

Celso Costantini first Apostolic Delegate in China

## Captivating missionary strategy

Published here is a translation of the preface, written in Italian by the Secretary of State, to a book by Christian Gabrieli entitled "Un protagonista tra gli eredi del Celeste Impero. Celso Costantini, delegato apostolico in Cina 1922-1933" ("A Key Player among the Heirs of the Celestial Empire. Celso Costantini, Apostolic Delegate to China 1922-1933") (Edizioni Dehoniane Bologna, 267 pp.).

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"We respect the Chinese people; it is just that the Church seeks freedom for her mission, for her work; no other condition". This is how Pope Francis answered a journalist's question on 18 August 2014, just as a Roman pontiff managed to fly over the air space of the People's Republic of China for the first time. He continued by citing the 2007 letter Benedict XVI had addressed to Catholics in the land of Confucius. "That Letter is still timely today... The Holy See is always open to contacts: always, because it has genuine esteem for the Chinese people".

That "always" that Francis reiterated casts us back to the deep furrow traced out in China by his distinguished predecessors, especially since the time the first Apostolic Delegate, the then future Cardinal Celso Costantini, was sent there. The accomplishments achieved by these faithful interpreters of the Petrine ministry, from 1922 to 1933, will leave their indelible marks on history. They are the subject of this study, which validates the reasoning of those who consider Costantini as the artisan of the new course of the Catholic Church among the heirs of the Celestial Empire.

The picture painted by this volume is altogether original, impressive, fascinating and stimulating. It is original because its composition is based on unpublished authoritative sources

made available by the Holy See, with particular regard to the Roman Pontiff and the correspondence of his Secretary of State and that of the Sacred Congregation *Propaganda Fide* with the Apostolic Delegate to China. The author, thanks to his historical and juridical expertise, managed to extract the finest material from the treasure trove of documents outlined. Indeed, future treatises on the Chinese question, for the period indicated, will be of no comparison to this publication.

What is impressive is the sheer amount of activities accomplished by Costantini, analyzed here. They are the primary roots of ecclesial development in China, because they continue to bear abundant fruit even today. Among the most impressive of these accomplishments are: the first Chinese Plenary Council organized by the future cardinal from Pordenone, which he presided at in Shanghai in 1924, as Pontifical Legate; the consecration of the first six Chinese bishops in 1926 and the promotion of indigenous clergy to significant ecclesiastical offices; the constitution of the first Chinese clerical religious institute, the *Congregatio discipulorum Domini*, which he founded in 1927; the establishment of the Fu Ren Catholic University that same year in Peking; and the inauguration of the general association of Chinese Catholic youth, which took place in 1929 at the headquarters of the

Apostolic Delegation.

The missionary strategy that emerges in this work is fascinating. In fact, Costantini was sent to China to set in motion the programme outlined by the Apostolic Letter *Maximum Illud* promulgated in 1919 by Benedict XV. Costantini had to navigate through the countless difficulties and turbulent waters within the country. But his objectives were clear: to separate the Catholic missions from the harsh conditioning of colonial powers, particularly by France, which was jealous of its protectorate; "to plant" the Church by entrusting her to indigenous clergy; to inject the lymph of the Gospel into the veins of the great Chinese civilization by eliminating foreign bodies imported from the West. This programme attracted the interest and appreciation of the national government, as it also converged with the Republic's ideals captured in the motto "Return China to the Chinese".

The stimulating aspect is in the results reached by the author and is left to the reader to uncover. This was accomplished thanks to an impeccable understanding between the Holy See and the first Apostolic Delegate to Peking. The portrait of Costantini in these pages does not present him as simply a man carry-



Celso Costantini in an official photo

ing out orders from on high. While obedient to higher authority, he was creative in interpreting orders for the greatest good of the faithful in the land of Confucius. He was a great friend of China and played a key role in the weaving of diplomatic relations between the Catholic Church and the Chinese Republic.

Our deepest gratitude goes to Dr Christian Gabrieli, who gives us this precious composition. He has shed new light on the figure and the work of Cardinal Celso Costantini, acclaimed son of the Diocese of Concordia-Pordenone, great evangelizer of China, enlightened leader of Catholic missions.

The author also deserves credit for revealing the utmost care, immeasurable commitment and boundless love of the Bishops of Rome for the Chinese people, just as Pope Francis attests today.