

# Brief history of the Catholic Church in China

BEIJING (CNS) — Catholic scholars and sociologists sometimes refer to the current religious revival in China as the country's fifth evangelization.

They consider the first evangelization when an Assyrian monk, Alopen, brought Christianity across the Silk Road to what is now Xi'an, China, in the seventh century. The period was commemorated with the erection of the Nestorian Stone, a 10-foot-high tablet that describes Christian doctrine and ceremonies, the development of Christianity in China and the support Christianity was given by some emperors of the Tang Dynasty. The stone contains doctrinal, historical and eulogistic contents that most scholars say could be accepted by all Christians today. The stone is preserved in the Provincial Museum of Shaanxi, in Xi'an.

Late in the 13th century, Italian Franciscan Father John of Montecorvino became the first Catholic missionary to China, and the period that followed became known as the second evangelization. In 1307, Pope Clement V made Father John an archbishop for his success at converting some high-level Chinese officials, baptizing about 6,000 people and erecting churches. The Franciscans operated in China for nearly 100 years; the New Catholic Encyclopedia indicates that in 1368 China might have had as many as 30,000 Catholics, although most did not belong to the majority Han ethnic group. This period was the second evangelization.

Early in the 16th century, Jesuits, Franciscans, Augustinians and Dominicans tried to gain a foothold in China but could not make it past the port of Guangzhou, where they were allowed to stay for short periods. Later in the 16th century, Italian Jesuit Fathers Michele Ruggieri and Matteo Ricci took up residence in Zhaozhou, dressing first as Buddhist monks, then as Confucian scholars. With their displays of scientific instruments from the West they gained the respect and protection of several Confucian literati. Father Ruggieri returned to Europe to try to get more support, and Father Ricci was able to settle in Beijing in 1601. The Jesuits later helped reform errors in the imperial calendar, which increased the missionaries' prestige.

By 1635, other religious orders began arriving in China, and soon the country was divided into territories for the religious orders. By 1700 the Catholic Church had about 200,000 Chinese members, but the so-called Chinese Rites Controversy stunted development of the church. Franciscans, Dominicans, Augustinians and members of the Paris Foreign Mission Society objected to Jesuit acceptance of Chinese rituals used to honor ancestors as well as to Chinese names for God. Papal decrees in 1715 and 1742 banned the Chinese Rites, and the emperor reacted by prohibiting the preaching of Christianity and by ordering the deportation of missionaries who did not use them. This period in the 16th and 17th centuries is known as the third evangelization.

The fourth evangelization occurred in the mid-1800s, when the Treaty of Tianjin guaranteed religious liberty for all Christians, including those in China's interior region.

Multiple missionary orders returned to China, and the Vatican began organizing ecclesiastical territories under the orders' jurisdiction. These flourished until the communist takeover in 1949 and the subsequent suppression of the church, including the expulsion of foreign missionaries and the imprisonment and torture of religious during the 1966-76 Cultural Revolution.

The fifth evangelization is identified as beginning in the 1980s, when China began allowing the practice of religion. Some scholars say that, unlike the other evangelizations, which depended on foreign missionaries, this era is marked by Chinese Catholics keeping and transmitting the faith.