

Going in by the other's door...



In watching an episode of the BBC series, *The Story of China*, on SBS earlier in the week I was following the rise of the Ming Dynasty. As part of that story the presenter, Michael Wood, began to explore the impact of Italian Jesuit missionary and humanist, Fr Matteo Ricci, in that period of Chinese history. On arriving in Portuguese Macao, Ricci first spent fifteen years learning the language until he spoke it like a native. He devised what he called a “memory palace”, a sophisticated word-association technique in the mind to remember the thousands of Chinese characters.

So as to move into positions of influence within Chinese culture, Ricci cast off his European clerical attire to dress as a *literati*, a scholar, known by the name Li Madou. He found Chinese culture to be deeply moral and philosophical, so he attempted a marriage between Chinese philosophy, Confucianism and the Christian faith – much as St Thomas Aquinas had done centuries before with Greek Aristotelianism. Ricci introduced Confucius to the West (giving the sage that rather Latinised name). He translated Euclid’s *Elements* into Chinese which was enormously well-received. Quite the polymath, he moved the Chinese astronomers from the limited lunar calendar to the more accurate solar one. One of his great treatises, a philosophical work, *On Friendship*, remains a classic in China to this day. Ricci has been called “the most outstanding cultural mediator between China and the West of all time”. So influential was he in the Imperial court that he was the first westerner to be given the honour of burial in Beijing after his death. This week the boys of Ricci House celebrated the 406th anniversary of that death with pizzas and fortune cookies – an ‘East meets West’ banquet, if ever there was one.

It was Francis Xavier who had taken the first tentative steps in this style of enculturation or accommodation and flexibility in new lands. Ignatius had encouraged it and often invoked a Spanish saying of his day, “Go in by the other person’s door and lead them out your own”. But after Xavier, it was another Italian Jesuit, Fr Alessandro Valignano, who developed all the principles which we today take for granted. Valignano, at the age of only thirty-four, was Father General’s delegate for all the lands of the Far East in the late sixteenth century. Far from engaging in ‘cultural imperialism’, he gave

missionaries like Ricci six principles or expectations to abide by:

First, a sympathy and respect for the cultural, social, intellectual and spiritual values of the people among whom one was working;

Secondly, a perfect command of the language, the idiom, in which that civilisation or culture was incarnated;

Thirdly, employing science and scholarship to introduce the values and ethos of one civilisation or culture into another;

Fourthly, a long-term endeavour of serious writing and personal dialogue;

Fifthly, concern for the groups upon whom a society depended for its leadership and cohesion (especially, in his time, the scholarly communities and government officials); and

Finally, the supreme importance of one's personal values lived out in one's life.

Ricci spent a lifetime incarnating those principles of Valignano. Such 'Ignatian accommodation' continues to be a quality of the Jesuit apostolic style today – in missions, in spiritual formation and in education. We aim to make it a characteristic of our way of proceeding here at Riverview.

"Going in by the other person's door" means to meet people where they are, impose little or nothing at first, listen a lot, engage, find common points, then lead them on. It is a perfect pedagogical tool. And with young people, it is an equally powerful tool of evangelizing – a way of revealing God present and active in their world, especially through the *Examen*.

Ricci had sufficient freedom to dress like the locals, to speak the language, to absorb the culture, to understand the traditional values of the people. When Ricci met this new and different world, his starting points were immersion, respect, looking for the good, seeking traces of God's universal Spirit, and finding a freedom to adapt. Yes, Ricci had a strong sense of the changeless but, at the same time, he recognised varied cultural, linguistic and historical expressions of those absolutes and ideals. Ricci listened and he learned. Only then did he presume to write, to share knowledge and faith, to instruct.

At St Ignatius', accommodation is at play in both practice and attitude. You will see it externally, in the doing. But we also strive to cultivate it *internally*, in values and beliefs. You will see the fruit of it in liturgical expression; flexibility when appropriate with our norms and guidelines; in an ability to deal with "grey areas"; from the challenge to one's values and understanding that comes from immersion programmes; in the levelling effect of a demographic mix of boys from city and country, indigenous and overseas students, boarding and day, who all shape and mould each other. Accommodation allows us to continue to be grounded in a four-and-a-half century old tradition and at the same time be at liberty to appropriate the best of contemporary insights into the teaching-learning process. As such, it always means growth and dynamism. It is fundamentally a freedom – a liberty to let go, a licence to embrace something new, to lead others out through a new door.

An English educator early last century, Sir Percy Nunn, wrote that teachers were "ambassadors of society to the kingdom of the child". Rather quaint, but it contains a truth. The adolescent kingdom is, to a degree, foreign territory – but not territory to be feared. Ignatius' understanding of culture and human nature, and the example of Valignano and Ricci living out such an approach, continue to model a way of ministry, a way of engaging with the young. Like all skilled ambassadors, we enter with respect. We first listen and learn the context. Only then we offer what we believe is of value, often building on what is already there.

Ricci rode the wave of the Renaissance, engaging with new cultures with a confident and enthusiastic embrace. It was a journey in freedom and in faith. Ricci trusted in God and in human nature. With a freedom grounded in scholarship, clear conscience and commonsense, he accommodated to times, places and circumstances so as to be the more effective and influential. His humanistic Jesuit formation readied him for the task. We follow in that tradition. This time, with your sons. Their travels will likely be just as far-ranging and as multicultural as Ricci's ever were, if not more so. God willing, our style of accommodation will fit them for the journey.