lost History*, cit., pp. 64-68.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. R. MALEK and P. HOFRICHTER (eds), *Jingjiao: the Church of the East in China and Central Asia*, Sankt Augustin. Steyler Verlag, Germany 2006.

historic massacre in Baghdad (1258) and Mongol terror extended to the heart of Europe. But they were religiously tolerant so that, paradoxically, in their immense empire a fresh wave of missionary activity flourished. Many of their leaders and officials were Christians, especially of Kerait, Onggud<sup>11</sup> and Uygur origin, and Christian were many of the wives in their courts.

The Nestorians revived their communities in central Asia and created many more; they followed the Mongol invaders into China and multiplied the churches, monasteries and bishoprics under the Yuan or Mongol dynasty (1271-1368). When in 1281 the monk Marcos, probably a Uygur, was elected Patriarch, under the name Yaballaha III, he ruled over thirty provinces and 250 dioceses.

What is new in this second wave is the Catholic presence. Dominicans and Franciscans had started missions in Asia. Although the Mongols ravaged the Dominican mission among the Cumans, killing about 90 friars (1241), papal diplomacy played perhaps the first active role in the missions, when ambassadors were sent to the khans.<sup>12</sup> Kublai Khan (1214-1294) asked the Pope for missionaries. In 1286 there was hope that the empress Yailak might become Catholic; in fact, the Khan Toqtaï and his family were baptized in 1290. In 1291 John of Montecorvino<sup>13</sup> left Tabriz as a legate of Pope Nicholas IV to the court of Kublai Khan. An Italian merchant, a Dominican, Nicholas of Pistoia, and John traveled to India where the Dominican died. When John and the merchant arrived in Khambaliq (Beijing) in 1294, Kublai Khan had recently died. Montecorvino tasted instant success. He even brought to Catholic unity the Onggud Nestorian Prince George (Korgiz). He translated the New Testament and the Psalter and trained boys for the liturgical services. After eleven years, the German Franciscan Arnold of Cologne was sent to him (1303 or 1304). In 1307 Pope Clement V, sent seven Franciscan bishops to consecrate John of Montecorvino archbishop of Beijing; only three arrived (1308). Several bishops were ordained and Franciscan monasteries were founded in various provinces. In 1336, Toghun Temür, the last Mongol emperor, asked for missionaries and Benedict XII sent 50 (1338); the hopes were so high...

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<sup>11</sup> These names are variously written: Kerait, Kereit, Kereyid; Onggud, Ongud, Öngüd, Öngüt.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. I. DE RACHEWILTZ, *Papal Envoys to the Great Khan.*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, Calif. 1971.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. *I francescani e la Cina. 800 anni di storia*, Edizioni Porziuncola, Assisi 2001; L. ARNOLD, *Princely gifts and papal treasures the Franciscan mission to China and its influence on the art of the West 1250–1350*, Desiderata Press, San Francisco 1999.

but then the Chinese overthrew the Mongols, establishing the Ming Dynasty (1368); next year all Christians were expelled from China.

Interestingly, the Chinese did not distinguish the two versions of Christianity (Catholic and Nestorian); they were both foreigners and allied of the Mongols. Neither Church survived the fall of the Yuan dynasty.

In other lands, the Dominicans were active in the Middle East, especially in Armenia, where they enjoyed some success in bringing several monasteries to Catholic union. Farther east, the Dominican Jordan Cathala de Severac worked in Quilon, India, and John XXII made him bishop in 1329; but his work did not survive.

*Ecclesia in Asia* sadly concludes: “Christianity almost vanished in these regions for a number of reasons, among them the rise of Islam, geographical isolation, the absence of an appropriate adaptation to local cultures, and perhaps above all a lack of preparedness to encounter the great religions of Asia”.<sup>14</sup> Well, perhaps! Only God knows for sure. The history of the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries in Asia was tragic for Christianity. The radicalization of Islam –think of the bloody campaigns of Tamerlane (1336-1405)– dealt a deadly blow to Christianity. There was also the Black Death (mid fourteenth century), which almost annihilated the missionaries. And, again, the sins of a divided and un-evangelical Church.<sup>15</sup> The fact is that, according to one estimate, between 1200 and 1500, the number of Asian Christians fell from 21 million to 3.4 million.<sup>16</sup>

## THE AGE OF DISCOVERIES

We call “Age of Discoveries” the era opened by the Portuguese ventures to the East and the Spanish expansion to the West, speaking from a euro-centric point of view. The

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<sup>14</sup> JOHN PAUL II, Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia*, no. 9.

<sup>15</sup> Some testimonies: When the Turks sacked Edessa in the 1140s, Michael the Syrian described how the city of Abgar, the friend of Christ, “was trampled underfoot because of our iniquity.” Bishop John of Córdoba (10th c.) described the compromises that Spanish Christians had to make under Muslim rule, which he delicately terms as “the great calamity that we suffered for our sins.” Solomon of Basra in the 1220s traced the history of Muslim victories in the form of a retroactive prophecy: “It is not because God loves them that He has allowed them to enter into the kingdoms of the Christians, but by reason of the iniquity and sin which is wrought by the Christians.” Cf. L. E. BROWNE, *The Eclipse of Christianity in Asia from the Time of Mohammed till the Fourteenth Century*, Howard Fertig, New York 1967.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. J. P. JENKINS, *The Lost History*, cit., p. 24.

arrival of Vasco da Gama in India (1498) paved the way for what *Ecclesia in Asia* calls “a new era of missionary endeavor”.<sup>17</sup> In fact, the Portuguese settlements of Goa (India) and Macao (China) became the main centers of missionary activity in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. The greatest missionaries of Asia, viz. St. Francis Xavier, Matteo Ricci, Roberto de Nobili, Alessandro Valignano, Alexandre de Rhodes... all came under the umbrella of the Portuguese *Padroado*. The system, for sure, had flaws and generated conflicts.<sup>18</sup>

We should not forget that, from the beginning of the Church, traders –lay people!– have often been the first missionaries. Then the professional missionaries –clergy and religious– followed them, because they knew the way to reach places and offered protection to stay there.

The first period of this era was reasonably successful. Francis Xavier<sup>19</sup> came to India in 1542, worked in Indonesia (1546-47), and reached Japan in 1549. His method was to open doors that others might enter. And so, thirty years after him, there were in Japan 200,000 Christians and 250 churches. Other missionaries worked in the Japanese field, like Franciscans and Dominicans; by the time of the persecution (beginning in 1597), the Japanese Catholics were perhaps over 500,000.<sup>20</sup>

I will not linger exposing the missionary vision of A. Valignano and the work of Matteo Ricci in China (the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of whose death we celebrate this year), nor the similar mission method of Robert de Nobili in India, and the flexible approach of Alexander de Rhodes in Vietnam.<sup>21</sup> Because we have to mention in this period the foundation and role of the Congregation *De Propaganda Fide* (now For the Evangelization of Peoples), of momentous importance, which was prompted precisely by the missionary needs of this part of the world. New elements entered missionary undertaking: the direct involvement of the

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<sup>17</sup> JOHN PAUL II, Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia*, no. 9.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. A. S. HERNÁNDEZ, S.J., *Las misiones bajo el patronato portugués*, Madrid 1977. C. J. COSTA, *A missiological conflict between Padroado and Propaganda in the East*, Pilar Publ., Goa 1997.

<sup>19</sup> On St F. Xavier biography, Cf. *Monumenta Historica Societatis Jesus*: biographies by G. SCHURHAMMER (1955), and J. BRODERICK (1952).

<sup>20</sup> Cf. C.R. BOXER, *The Christian Century in Japan, 1549–1650*, Carcanet Press Ltd, Manchester, United Kingdom 1993.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. A. C. ROSS, *A Vision Betrayed: The Jesuits in Japan and China, 1542-1742*, Maryknoll, Orbis, New York 1994.

Holy See, the creation of Vicars Apostolic, the insistence on the native clergy, etc. In was in this time that the incredible saga of the Korean Church started, the only church planted by natives, when in 1784 Yi Sung-hun was baptized in Beijing, with the name of Peter, and then, in Korea, he baptized his friends and many neophytes; the church lived without priests practically until 1836. During this period, the apostolic enthusiasm was somehow marred by what Pius XI called “the accursed question of Chinese Rites,” whose scars still hurt.<sup>22</sup> History might be tempted to conclude this “wave,” once more, as finally a failure, given the calamitous situation at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>23</sup>

#### NINETEENTH CENTURY MISSIONARY AWAKENING

After the Napoleonic wars (1814), Europe experienced a remarkable ecclesial renewal, especially with an impressive explosion of missionary zeal. On the one hand, the whole People of God became involved, thanks to institutions like Children’s Mission, The Society of St. Peter Apostle, and others; on the other hand, never in history appeared so many Religious Congregations dedicated to mission. Two traits are noteworthy: the massive participation of women<sup>24</sup> and the élan of Protestant missions.<sup>25</sup> Most of the local churches we have today were “planted” during this period (apart from the Philippines).

This missionary thrust came allied to the European colonial expansion, which caused many observers to see in both the same enterprise.<sup>26</sup> This mission was systematic, cloning the European churches with their faith, institutions and culture.

During this time, Missiology was born, opening the door to new ideas.<sup>27</sup> The

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<sup>22</sup> Cf. G. MINAMIKI, *The Chinese Rites Controversy from the Beginnings to Modern Times*, Loyola University Press, Chicago 1985.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. J. COMBY, *Deux mille ans d’évangélisation*, Desclé, Paris 1992, pp. 191–193.

<sup>24</sup> Just consult the Mission Weeks of Louvain: *Le rôle de la femme dans les missions*, (1950) and *Visage nouveau de la femme missionnaire* (1973).

<sup>25</sup> Cf. E. G. LEONARD, *Histoire Générale du Protestantisme*, PUF, Paris 1964, vol. 3, pp. 460–559.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. for India the bitter critique of M. K. PANIKKAR, *Asia and Western Dominance*, G. Allen & Unwin, London 1965; on China: P. HARRINGTON, *Peking 1900: The Boxer Rebellion*, Osprey, Oxford 2001.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. J. A. B. JONGENEEL, *Philosophy, Science and Theology of Mission in the 19th and 20th Centuries. A Missiological Encyclopedia*, Part 2, Peter Lang, Frankfurt 1997.



Magisterium was more active, especially Pius XI with *Maximum illud* (1919), followed by the facts: in 1925 the Pope put an end to the question of the Rites; in 1926, he ordained the first Chinese bishops,<sup>28</sup> followed by the first Japanese (1927) and Vietnamese (1933) bishops.

The results of this period have been very positive in Africa and Oceania; not so much in Asia. However, the roots of what we are now were planted and it is up to us to make them bear more fruits.

#### POST-COLONIAL MISSION AND PRESENT SITUATION

The second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has brought a dramatic change to the Church and to the world. Vatican II (1962-1965) opened vast horizons, especially for the missionary activity. Sure, a serious crisis followed the council, which 20 years later was still struggling to recover.<sup>29</sup> As for the world, decolonization has given Africa, Asia and the Pacific their dignity as nations. This coming of age was sometimes peaceful, sometimes painful. The missions were deeply affected. Some countries expelled the foreign missionaries and many more closed their doors to new ones. Besides, the secularization of the West has dried up the flow of European personnel to the “missions” which now have become “churches.” By the first time in history, the Asian churches are on their own, so to say, fully responsible for their sustenance and growth. United in the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC), they strive to create a new way of being church and, therefore, a new way of missioning.<sup>30</sup>

Now the missionary endeavor is Asian, in Asian ways.<sup>31</sup> By the first time in history, an Asian Mission Congress has taken place (2006), explaining this Asian way as “an evocative

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<sup>28</sup> There had been the case of Gregorio Lo(pez), O.P., ordained in Canton in 1685.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. F. GÓMEZ, *The Missionary Activity Twenty Years After Vatican II*, “East Asian Pastoral Review” 23 (1986), 26-57.

<sup>30</sup> See FABC Special Report, *A New Way of Being Church-in-Mission in Asia*, [http://www.sedos.org/english/FABC\\_Special\\_Report.htm](http://www.sedos.org/english/FABC_Special_Report.htm), accessed on July 3, 2010.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. J. YUN-KA TAN, *Missio Inter Gentes: Towards a New Paradigm in the Mission Theology of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences*, “FABC Paper” 109 (2004).

way through stories, parables and symbols.”<sup>32</sup> Taking dialogue as a method, the whole Church is missionary: “The whole community, every group, every person, with whom we relate in service, is an agent of evangelization.”<sup>33</sup> I dare say that hope in the future is today more justified than ever. Caution, though, is also needed here: the statistics reckon the Catholics in Asia to 1.8% of the population (*Agenzia Fides* 22/10/2005).<sup>34</sup> Only Korea has had real growth: Since 1999 there has been an annual increase of 2-3%. Japan has decreased; Vietnam in 1956 had 7.5% of Catholics, while in 2008, the proportion had decreased to 7.18%.<sup>35</sup> India is 1.55% Catholic (2005), practically the same proportion than in 1965; and so on.

I would not close this brief survey without a note on the new wave we are now surfing... the “cyber-mission”. In less than one generation Internet has become a “New World”. It is also Asia that populates most of this “digital continent”. The possibilities for mission are mind-boggling: only now it becomes possible to reach the majority of the billions waiting for Christ in this vast region. Missionary training ought to prepare “i-evangelizers,” lest we miss the opportunity.<sup>36</sup> As the Holy Father has said: “can we not see the web as also offering a space – like the “Court of the Gentiles” of the Temple of Jerusalem – for those who have not yet come to know God?”<sup>37</sup> Besides we emphasize inculturation in mission; the Pope calls this cyber-apostolate “diaconia of culture”, which should make us think.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> *Message of the First Asian Mission Congress of FABC*, Chiang Mai, Thailand, October 18–22, 2006; cf. more in M. SATURNINO DIAS (Ed.). *Telling the Story of Jesus in Asia: A Celebration of Faith and Life*. Asian Trading Corporation, Bangalore 2007.

<sup>33</sup> *A Renewed Church In Asia: A Mission Of Love And Service*, The Final Statement of the Seventh Plenary Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Samphan, Thailand, January 3–12, 2000.

<sup>34</sup> In 1900, the Catholics were 1.3% (including the Philippines), according *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (Cf. *Catholic Encyclopedia*, Robert Appleton Company, New York 1907).

<sup>35</sup> Cf. MGR. S. DELACROIX (ed), *Histoire Universelle des Missions Catholiques*, Vol.3, Grund, Paris 1957, p. 239; for the situation in our days, cf. LM NGUYỄN NGỌC SON, in *Nhìn lại sứ mạng truyền giáo trong 50 năm qua và hướng đến tương lai* <http://www.dunglac.org/index.php?m=module2&v=detailarticle&id=45&ia=7469>, accessed July 3, 2010.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR SOCIAL COMMUNICATIONS, *The Church and Internet*, February 22, 2002.

<sup>37</sup> BENEDICT XVI, Message of His Holiness Pope for the 44th World Communications Day, *The Priest and Pastoral Ministry in a Digital World: New Media at the Service of the Word*, Sunday, 16 May 2010.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*

My final point in this story is a brief mention of the role of the laity. We should not forget that “because the lay faithful belong to Christ, Lord and King of the Universe, they share in his kingly mission and are called by him to spread that Kingdom in history.”<sup>39</sup> And so it has been: Christian traders have opened the doors to the Gospel, both in Nestorian and Catholic missions. Greatly influential have been the women, wives of Mongol rulers; especially Princess Sorghaghtani Beki, wife of a son of Genghis Khan and mother of Kublai Khan and Mongke Khan. Now the role of the laity is still more decisive, as we are here to show; only when the whole laity become a massive missionary body, will the Church experience a real spring in Asia.

#### HOLINESS AND MARTYRDOM

Speaking of “holiness,” places the history of missions in a very different horizon. To begin, let me quote Cardinal Dias: “The theme of evangelization must be considered in the wider context of the spiritual combat which began in the Garden of Eden with the fall of our first parents, in the wake of fierce hostilities between God and the rebel angels. If this context is ignored in favour of a myopic world-vision, Christ's salvation will be conveniently dismissed as irrelevant.”<sup>40</sup>

If we consider history in the light of this principle, we realize that, perhaps, where we record “failure” God might have smiled with victory. The model is Calvary: was it a defeat or a triumph? When we revisit the waves of missionaries, marching out to unknown lands – like Abraham– we discover there an apostolic faith and obedience to Jesus’ command which is, precisely, the glory of God, that is, the final goal of any Christian activity. This apostolic zeal reached often the level of heroism which is the definition of holiness.<sup>41</sup>

Francis X. Clark wrote of the 486 Catholic canonized Asian Saints and Blessed.<sup>42</sup> But

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<sup>39</sup> JOHN PAUL II, Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles laici*, no. 14.

<sup>40</sup> CARD. IVAN DIAS, Prefect of the Congregation for Evangelization, to The Anglican Conference of Lambeth, 22 July 2008.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. J. D. RYAN, *Missionary Saints of the High Middle Ages: Martyrdom, Popular Veneration, and Canonization*, “The Catholic Historical Review”, 90 (1: 2004), pp. 1-28.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. F. X. CLARK, S.J., *Asian Saints*, Claretian Publications, Quezon City 2000; Cf. V. J. O'MALLEY, C. M., *Saints of Asia: 1500 to the Present*, Our Sunday Visitor 2007.

we think first of the thousands of monks, mainly of the East Syrian and Jacobite churches, who peopled the monasteries from Mesopotamia to China and India, covering the huge span of Central Asia: Arabs, Persians, Turks, Uygurs, Tartars, Indians, Chinese... of all races, abandoning the world to serve only God: this is a triumph of light over darkness and, therefore, a success of the mission itself. Limiting ourselves to Catholics: the Asian Religious, from the medieval Franciscan and Dominican convents to the contemporary Congregations, are outstanding witnesses to the sanctity of the Gospel; an accomplishment of the mission.<sup>43</sup>

Martyrdom is the summit of holiness, and Asia is the continent with the biggest number of martyrs: what an achievement for Mission! When the Roman Empire stopped persecuting Christians, the Persian Sassanids started; from 339, under Shapur II (309–379), until 401, “One estimate is that as many as 190,000 Persian Christians died in the terror...” more than in the Roman persecutions.<sup>44</sup> In the modern ages, we can briefly remember that, in India, Gonsalo Garcia and John de Brito were canonized in 1629 and 1947 respectively. Japan had the most systematic –and effective– persecution, with perhaps more than 200.000 martyrs, such as Paul Miki and companions.<sup>45</sup> Korea honors more than 10,000 martyrs and John Paul II canonized 103 in Seoul in 1984, lead by Andrew Kim Taegon, with Chung Hasang and Kim Hyoim who were lay leaders. Vietnam has more than 200,000 martyrs including those 117 canonized in 1988: Andrew Dung Lac and companions. China has 120 martyrs canonized by John Paul II in 2000: 33 were missionaries and 87 native Chinese; there had been sporadic persecutions during the 17, 18 and 19 centuries, but the so called Boxers rebellions, in 1900, produced the greatest numbers, about 32,000 Christians were butchered; among which the Orthodox count 222.<sup>46</sup>

The Philippines has no martyrs; Lorenzo Ruiz and companions and Catechist Pedro Calungsod who was beatified in 2000 were “made in Japan.”

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<sup>43</sup> Just think that India with 82,348 Sisters is second only to Italy (102,089) in number of women religious in the world: data of *Agenzia Fides* 22/10/2005.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. S. H. MOFFETT, *A History*, cit., p 139-145.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. *Catholic Encyclopedia*, Robert Appleton Company, New York 1907, voice “Japanese Martyrs”.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. P. HARRINGTON, *Peking 1900*, cit.; cf. J. W. ESHERICK, *The Origins of the Boxer Uprising*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1987; cf. D. PRESTON, *The Boxer Rebellion*, Berkley Publishing, Berkeley 2001.

The 20th c. is deemed as the bloodiest in human history, also for Christian martyrs.<sup>47</sup> In Asia, we must mention the genocide of Armenians, perpetrated by the Otoman Turks in 1915, resulting in 2.1 million victims.<sup>48</sup> Persecutions have flared here or there, like in Thailand the so-called Seven Blessed Martyrs of Songkhon, in 1940, who were beatified by Pope John Paul II in 1989. Even today, in Muslim societies, martyrdom is often a likelihood and; in India, Hindu fanatics are a threat to Christians in many regions; everywhere, workers for justice are always in danger.

## CONCLUSION

Let us conclude with a historian: “Christians believe that God speaks through history; and only by knowing that history can we hope to interpret momentous events like the Japanese persecutions and the fall of the Asian churches. Yet Christians have systematically forgotten or ignored so very much of their history that it is scarcely surprising that they encounter only a deafening silence. Losing the ancient churches is one thing, but losing their memory and experience so utterly is a disaster scarcely less damaging.”<sup>49</sup> History is a teacher, but its lessons are never evident. The waxing-waning saga of Christian missions in Asia has been appraised variously; today the emphasis is on “incarnation” as a theologian puts it: “Only when the Gospel passes through the prism of Asian World-view, will it reveal its splendor, colours and beauty to the Asian peoples.”<sup>50</sup> Perhaps God’s clock for Asia ticks with a different rhythm and we must revere the mystery.

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<sup>47</sup> Cf. R. ROYAL, *The Catholic Martyrs of the Twentieth Century: A Comprehensive World History*, The Crossroad Publishing Company, New York 2006.

<sup>48</sup> Divided roughly: 1.2 Million Armenian Christians, 0.6 million Syriac/Assyrian Christians and 0.3 million Greek Orthodox Christians, a number of Georgians were also killed. Cf. M. A. AHNERT, *The Knock at the Door: A Journey Through the Darkness of Armenian Genocide*. Beaufort Books, New York 2007.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. J. P. JENKINS, *The Lost History*, cit., p. 262.

<sup>50</sup> FELIX WILFRED, *Sunset in the East?*, University of Madras 1991, p. 167.