

“What you want to ignite in others must burn within you”

## Obituary on Fr. Roman Malek SVD (1951–2019) – for Many Years Editor-in-chief of *China heute* and Founding Director of the China-Zentrum

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Fr. Malek at the 8th European Catholic China Colloquium in Freising in September 2010. Photo: China-Zentrum archives.

Fr. Prof. Dr. Roman Malek SVD died unexpectedly in Grudziądz in Poland on 29 November 2019. For more than forty years Fr. Malek belonged to the Steyl Missionary community in Sankt Augustin and worked additionally as director of the sinological Monumenta Serica Institute, as lecturer at the Philosophical-Theological Faculty SVD of St. Agustin, and in pastoral ministry. He was a formative figure on the SVD campus but also worked over and beyond

that. Through his numerous activities he contributed greatly to raise awareness of China and the Church in China.

Fr. Malek was born on 3 October 1951 in Bytów, Kashubia, Poland. After entering the Society of the Divine Word (Societas Verbi Divini SVD, Steyl Missionaries) in 1969, he studied philosophy and theology in Pieniężno and then Anthropology of Religion and Religious Studies at the Catholic University of Lublin. In 1976 he was ordained priest in Pieniężno. His Master's thesis dealt with Tenrikyō, a new Japanese religion, for Fr. Malek

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At study in younger years. Private photo.

first wanted to go to Japan as a missionary. However, the SVD earmarked him for academic work on China and he was assigned to the Monumenta Serica Institute. At the end of May 1976, therefore, he came to Sankt Augustin to take up studies at the University of Bonn in Sinology, Japanology, Comparative Religion and both medieval and recent Church history. At the same time, he was already working on the editorial board of the Monumenta Serica

Institute whose tasks include the editing of academic publications on China. Thanks to his talent for languages and his studious discipline, Fr. Malek quickly and almost perfectly mastered the German language and also rapidly learnt Chinese, which he developed further during a time of studies at the Catholic Fu Jen University in Taipei, Taiwan from 1978–1980. He completed his doctorate in Sinology at the University of Bonn in 1984 with a dissertation on fasting in religious Daoism, making a significant contribution to the then little known area of Daoist rituals.<sup>1</sup>

From 1985 on Fr. Malek was co-publisher of the internationally renowned periodical *Monumenta Serica*, as well as editor-in-chief of the Monumenta Serica Monograph Series, and additionally, from 1986 on a lecturer at the Philosophical-Theological Faculty. Besides research into Chinese culture, he was also interested in Christianity in present day China. Thus in 1984 he undertook the publishing of *China heute. Informationen über Religion und Christentum im chinesischen Raum* (China Today. Information on Religion and Christianity in the Chinese World), that had been founded two years beforehand in the Monumenta Serica Institute, later published by the China-Zentrum. He remained editor-in-chief until the end of 2003. The periodical gained its form under Fr. Malek – to which until 2008 the layout designed by himself also contributed – and became a reliable medium of information about the situation of the churches and religions in China. Due to his broad knowledge he was able to work on and assess topics about the different religions and the culture of China, as well as questions about the life of the Church in China, mission history or theology. From the outset he included Protestant colleagues in the work and time and again secured contributions from academics with whom he was acquainted. He wrote numerous news articles and analyses for *China heute* himself, especially on religious policy and on Sino-Vatican relations, as well as many statistics. He valued a thorough documentation of translations of significant texts of religious policy and ecclesial texts, many of which he made himself, as well as a bibliographic section which became more extensive over the years. Issues were often completed “overnight,” as witnessed the following morning by empty coffee cups and full ash trays. At the beginning Fr. Malek also liked to share in the

1 *Das Chai-chieh lu. Materialien zur Liturgie im Taoismus* (Materials on the Liturgy in Daoism), Würzburger Sino-Japonica, Vol. 14, Frankfurt a.M. – Bern – New York: Peter Lang publishers 1985.

sociable packing of the printed issues of *China heute* that were sent out. In 2006 he called the Polish counterpart *Chiny dzisiaj* into being and published it until 2011.

In 1988 Fr. Malek was appointed founding director of the China-Zentrum, also with its seat in Sankt Augustin, which serves to promote contacts with the Catholic Church in China. The Centre was initially supported by members of the German Catholic Mission Council (DKMR), including aid organizations, male and female missionary orders and representatives of German dioceses. Fr. Malek worked to ensure that the membership gradually spread beyond Germany. Thus from 1995 members were accepted from Austria and Switzerland and, later, also Italy.

In addition to his demanding position as director of the China-Zentrum, which he fulfilled with great commitment and verve, in 1992 he took over the positions of director of the Monumenta Serica Institute and editor of all its publications, as successor to Dr. Heinrich Busch SVD (1912–2002), who had shaped the destiny of the Institute over a long period of time. Fr. Malek maintained the leadership of both institutions parallel until 1998. On the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the China-Zentrum and the simultaneous handing over of the directorship to Fr. Paul Raabe SVD (1937–2007) on July 1, 1998, Prof. DDr. Hans Waldenfels SJ, at that time vice-chairman of the China-Zentrum, honoured Fr. Malek with the following words: “It is Fr. Malek’s enduring merit that with great clear-sightedness he time and again directed attention to the needs and requirements of the Church in China, made visible the great perspectives and, wherever possible, initiated short-term steps that served the cause of China and the Church. This certainly required patience and discretion and untiring, often time-consuming effort.”<sup>2</sup>

Fr. Malek was involved early on in the Ecumenical China Working Group ÖCAK, which had already been founded in the early 1970s by the Associations of Protestant Churches



At the conference “Christianity and Culture” 1996 in Sankt Augustin with Prof. Dr. Zhuo Xinping of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (Beijing) and Dr. Justus Freytag, the then Protestant chairman of the ÖCAK. Photo: China-Zentrum archives.

<sup>2</sup> See *China heute* 1998, No. 4, pp. 100-103, here pp. 102-103.



and Missions and the German Catholic Mission Council. Also in this framework the numerous European Ecumenical China Conferences, co-organized by the China-Zentrum, as well as the European Catholic China Colloquia took place; the latter continue until today. In 1996 the China-Zentrum together with the ÖCAK organized the conference “Christianity and Culture in the Face of the Challenges of Modernity,” and Fr. Malek published an impressive collection of ecumenical contributions, written at his invitation, on religion, theology and Church in the Chinese context; the volume is entitled “*Fallbeispiel*” *China* (“Case Study” China).<sup>3</sup>

For several years he also co-organized the German-Chinese student meetings, which have taken place since the mid-1980s in Sankt Augustin and other places, originally to win over students for the topic of religions in China. The tradition of these meetings still exists today, they are organized annually by the China-Zentrum on different topics. In 2019 the meeting took place for the 34th time.

With regard to the People’s Republic of China, Fr. Malek was always anxious to maintain contact with both parts of the Catholic Church in China: the official and the underground Church. This is reflected among other things in the visiting programs of Church delegations, but also to China, as well as in the admission of Chinese seminarians, priests and religious sisters to the further training program at the Philosophical-Theological Faculty from the end of 1993 / beginning of 1994. A great concern of his was inner-Church reconciliation, and an informal, natural interaction, e.g. also with the annual summer workshops for Chinese theology students in Europe, which Fr. Malek co-initiated starting from the mid-1990s, contributed towards it substantially. In the year 1997, during



1995 at the summer workshop with retreat on the Grand Saint Bernard in Switzerland together with the Chinese seminarians and sisters from Sankt Augustin. Photo: China-Zentrum archives.

3 “*Fallbeispiel*” *China*. *Ökumenische Beiträge zu Religion, Theologie und Kirche im chinesischen Kontext* (“Case Study” China. Ecumenical Contributions to Religion, Theology and Church in the Chinese Context), Sankt Augustin – Nettetal: Steyler Verlag 1996.



Fr. Malek and Fr. Zbigniew Wesołowski SVD, Monumenta Serica Institute, meeting Pope John Paul II in Rome in the summer of 1997. Photo: China-Zentrum archives.

one such workshop in Rome, there was a personal meeting with Pope John Paul II. Fr. Malek followed very precisely how Sino-Vatican relations developed under this Pope, his countryman, and under the successors. Among the initiatives for Chinese theologians in Europe there were also regular meetings in the Monumenta Serica Institute, at which Chinese theology students could present their academic work. The academic studies of Chinese clerics was always dear to the heart of Fr. Malek. As moderator and doctoral adviser he accompanied many of the licentiate theses and doctoral theses of Chinese seminarians and priests in Sankt Augustin.

Fr. Malek also followed developments in Hong Kong and Macau intensively before and after the transfer to the People's Republic of China in 1997 and 1999. The result was two impressive book publications on the Church in both territories, as well as an exhibition "Macau '99, Origin is Future," arranged jointly by the China-Zentrum and the Monumenta Serica Institute.<sup>4</sup> Together with Prof. Hans Waldenfels and the Auxiliary Bishop of Essen Franz Grave, Fr. Malek helped revitalize the partnership between Essen and the Hong Kong Diocese that had existed since the foundation of the Diocese of Essen.

Fr. Malek was a master of networking. The geographical neighbourhood to the Konrad Adenauer Foundation led, for instance, to various joint projects and visitors' programs, such as in 1988 the international conference "Confucianism and the Modernisation of China," to which Fr. Malek made a decisive contribution.<sup>5</sup> As a genuine European his

4 See both publications: Roman Malek (ed.), *Hongkong: Kirche und Gesellschaft im Übergang. Materialien und Dokumente* (Hong Kong: Church and Society at the Time of Transfer. Materials and Documents), Sankt Augustin: China-Zentrum – Nettetal: Steyler Verlag 1997, as well as *Macau. Herkunft ist Zukunft* (Macau: Origin Is Future.) A joint publication of the China-Zentrum and Monumenta Serica Institute, Sankt Augustin – Nettetal: Steyler Verlag 2000.

5 The contributions in this conference were published later on in: Silke Krieger – Rolf Trauzettel (eds.), *Konfuzianismus und die Modernisierung Chinas* (Confucianism and the Modernisation of China), Mainz: Hase & Koehler 1990.



The famous “Gang of Four,” from left to right: Fr. Angelo Lazzarotto PIME, Podium moderator Edmond Tang of the Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland, Fr. Jean Charbonnier MEP, Fr. Jeroom Heyndrickx CICM, Fr. Malek. Photo: China-Zentrum archives.

thoughts travelled early on across constricting borders and he made contact with fellow contenders and those with the same ideas in other European countries. With some “old China hands” he founded the “Four Seas Association,” jokingly also called the “Gang of Four,” that was dedicated to the promotion of European ecclesiastic and academic work on China: with Fr. Malek were the Fathers Jeroom Heyndrick CICM with the Verbiest Institute in Leuven, Belgium, Jean Charbonnier MEP with the then Relais Chine-France in Paris, and Angelo S. Lazzarotto PIME in Italy. Fr. Malek found a “brother in spirit”<sup>6</sup> in the former editor-in-chief of *Christ in der Gegenwart*, Manfred Plate (1929–2007). Already in the 1980s the two functioned as bridge builders to the Christians in China.

Through Fr. Malek’s numerous international contacts a large number of significant personalities of the Chinese Church came to Sankt Augustin, among them early on Aloysius Jin Luxian SJ (1916–2013) who for many years was the Bishop of Shanghai, the then president



Fr. Malek with Bishop Aloysius Jin Luxian of Shanghai in the 1990s. Photo: China-Zentrum archives.

of the Taiwanese Bishops’ Conference and later Cardinal Paul Shan Kuo-hsi SJ (1923–2012) and the later Bishops of Hong Kong, Cardinal Zen Ze-kiun SDB and Cardinal John Tong. Fr. Malek mostly accompanied the delegations personally on their visits to Catholic institutions and prominent persons in Germany.

Apart from representatives of the Church, numerous academics also came to Sankt Au-

<sup>6</sup> See *Christ in der Gegenwart* 2019, No. 49, p. 552. In his obituary for Manfred Plate Fr. Malek paid extensive tribute to his commitment to China, see *China heute* 2007, No. 3, pp. 75-77.





Bishop Xie Tingzhe of Urumqi in June 1994 visiting Sankt Augustin. Photo: China-Zentrum archives.

gustin, due to the conferences and lectures at the Monumenta Serica Institute and the China-Zentrum, arranged through Fr. Malek's great talent for organisation. Special mention should be made of the international conference on the occasion of the 400th birthday of the important Cologne China missionary Johann Adam Schall von Bell SJ (1592–1666) in 1992 and the conference on the history of the Jews in China in 1997.<sup>7</sup> In addition he enriched the cultural life on the campus of the Steyl Missionaries through various exhibitions which he inspired and planned in the ethnological museum Haus Völker und Kulturen (House of Peoples and Cultures), among them the exhibition “Die Gesichter Jesu in China” (“The Faces of Jesus in China”) in 2003, which was also exhibited in other European countries and which took up the theme of the book series *The Chinese Face of Jesus Christ* begun the previous year, showing the Chinese reception of Jesus in China throughout the epochs.<sup>8</sup> Several times Fr. Malek held Good Friday meditations with Chinese Passion pictures in the church of the missionary seminary.

Fr. Malek was an exceptionally productive author and publisher. Alongside numerous publications of his own, he published 20 volumes of the periodical *Monumenta Serica*, 75 volumes of the book series of the Institute, as well as 20 years of issues of *China heute* – his literature index comprised almost 1.000 entries. Apart from that he often gave talks, took part in conferences at home and abroad and was a guest lecturer at different universities in Germany, Poland and Austria. After his habilitation in Sinology in 2003 on the academic and convert Wu Leichuan,<sup>9</sup> he regularly gave courses at Bonn University. Several

7 See the conference volume published by Fr. Malek: *Western Learning and Christianity in China. The Contribution and Impact of Johann Adam Schall von Bell (1592–1666)*, Monumenta Serica Monograph Series XXXV/1-2, 2 Vols., Sankt Augustin – Nettetal: Steyler Verlag 1998; and also *From Kaifeng ... to Shanghai. Jews in China*, Monumenta Serica Monograph Series XLVI, Sankt Augustin – Nettetal: Steyler Verlag 2000.

8 This project comprises a total of six partial volumes (1, 2, 3a and 3b, 4a and 4b) that appeared between 2002 and 2019 as Vol. L of the Monumenta Serica Monograph Series.

9 *Verschmelzung der Horizonte: Mozi und Jesus. Zur Hermeneutik der chinesisch-christlichen Begegnung nach Wu Leichuan (1869–1944)*, Studies in Christian Mission 29, Leiden – Boston: Brill 2004.

trips took him to the People's Republic of China. The special topic of his research was the history of the Steyl Missionaries in China. In this field he published his own writings and initiated research projects of others. In the last period of his life Fr. Malek worked on a complete catalogue of all Steyl publications in China.

Fr. Malek did not see himself only as an academic, he was also a passionate pastor. For more than twenty years he cared for the Catholic community of the branch church St. Adelheid in Müllekoven, the smallest district of the city of Troisdorf. In addition he took on a great deal of pastoral help elsewhere. Apart from that he was very committed to the accompaniment of the Chinese theologians.

In April 2011 Fr. Malek suffered a serious stroke that affected him so severely that he had to retire from all his tasks. Well cared for by the Croatian Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul (Vinzentinerinnen) in the infirmary of the Mission Seminary in Sankt Augustin and in spite of his limitations, he continued to work on his book projects with great perseverance and discipline. Two sequel volumes of the series *The Chinese Face of Jesus Christ* still appeared in the publications of the Monumenta Serica Institute, in 2015 and 2019 respectively.<sup>10</sup> For his commitment to the Catholic Church in China, in 2016 Fr. Malek was awarded the prize “Heart without Frontiers” by the Polish Cardinal Adam Kozłowiecki Foundation. In that same year the Monumenta Serica Institute honoured him on his 65th birthday with the two-volume festschrift *Rooted in Hope: China – Religion – Christianity*.<sup>11</sup> The forty contributions from colleagues,



Fr. Malek on 7 October 2016, on the occasion of his 65th birthday. Photo: Monumenta Serica Institute.

friends, confreres and companions united in this extensive work bear witness to the esteem in which the jubilarian was held, as well as to the breadth of his professional interests.

In April 2018 Fr. Malek left the community of Sankt Augustin, to which he had belonged for so long, and went back to his native Poland where he spent the last one and a half years of his life in the Steyl Mission House in Górna Grupa. After a brief illness he died in the early morning of 29 November in the hospital in Grudziądz. On 2 December he was laid to rest in the SVD cemetery of Górna Grupa in the presence of numerous Polish confreres and a number of Chinese priests, sisters and seminarians.

10 *The Chinese Face of Jesus Christ*, Vol. 4a: Annotated Bibliography (with Maney Publishing, Leeds), and Vol. 4b: Supplementary Anthology, General Index, Addenda (with Taylor and Francis, Abingdon, Oxon).

11 Barbara Hoster – Dirk Kuhlmann – Zbigniew Wesolowski S.V.D. (eds.), *Rooted in Hope. Festschrift in Honor of Roman Malek S.V.D. on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday / In der Hoffnung verwurzelt. Festschrift für Roman Malek S.V.D. zu seinem 65. Geburtstag*, 2 Vols., Sankt Augustin – Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge 2017. Fr. Malek's literature list is on pages xliii–cviii.





Fr. Malek and Fr. Wesolowski with the French sinologist Françoise Aubin at the Monumenta Serica Institute in May 2013.  
Photo: Monumenta Serica Institute.

Fr. Malek was a strong personality, a convinced priest and a distinguished scholar who developed a wealth of activities and managed an enormous workload during the 68 years of his life. In view of his life's work, the French mongolist and sinologist Françoise Aubin (1932–2017), a frequent guest at the Monumenta Serica Institute, once speculated that Fr. Malek must have more than one life in order to be so extraordinarily productive. Nevertheless, he was far from being a pure “workaholic” – he loved conviviality, especially with good food and drink, had a great sense of humour and was full of joy and passion.



Fr. Malek on a visit to China in November 1990 during a conference in Xi'an, co-organized by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation. Photo: China-Zentrum archives.

“What you want to ignite in others must burn within you” – these words, attributed to his favourite author, Saint Augustine, characterise Fr. Malek very well. The numerous expressions of condolence which were received in the Monumenta Serica Institute and at the China-Zentrum after his death are an impressive proof of how many people Fr. Malek guided, influenced and inspired in many ways worldwide. May his soul, as he always wished, free from all earthly fetters, now roam freely over Chinese lands.

R.I.P.