

THE REDISCOVERY OF YONGZHENG'S LETTER OF 1725 TO POPE BENEDICT XIII*

During my last visit to the Manuscript Department of the St. Petersburg Branch of the Institute of Oriental Studies in summer 1998, due to the courtesy of the keeper of Manchu holdings, Dr. Tatyana A. Pang, I could make acquaintance of a trilingual document written in Manchu, Chinese, and Latin (call number C 31). It is probably the original letter, sent by the Emperor Yongzheng to Pope Benedict XIII, in

reply to his letter of congratulations on occasion of Yongzheng's accession to the throne. The circumstances that surrounded the dispatching of the letter are a well-known chapter in the history of Missionary relations between the West and China. They have been exhaustively summarised by Antonio Sisto Rosso already in 1948. We read in particular:

"Benedict XIII, learning from optimistic reports by Pedrini and others of the accession of the Yung-chêng Emperor and of his good disposition toward the missionaries, decided to send to China five missionaries: two Carmelites — Gotthard Plaskowitz of St. Mary and Ildefonso of the Nativity — and three Franciscans. He entrusted to Plaskowitz, as head of the group, rich gifts and two Breves for the Emperor; in one Breve he congratulated the Sovereign on his accession, and in the other requested him to free Appiani and Guignes. Gifts and Breves were to be presented through Fathers Perroni and Romei, Propaganda Procurators in Kuang-chou and Pei-ching respectively.

The five missionaries, who left Roma in mid-October 1724, had to part at Oostende for lack of accommodation on board, and thus the Carmelites arrived at Kuang-chou alone on July 24, 1725. There Perroni let the Governor General handle this affair through the highest Boards and forward the Carmelites to Pei-ching as Legates on August 18. The legates, who reached their destination on October 22, two days later were announced to the Emperor, while both Breves were filed with the Board of Rites. Despite subsequent explanation about the true qualifications of the Fathers who came to stay as missionaries, the Emperor wanted to receive them as Legates, which he did in admitting them to a Palace audience on November 7, and then promptly dispatching them home.

On November 13, the Emperor answered the first Breve with a courteous letter; and on November 18 he issued the reply to the second granting the release of Appiani and Guignes. Early that morning the papal gifts were delivered to the Eunuchs of the Imperial Villa, and at noon, after performing the customary prostrations, the Envoys were admitted to the imperial presence. The Sovereign ordered the Envoys seated, while the others knelt down. He said that he appreciated the congratulations on his accession and the condolence on his father's demise expressed in the first papal letter, and that, with reference to the second letter, he had pardoned Pedrini whom his father had confined solely for his stand on religious matters. Then Fr. Plaskowitz entreated the Emperor to let the missionaries preach in the provinces as before. Taken by surprise, the Emperor began a long discourse on religious issues and set forth the reasons for denying the request.

There was nothing else for the Legates to do but hasten their return. On November 26, they were granted a farewell audience, and the next day they received from the Board of Rites the Imperial gifts and replies for the Pope. ..." [1].

The Chinese documents concerning this event has long become available in the English translation by Lo-shu Fu; it comprises (i) a memorial of the "Viceroy of Liang-Kwang, K'ung Yü-hsün", which announces the Legates' arrival at the Court; (ii) a note on the audience granted by the Emperor and recorded in the *Yongzheng Shilu* (ch. 25, p. 11a); (iii) the Emperor's reply to the Pope's first *Breve* (*Shilu*, ch. 37, pp. 6b—7a), which is the "courteous letter" mentioned by Rosso and dated by November 13 (according to the registration in the *Shilu*); (iv) K'ung Yü-hsün's report of the Legates' departure; (v) the Emperor's answer to the

Pope's second *Breve* concerning the release of two missionaries, L. Appiani and A. Guignes (*Shilu*, ch. 45, pp. 32b—33a) [2]. A copy of this second letter exists also in the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, and has been published in facsimile by Rosso (with an English translation), in addition to extant Italian, French and Latin translations [3].

The Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana keeps also a copy of the Emperor's reply to the first papal *Breve* (the above-mentioned "courteous letter" of November 13), which is identical, as Rosso believes, to that registered in the *Shilu*, with the exception of "a few variants". This *Shilu* record

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