

Father Thomas Pereira, S.J. A Hero of the Christian Missions in China.

Once in a while unqualified writers have let their imaginations run riot over interpretations of historical events and all too often has an unfounded criticism brought opprobrium upon victims of their prejudices and misinterpretations. One of the victims of this conspiracy was a Portuguese priest who filled an important position in Christian affairs in China late in the 17th century.

With a complete disregard of sources which have lain neglected in the archives, and drawing conclusions from one-sided erroneous accounts of history, one of the first to villify Father Thomas Pereira, S. J., for that was his name, seems to have been the Rev. Robert Jenkins, who, drawing upon accounts by Catholic sectarian rivals, in his The Jesuits in China and the Ligation of Cardinal de Tournon, London, 1894, bitterly assailed this priest's good name. He seems to have made use of sources that were almost entirely anti-Jesuit in their content.

Later writers have also taken their cue from Jenkins, only adding to the confusion, and one of the most recent of these is Arnold H. Rowbotham, Missionary and Mandarin: The Jesuits at the Court of China, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1942, who uses the most unrestrained language in describing Father Pereira and the course of events.

In part of this has been due to the ruling by the Holy See that the events in China should not be the subject of polemics and although the Jesuits, obeying the orders of the Jesuit General, have preserved a silence for over two hundred and sixty years, the members of other Catholic communities have not stayed their pens. Drawing therefore from these one-sided sources which, at best, are suspect, several writers have done much to perpetuate the slanderous attacks on the good name of a man who loyally served his Church and the work intrusted to his charge.

And so it has happened that Rowbotham calls Father Pereira "a supreme example of narrow nationalism ... standing out on the canvas of time clothed in gloomy colours of intrigue fighting with all the forces of his cunning character ... symbolizing the crafty, scheming minister of darkness which, was the popular conception of the Jesuit in Protestant England." Had the writer taken the trouble to examine documents in Lisbon and Rome his reading of history would have been very different, for the achievements of Father Pereira are fully recorded in ^{the} contemporary documents, and modern writers have rendered a dis-service by their failure to refer to them.

An exception is Father Joseph Sebes who has studied source material and he says that Father Pereira "did not cease to work for and to promote the interests of the Catholic Mission in China and by the use of his moral qualities and endowments, as well as his knowledge, technical skill and rare talents." He adds that the Superiors of the Society of Jesus described him in a report sent from China to Rome in 1700 as being "endowed with an exceptional dexterity in the handling of affairs, with moral virtues and prudence in a more than ordinary degree; he was humble, zealous and lover of poverty and obedience."

Jenkins and Rowbotham were referring to disputes. Unfortunately there were all too many of these, but they were not of the making of the Portuguese Jesuits. First of all, there were the problems of the jus patronatus whereby Rome had awarded to Portugal the privilege of what is known as the patronage of all ecclesiastical appointments in the regions of the world discovered by the Portuguese. This commenced in 1415, when, as part of their struggle against the enemies of the Cross, Ceuta was wrested from the Moors. This was followed by the explorations carried out by Prince Henry and his associates in the discoveries which led to Papal Bulls and Briefs being issued by a whole succession of popes confirming Portugal's rights and encouraging the Portuguese to greater efforts.

So glowing did the prospects seem for new areas in which to evangelise that Pope Sixtus IV in 1481, granted to Portugal without qualification "all the spiritual jurisdiction and power from Cape Bojador to the Indies for ever." Then followed the discovery of the sea route to India and "It seemed that the whole East," adds Edgar Prestage, "now lay open to the work of evangelisation, and Pope Leo X could refuse nothing to the sovereign of Portugal who had given the Church new realms to conquer, and on 3rd November, 1514, by the Bull Precelsae devotionis, he renewed the concessions made by his predecessors to Portugal not only up to the Indies but in any region whatsoever."

The newly founded (1514) Society of Jesus felt drawn to be permitted to sow the seeds of the Gospel in these fields, and Portugal welcomed the Jesuits as an international order of missionaries to make up for the limited number of priests available in Portugal for the wide ranging enterprise that had to be carried out.

Soon afterwards, in 1563, the Portuguese ambassador to the Vatican, supported by Father Francisco Borja, the Jesuit General, suggested to the Holy See that missionary labours should be directed and co-ordinated in Rome. A commission of cardinals was appointed nothing was done until fifty-four years later when the Sacred Congregation of the Propaganda of the Faith set up the Seminary of the Urban College as late as 1622.

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Meanwhile there had been problems when, contrary to the repeated orders of the King of Spain, who then also sat on the throne of Portugal, who decided that Spanish friars should deep to Spain's dominions and let Portuguese priests and their confrexes of other nationalities labour in the lands discovered by the Portuguese. However, Spanish Franciscans, Augustinians and Dominicans drawn by the prospects which Portugal had revealed appeared in Japan and China, and the Jesuits appealed to Pope Gregory XIII for a ruling; this resulted in the Brief Ex Pastoralis Officio (1585) ordering Spanish friars to keep to the Philippines. However the very same pope only complicated matters by giving secret permission to the Franciscans to enter China as missionaries, salving his conscience by a provision that the friars had first to obtain the permission of the King of Portugal. The difficulties were increased in 1608 when Pope Paul V brushed aside all restrictions.

So long as Portugal was ruled by a Spanish monarch, the Propaganda had no desire to offend the king but when the Portuguese threw off the Spanish yoke, in 1604, Rome steadfastly refused to recognise Portugal's autonomy, although nearly every country in Europe was happy to welcome Portugal as an independent nation, Rome continued to deny Portugal's rights. The cardinals at Rome came up with new ideas all the time but Innocent X demurred, probably feeling that Portugal had undeniable rights, under Alexander VII (elected 1655), however, Rome's attitude hardened. A campaign began in Rome to "ignore the rights of kings" (that is, Portugal's Padroado for the privileges which had been conceded to Spain, in the Patronate, were not affected),

The cardinals seemed to be anxious to get out of the position which had been granted to Portugal for nearly two centuries, and the Propaganda Fide came up with the idea of supporting the newly founded French Societe des Missions Etrangeres de Paris (founded 1658 by King Louis XIV), and nominations were made of vicarsapostolic, members of the new French order, in partibus infidelium, answering directly to the Supreme Pontiffs and ignoring the patronage of kings. The new prelates were instructed to keep their missions secret until they reached their destinations, and to by-pass every Portuguese check-point on the route from Europe to their Asian destinations.

"The cardinals of the Propaganda and their French allies," adds Professor Boxer, "regarded the Padroado as an obsolescent papal favour which could be abrogated now that it was obvious that Asia could not be converted by Portugal alone. Portugal, on the other hand, saw no reason why their indubitable privileges should be abrogated by unilateral action, particularly when so many

popes had expressly stated the contrary." One Portuguese viceroy in India went so far as to give instructions that if any of these vicars apostolic should be caught he should be hanged in the market place, while prepotory orders were issued for every member of the government and the ecclesiastical authorities to resist "the interlopers." Appeals made in Rome by the Portuguese for the negotiation of a settlement over the issue went unheeded.

Another problem was that known as the Rites Question. In their work the Jesuits had found, from the very earliest stages, the need to weigh carefully the values of the terms used in their catechisms and sermons to interpret the idea of God and Heaven, and learned discussions had taken place, with Chinese Christian scholars taking an active part, to find the most fitting words to use. In China, as well as Japan, this was held to be particularly important and, beginning with the pioneer missionaries, who from the very earliest stages prepared dictionaries, there was a constant search for the correct term. Side by side with this there was the problem of the age-old custom to pay special reverence to the dead, especially the ancestors, a custom which unfortunately has been called "ancestor worship," linked with which was the practice for successful candidates at the government examinations to make obeisance before the effigy of Confucius, the scholar and sage. This also came in for considerable study and discussion, and beginning with Father Matteo Ricci it was agreed that they could be tolerated. These rulings did not go without the opposition of some Jesuits and by the majority of the Spanish friars from the Philippines.

When the friars entered the lists talks over these subjects were no longer orderly, and there was bitterness and acrimony. Delegates from both sides were sent to Rome to place before the Holy See the viewpoints of either side, and the popes pronounced, now in favour of one and then the other, only adding to the confusion that prevailed.

From the early days of the Mission which Portugal had founded there had been problems and even persecutions but with the passage of time, by the second half of the 17th century, a period of relative success had come and in many places in China the missions flourished. In part this was undoubtedly due to the increasing influence of the priests in Peking who had reason to be pleased, but Father Verbiest, who was the chief of the headquarters there was concerned over the shortage of good mathematicians and scientists arriving from Europe. His letters, following the earlier expositions of Father Rhodes in Paris which had, as a matter of fact, contributed to the idea of setting up vicars-apostolic, led to the suggestion that the Roi Soleil should introduce "French royal mathematicians" into China direct.

Before this came into serious consideration, young Emperor K'ang-hsi had taken considerable interest in the work of the priests and once, when he was informed that a young master of arts in Macao was an accomplished musician, he sent two ranking mandarins to escort young Father Thomas Pereira to Peking (1672). Deciding to take lessons in music, the emperor sat with the Portuguese priest at the clavicord, admiring the ease with which Father Pereira after listening to a Chinese tune wrote down the score and reproduced it on the instrument he was playing. "This European science is truly admirable," the emperor said, "and this young man is a marvellous genius." On another occasion he said that Father Pereira was the only person he knew who was able to probe his inmost feelings and that he was happy to follow his advice on many matters.

A report by a Jesuit visitor says, "So great was the esteem in which the priest was held by the emperor than even mandarins, including those who presented themselves at Court, with the governors of the provinces, paid Father Pereira their respects, and were not ashamed to ask him to intercede on their behalf." He, in turn, would not hesitate to ask them for favourable treatment of the missionaries in the provinces. The missions flourished, therefore, as never before in China and "Father Pereira was in fact the veritable column of the Missions in China," so read another report.

In 1685 the King of France decided to send, with the reluctant consent of the Jesuit General in Rome, who counselled prudence, six priests who were accomplished mathematicians and well versed in the sciences. They embarked in a French warship on a diplomatic mission to Siam and the priests sailed to Ningpo, being then invited by Father Verbiest, head at that time of the Mission in Peking, to come to the Chinese capital.

Not long afterwards, however, the death took place of Father Verbiest and the Emperor decided to appoint Father Pereira President of the Tribunal of Mathematics, but the Portuguese priest asked to be permitted to decline the great honour, recommending, instead, that Father Philip Grimaldi be given the distinguished honour. At the Emperor's insistence he agreed to fill the post temporarily, but jointly with Father Antoine Thomal, until Father Grimaldi should return to the country.

There was one post which Father Pereira was not permitted to decline. His ecclesiastical superiors appointed him Deputy Visitor of the Jesuits in North China, "with express instructions and powers to deal with the French intruders." He was instructed not only to prevent the admission of the French Jesuits but to report on all that went on.

Claiming that their scholarly attainments entitled them to remain in Peking to serve the Emperor of China, the Frenchmen demanded that the Portuguese withdraw to the mission fields, and surrender to them therefore all the properties, library and offices in Peking. Alternatively they hoped to form an independent Jesuits mission in China. Father Pereira had to weigh the problem from many angles and gave his decision that two of the French priests could remain in Peking but that all the others had to serve in the provinces, just like all the other priests in China.

He had been presented with a dilemma which should have been settled in Europe, a matter for international councils and experienced statesmen, rather than that its solution be suddenly foisted upon a single man, with no experience of such a tricky affair, without counsellors and guidance, and very far from the means for serious consultation of any kind. His decision -- when his own superiors and the leaders of the Church had shirked their obligation to smooth away the difficulties that had arisen -- was, on the face of it, wise, sane and intelligent. Looked at, furthermore, from the perspective of our times we can see that this was a ruling which prevented the development of a situation which his betters in Europe had failed to tackle honestly as they should have done.

Thus it was that Fathers Joachium Bouvet and Jean Francois Gerbillon were permitted to stay in the Chinese capital but the other French priests, disgruntled at having to carry out the work of evangelisation and not use the fruit of their special scientific attainments, found the means of returning to France or of working elsewhere.

Portugal could not have been happy over the decision, too, for they must have expected the complete exclusion of the members of the French Province, whose sphere of influence was to promote the interests of France alone, and it is clear that had a less tactful priest been in charge in Peking, an explosive situation would have resulted. Nevertheless, the Frenchmen continued, for years, to needle Father Pereira to give them full charge of Peking, in spite of the Jesuit General's approval of the ruling which Father Pereira had made.

The Jesuit General then made a decision of his own, and ordered that henceforward the old Portuguese Mission in Peking should be placed no longer under the administration of a Portuguese priest but of other European Jesuits, excepting the French, although Portugal had paid for and continued to pay for the upkeep of this and all the other missions in China.

It is curious to read in a recent publication that "after the arrival of the French priests, the Portuguese tried every means in their power to rid the country of them." It would appear that the Frenchmen would have been prepared to settle for having two Jesuit missions in one country, each taking instructions from a different national headquarters or, better still, leaving them in

sole control of the mission which the Portuguese had created and supported for so many years.

Power politics had entered what should have been a field of peaceful endeavour and responsible leadership, and whereas in Europe nobody seems to have known how to settle a thorny question, here in China, Father Pereira established a mode of operation which removed the danger of conflict and pointed to the need for a Christian approach to a dispute not of Portugal's making.

At this juncture the need arose for the services of our Portuguese priest again. For many years there had been disputes and even conflict with the Russians over the Siberian borders of the two countries and at last arrangements had been made for a meeting of Russian and Chinese envoys at a place called Nerchinsk. During the negotiations Father Verbiest had been involved and he had recommended to the Emperor that the best person to assist the Chinese plenipotentiaries was Father Pereira, and so it was to him that Emperor K'ang-hsi turned asking him to be his personal representative and observer and adviser to the Chinese envoys. To show him very particular honour the Emperor presented the Portuguese priest with robes from his own wardrobe as a mark of special esteem. The Portuguese was then forty-four years of age, had spent seventeen years in the Chinese capital and been in constant contact with the Emperor. Appointing him, the Emperor issued an edict addressed to the Chinese plenipotentiaries and he justified the choice of this priest by declaring "Having seen that the Europeans whom I employ are loyal and trustworthy and people on whom I can rely, Father Pereira shall go with you to the Moscovites."

Our Portuguese priest then asked the Emperor to be permitted to take a companion and it speaks volumes for Father Pereira's liberality that he should have chosen Father Gerbillon. The young Frenchman was barely thirty years old and, at the time of his appointment, had been only a few months in Peking, with hardly any experience about the affairs of China, but Father Pereira felt that he was to be trusted.

The outcome of the negotiations with the Russians was the Treaty of Nerchinsk and Emperor K'ang-hsi was jubilant over the results, so much so that, he expressed his thanks to the priests for their part in the negotiations which has been difficult, both Father Pereira and Father Gerbillon being kept busy. A page of Chinese history which was foreign contribution to the settlement by foreigners, one of them a Portuguese priest, of a dispute between China and Russia.

It happened then that the Viceroy of Chekiang started a persecution of Christians, imprisoning Father Intercetta, and it was only necessary for

Father Pereira to present a petition to obtain the emperor's help. This was followed by an even more important move and, supported by Fathers Antoine Thomas, Bouvet and Gerbillon, Father Pereira presented a second petition to the Emperor asking for formal permission to preach Christianity in China. After some difficulties with the Board of Rites in Peking, the governing body in China for matters of this kind, the celebrated Edict of Toleration was issued on 22nd March, 1692, and greatest concession ever granted in China to any foreigner.

Detailed reports of the steps taken to secure the passing of the celebrated edict were written at the time, one by Father Francisco Nogueira, Visitor of the Jesuit Missions in Eastern Asia, who gives full credit to Father Pereira for his services to the Church, although this priest never made any claims himself for his part in the accomplishment. The manuscript has remained unpublished in the archives in Portugal. On the other hand the Jesuits in Paris gave the fullest publicity to the achievement, stressing the services of Father Gerbillon, with little if any mention of Father Pereira, who as the leader of the group who called on the Emperor, was the head of the Catholic Mission in Peking.

Father Gerbillon's report on the Russo-Chinese Treaty was also published in Paris and the editors there were not slow to point how important were the services of the young French priest. The "propaganda machine", as we moderns would use the term, was kept active letting the reading public know what the French Jesuits in China were doing for Christianity in that country. The work of the Portuguese was hardly mentioned, if at all. Based on Gerbillon's report to his confreres in Paris, historians have not only given the greater credit to the French priest for the success of the negotiations but some modern writers have even omitted the Portuguese priest's name entirely.

The official report of the Mission was written by Father Pereira, as chief of the Jesuits in China, and sent to the General in Rome, where it has remained in manuscript for over two hundred and seventy years, until brought out in an annotated edition by Father Joseph Sebes, in 1961. Credit is given to Father Gerbillon, a fine gesture on the part of Father Pereira, quite in keeping with the conduct of a man of high principles and honesty of purpose, but from the same report it can be seen how great was the part played by the author himself. It is truly unfortunate that it has taken so long for this report to be published, although a copy has lain in one of the archives in Lisbon, and it is disheartening to think that the Portuguese have neglected this valuable material to help to rehabilitate the good name of a very worthy member of their Mission in China.

With the publication of the Edict of Toleration of 1692 high hopes were raised that a great opportunity had been created for the growth of Christianity

in China, and missionaries there felt that an era of successful endeavour was about to begin. However, a number of persons in Europe, cardinals among them, were ready to make their voices be heard over the matter. They brought up again the old Term questions and the Rights problems and references to the old disputes which had raged in China generations earlier, and pressure was brought to bear to condemn again the Jesuit point of view to these disputes. It is significant that the leading Chinese Christians had supported the Jesuits, including the first Chinese to be consecrated a bishop, the Dominican friar, Com Domingo Lopes, O.P.

During a century Rome had vacillated over the question but now the cardinals decided to force a decision and this they succeeded in doing. The despatch of a Legate to represent the Pope was thought to be a happy idea and Archbishop Carlo Maillard de Tournon, a young priest of good family was nominated. He was ordered to proceed to China and there to inform the Chinese of Rome's ruling in the matter of the Rites. Above all, Tournon was instructed to ignore the claims of the Portuguese to any privileges, and he was to condemn the ceremonies of the Chinese scholars in honour of Confucius and of the people in honour of the ancestors.

Not only did Tournon, on his way to the Far East, ignore the Portuguese, he side-stepped all the Portuguese missions, including Goa, the great headquarters of all the various religious orders in Asia. At Macao, where he arrived late in 1705, Tournon refused to accept the honours and homage of the people and government, for they had prepared a sumptuous welcome in his honour, in spite of the fact that Lisbon had already sounded the alarm and warned everyone of the Portuguese officials and ecclesiastical leaders not to recognise him and the "authority" which he possessed.

In China the Jesuits used their influence with the Throne to facilitate the Legate's visit and the Emperor received him with every courtesy and distinction, a concession to Fathers Grimaldi, Pereira and Antoine Thomas, who had asked the Chinese monarch to show favour to the Legate. The French Jesuits hoped, at first, that the Legate's mission would prove beneficial to an independent French Mission in China, but they were soon disillusioned.

From the very first there were problems, for the Legate's interpreters were helped by the Emperor to be incompetent, K'ang Hsi even nomination Father Bouvet, one of the French Jesuits, to serve in this capacity. But Tournon would have none of it and insisted on his own nominees. Long disputes followed and the Emperor's patience began to wear thin, while the Legate declined to make any pronouncement on the question of the Rites, although he knew that the Pope had, on 20th November, 1704, condemned them out of hand.

The last audience given by the Emperor to Tournon took place on 30th June, 1706,

when the Emperor stated that he was leaving for his summer holiday in Manchuria. However, Father Maigrot, of the French Missions Etrangeres, was sent to call on the Emperor, but K'ang-hsi expressed his disgust with the priest's ignorance of Chinese, and recalled the gifts he had intended sending the Pope. He also complained that the Legate had not presented any credentials to prove his claim to represent the Holy See. The Emperor now decided that missionaries wishing to preach in China should first get a certificate from the Chinese government accepting the ceremonies of the Rites, first laid down by Father Ricci, as purely civil and not religious. Upon this, Tournon, then at Nanking on his way back to Macao, issued a mandate requiring every missionary to obey his orders and to renounce the Chinese Emperor's ruling on the matter in dispute.

Reaching Macao late in June, 1707 Tournon began to storm and rave at every person who failed to accept his authority which he claimed to possess, but which the Portuguese Government refused to recognise. Macao was rent with passions as excommunications flowed from the Legate against those who questioned his power. The Governor came under the ban and so did all the Jesuits and the Majority of the secular priests, while most of the friars of the various Orders in Macao sided with Tournon, who, as an Augustinian himself, took up residence in the Convent of the Augustinians in Macao.

For three years the most bitter feelings raged only to end when the Legate died on the 8th June, 1710. But even this was not sufficient, for Tournon's partisans in Europe declared that he had been imprisoned and poisoned by the Portuguese, and absolutely untrue accusation, while they cast about for a scape-goat on whom to pin the consequences of the Legate's own incompetence and bad temper. They felt that Father Thomas Pereira would be such a man and he was blamed for the failure which had characterised Tournon's mission, an accusation as unfair as it was incorrect. Father Pereira had died on the 24th December, 1708, sorely troubled over the failure of the Legate to understand the importance of his issue, just as most of the leaders of the Jesuits in China felt, and Christianity entered a period of uncertainty and difficulty. The issue was transferred from China to Europe again and supporters of the Legate embarked upon a campaign to justify everything he did, while the Jesuits, obeying orders, kept their silence. A whole flood of books appeared, condemning the Jesuits and Portugal for supporting them, while Father Pereira's good name came in for a great measure of opprobrium.

Tournon's mission was a complete failure and for generations writers have viewed the Rites controversy as "a product of rivalry between various religious Orders, and of ignorance and intolerance on the part of the Mendicants." The issue was, as a matter of fact, more complex than that and Rome was aroused to try and adjust matters. A new Legation was appointed, Carlo Ambrogio Mezzabarba

sailed for China where he was treated in a friendly way, but China's attitude had hardened. The new Legate made many concessions and he was affable and tried to please, while the Emperor was friendly enough and Mezzabarba left in a friendly atmosphere but he knew that his efforts had been futile.

To add to the problem the Holy See revoked the concessions granted and the Constitution Ex Quo Singulari in 1742 was a clear condemnation of the ideas which the Chinese Catholics, supported by the Jesuits, had worked for. Two centuries later, moreover, a Council of Chinese archbishops and prelates met in Rome and convinced the Papal Councils that Rome had been wrong all along, and the Pope withdrew the strictures against the Rites when performed in a civil ceremony. . . . his signature to the decree on 8th December, 1938, but times had changed and the Japanese attack on China was then raging, so that the decision did not have the significance it would have had in the 17th and 18th centuries.

Father Pereira would have been happy to see his views vindicated but it was not to be, for Rome in the 18th century turned back the clock and created problems for the work of evangelisation in China by the attitude it was persuaded to take by men who should have known better.

Time has not only shown that Father Pereira was right and his opponents wrong, but we know that he served in other ways. During a period of Stress, the result of floods in China, the Emperor, who had been shocked by the corruption of earlier relief programmes by Chinese officials, placed Father Pereira in charge of relief work and he did wonders, earning the praise of the Emperor for the honest, efficient measures adopted to help the poor. He was an architect of merit and among his projects was the designing of a college building in Peking, while his knowledge of mechanics enabled him to execute a number of ~~missions~~ missions in the Chinese capital.

At Father Pereira's death the Emperor ordered and paid for an imposing funeral and wrote a personal eulogy to be engraved on the tombstone of the humble priest who had served him and China so faithfully during so many years.

Unfortunately Portuguese scholars have written little about this priest, although at least 117 of Father Pereira's letters have survived, from 1677 to 1708, describing events and issues in China and submitting reports to his superiors, while he received at least 68 letters, all these to be found in the archives in Portugal and Rome. There is ample material here for an interesting biography of a man who served his Church in the way in which he had been trained to work and it will be seen that his contribution was noble, dignified and correct in difficult times, while his conduct was that of a humble, modest and

earnest priest who did that which was right. Let us hope that his good name will be properly vindicated some day.