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A Fresh Look at Francis Clet

Thomas Davitt, C.M.

It is factually accurate to state that Francis Clet was a confrere who was martyred in China, yet it can be misleading. This happens if emphasis is placed on the second element in the statement. Biographers and illustrators have tended to do this, trying to make his martyrdom illuminate the earlier part of his life. The emphasis should rightly be placed on the first element: Francis Clet was a confrere.

Vincent de Paul and Justin De Jacobis were canonised because they lived lives of heroic virtue. Francis Clet, John Gabriel Perboyre, and the martyred confreres of the French Revolution were beatified because they accepted death rather than compromise on their faith. This is something expected of every Christian in similar circumstances and it does not imply heroicity of virtue during the previous years. Francis Clet and the others were relatively ordinary confreres who happened to find themselves in historical circumstances where priests were being executed for fidelity to their vocation, and they showed that when the crunch came they had their priorities right. It is distortion of what they really were to try to make their eventual beatification mean more than it does.

Francis was born on August 19, 1748 in Grenoble, and was educated at the Royal College there.¹ This was a Jesuit college but during Francis' time there the Jesuits were sup-

*This article originally appeared in *Colloque* (Spring 1980 [2], 13-31), a Journal of the Irish Province of the Congregation of the Mission. The author has emended it for its publication here.

¹There was an older brother named François, who became a Carthusian. Our confrere was baptised François-Regis in honour of St. Jean-François Regis, who was much honored in the locality and was canonised only nine years previously.

pressed in France, in 1764, and the college was taken over by secular priests. At the age of twenty-one he entered the Congregation of the Mission in Lyons, in 1769; he had possibly spent a couple of years in a major seminary. He probably came into contact with the Congregation during a mission or retreat. He was ordained in 1773 and appointed to teach Moral Theology in Annecy; he spent fifteen years there, the final ones as Superior.

On November 6, 1787 Antoine Jacquier, the ninth Superior General, died. The sixteenth General Assembly opened in Saint Lazare on May 30, 1788. Francis was elected a delegate for the Lyons Province, and at forty was the youngest confrere present. Jean-Felix Cayla de la Garde was elected General; he was fifty-four years old, a native of Rodez, and had been Superior of the seminary there and of the one in Toulouse. The Assembly elected an Irishman, Edward Ferris, as Third Assistant; he was Superior of the seminary in Amiens.²

When the Assembly was over, the new General asked Francis to remain on in Paris as Director of the internal seminary (novitiate). The following year the Revolution started. In his Circular Letters in 1790 and 1791 Father Cayla gives some idea of the effect of it on the Congregation in Paris as well as news of Community activities elsewhere, including China. In 1773, nine years after they had been suppressed in France, Clement XIV ordered the total suppression of the Jesuits. Ten years later, by a decree of

²In the *Recueil des Principales Circulaires des Supérieurs Généraux de la Congrégation de la Mission*, vol. II p. 212, the election of Ferris is mentioned. On p. 203 he is not listed among the delegates, but this is clearly an editorial or printing error as the original *Acta* of the Assembly, in the archives of the General Curia in Rome, show that he was an elected delegate and was present at the Assembly from the start.

December 7, 1783, the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith handed over to the Congregation of the Mission all the missions in China which had previously been in Jesuit hands. The first Vincentian to go to China as a result of this was actually the thirteenth to go there, as there had already been four French, three Italian, three Chinese, one Portuguese and one German there. In February 1791, Father Cayla decided to send three more, two deacons who were students in Saint Lazare and a priest; as there was some doubt about the latter being ready in time for the sailing, Francis volunteered to go, and was accepted; he had previously volunteered unsuccessfully.

At this time there was an Irish confrere, Robert Hanna from Newry, in Macao, the Portuguese colony in China; he spent 1788 to 1794 teaching in the seminary there before going to Peking, where he became a member of the Mathematical Academy; he died there in 1797, aged thirty-five.³ While still in Macao he received a letter from the Procurator in Saint Lazare, Jean-Francois Daudet, with the following news:

Father Clet, who had been teaching theology with success for fourteen years, came here for the General Assembly; they got to know him well enough to appreciate his worth and made him Director of the seminaire (novitiate), and I think that in spite of the General's affection for you he would not let him go if there was any future for the Congregation here; he's got everyting you could ask for, holiness, learning, health and charm.⁴

³"Close application to study brought on an illness which developed into chest disease," Patrick Boyle CM: *Some Irish Vincentians in China*, Dublin 1918, p. 15.

⁴M. Demimuid: *Vie du Véné^εérable François-Régis Clét*, Paris 1893, p. 64.

On March 10, 1791 Francis wrote to his eldest sister, Marie-Therese; she was the eldest of the fifteen Clets, fifteen years older than Francis, who was tenth; she never married and survived all her siblings, dying a year after Francis, at the age of eighty-eight. After telling her he was off to China, he continued:

I've about ten days left to get to Lorient where I'm to board ship; it's doubtful if I'll be able to have a reply from you before I leave Paris, so lose no time in answering. As I'll be running a great many risks, and since I probably won't have the pleasure of seeing you, I think I should put my affairs in order in case my life should outlast yours; if you outlive me there's no problem as my will is made. But it's important to fix things up for any eventuality; I'm not handing you over complete control of all my possessions because, absolutely speaking, I could come back, and then, if you were dead, I'd have no claim. Besides, since ships leave for China every year, I'll be able to receive some money enabling me to make little gifts to facilitate conversions. So, my idea is to hand over to you ownership of my rights, apart from an annual allowance of 300 francs. It's not that I'm going to claim that amount each year, except perhaps after your death; I'd be quite happy to get 200, or even less if you couldn't afford that. You realise that by this arrangement you'll have to re-make your will, naming someone you think suitable as your heir; and if you continue to have, as no doubt you will, some kindly feelings towards me, you'll be able, on your own authority, to make me an allowance which will add something to what I hold on to for my rights. Let me know as soon as possible what you think of this, but I must tell you that, if I don't have your answer by the last day of my stay in Paris, I'll settle things as I have explained rather than leave your affairs and mine in a mess from which it will be very hard to escape later on.

You can easily imagine that a journey as long as the one I'm making calls for an exceptional sum of money. I need 1,000 francs, and Father Daudet, our Bursar, is willing

to advance me this sum on the understanding I gave him that you would repay him in a short time. I'm asking you to borrow this amount if you have no other way of meeting my request; but remember that if you repay Father Daudet by means of a bill of exchange drawn on some merchant, it will certainly be paid in *assignats* (Government promissory notes) on which 5½% or even more will be lost in converting them into cash; so he'll have to take this loss into account since it's not right that he should be at a loss in giving me necessary help. Anyway, to make up for this exceptional surcharge I'll have the notary include a statement that I won't have the right to ask for my allowance until three years after the drawing up of the agreement.[1]⁵

His sister got the letter in time, made the expected attempt to dissuade him, and received his answer, written the evening before his departure from Paris; he wrote:

I could, of course, be making a mistake, but at least I'm in good faith. If God doesn't bless my attempt, I'll cut my losses, admit I was wrong, and in future be more on my guard against the illusions of my imagination or vanity; the experience will teach me a bit of sense. [2]

On their way to Lorient the three made their final overnight stop at the seminary in Vannes, where Pierre-René Rogue was professor of dogma; he would be guillotined five years later. They sailed from Lorient in early April 1791.

Since the Propaganda decree of 1783 three French confreres and Robert Hanna had been sent from Paris, three

⁵Extracts from the letters of Bl. Clet will be identified by the number of the letter in *Lettres du Bienheureux François-Régis Clet*, edited by Brother Joseph van den Brandt, CM, Peking 1944. The number of the letter will be given in brackets after the extract.

Portuguese confreres had gone from their Province, and three Chinese had joined the Congregation; this meant that Francis and his two companions became numbers 25, 26 and 27 in the chronological list of Vincentians in China.⁶ The two deacons were Louis-François Lamiot and Augustin-Louis Pesné, and on arrival in Macao they were ordained priests. The former was appointed to Peking, and the latter, with Francis, to work in rural areas. Pesné died within four years.

Francis wrote his first letter to his sister on October 15, 1792 to let her know he had arrived at his final destination, in Kiang-si:

At the moment I'm living in a house which is rather large but totally dilapidated; they're going to start repairing it at once, and as it's wooden it won't be unhealthy in the winter, which, anyway, isn't very bad in these parts. A new life is starting for me, re-awakening religion in former Christians who have been left to themselves for several years, and also converting pagans; that, I hope, will be my work till death. [5].

Kiang-si was one of the most populous and fertile regions, yet its Catholic community was one of the poorest and most neglected; when Francis arrived they had last seen a priest in 1787, a Chinese Jesuit. Francis was the only European in a large area and felt the isolation very much. A year later he was changed to Hou-Kouang and appointed local Superior for a scattered group of confreres.

⁶Van den Brandt: *Les Lazaristes en Chine*, Peking 1936.

The language was a big problem for a man of forty-four.⁷
In 1798 he wrote to his brother a Carthusian:

The Chinese language is hopeless. The characters which make it up don't represent sounds, but ideas; this means that there's a huge number of them. I was too old on coming to China to get a good working knowledge of them.... I know barely enough for ordinary daily living, for hearing confessions and for giving some advice to Christians.
[12]

Two years later he was repeating the same sort of thing, but added:

It's much better for them to have me, ignorant and all as I am, than to have no priest....[16]

He never mastered the written language at all, and even eighteen years after his arrival this still caused difficulties; he had to write to a Chinese confrere, Paul Song:

I have to write to you in Latin because you misunderstand the words of my letter written in French....
[38]

That is jumping ahead, and getting away from the 1798 letter to his brother which begins:

My very dear brother,

It's now seven years since I sailed from the waters of our unfortunate country to go to China, where I arrived safely after a six-month voyage; the first family news I got was a very short letter from you from Rome, dated December 25, 1796. It referred to two earlier longer ones,

⁷John Gabriel Perboyre wrote in 1835: "I'm told Father Clet spoke it only with great difficulty": *Lettres du Bienheureux Jean-Gabriel Perboyre*, edited by van den Brandt, Peking 1940, p. 119.

but they never reached me. This letter, short and all as it was, was a great relief to me because it let me know that at least up to a certain date none of my brothers or sisters had been a victim of the Revolution.

He expresses his views on the Revolution later:

It's better to be in China than in France; our pagans don't go in for anything like the atrocities of your anti-religious people, who prove the truth of *corruptio optimi pessima*....

The letter also has his views on the missionary scene:

Conversions of pagans are rare here; they see the scandal of some bad Christians and they refuse to be instructed in a religion so badly lived-up to by those who profess it; they see only the bad and shut their eyes to the vast majority who live lives in keeping with the Gospel. Anyway, the number of missionaries is too small....

At first I worked for a year in Kiang-si where, among other things, I baptised something over a hundred adults who were reasonably well instructed. I could have baptised a far greater number, who were strongly urging me to grant them this favor, but they didn't seem well enough prepared, and we've noticed that catechumens who are baptised too easily apostatise equally easily....

Since I haven't got the spirit of prayer I don't draw down the blessings of Heaven on my pastoral work. Having only a mediocre interior life my pastoral work does not rise above that level....My being transplanted to a country and climate so different from ours hasn't affected my health in any way; our food is almost the same as in Europe, apart from wine which is too scarce to drink; the little we have is kept for Mass. We eat wheaten bread, unless we go for rice which is the usual food for the Chinese; we have fowl, pork and vegetables. [12]

A little over a year later he has another letter to the same brother, mentioning that letters are still not getting through to China; he also has further comments on the Revolution and his health:

We have some lax Christians but, thank God, we've neither philosophers nor female theologians....Our ears are never assaulted with blasphemies, nor the word 'liberty'. All things considered, there are more Christians in China than in France....My health is keeping up; since I got here I've been sick several times, but nothing really serious. I'm slim now instead of fat, so it's now easier for me to go across mountains. I make all my trips on foot as I find it less tiring than on horseback....[15]

In 1802 he is still worrying about his family and how it was faring:

My very dear brother,

During 1801 I received your letter of May 2, 1799; I've no way of knowing if you got mine; this is the third time I've taken pen in hand to pass on some news of myself and to ask for some news from you. I received only two letters from you, both very short, which pre-supposed other longer ones which, apparently, had family news in detail. I wrote also to the eldest sister but heard nothing from her; maybe she didn't get mine either. However that may be, your letter was extremely welcome as it let me know that in the midst of that universal upheaval none of the family had met a violent death, something I had been very much afraid of....

He then goes on to speak of his own life:

For more than fifteen years there has been no religious persecution of any sort, although we can't preach publicly because the Emperor allows missionaries only in the capital and not down the country; we slip secretly into those areas. Our ministry has to be secret and

undercover as a result; if we were to decide to preach openly, we'd probably be arrested and deported back to our own country.

He adds, though, that his pagan neighbors know he is a European and a priest; they have seen him publicly officiate at funerals, in vestments. None of them say anything about this to the authorities, so he can add:

I see no gleam of hope for martyrdom; anyway, I've no trouble in convincing myself that I don't deserve it. All the same, our life is not without danger as, over the past six years, large numbers of Chinese have rebelled against the government.[16]

After 1802 we have no more letters to his brother. Most of the other surviving letters were written to Paul Song, the Chinese confrere already mentioned; he was born in 1774 and ordained in 1803, and appointed to work with Francis. On his arrival at the residence for the first time he found that Francis was away but had left a letter for him:

Reverend and dear confrere,

The grace of our Lord be ever with us!

What a pleasant surprise for me to hear of your arrival in our mountains! I don't congratulate you on your arrival since, by leaving the capital and therefore dear Father Ghislain, you lose more than you gain; nothing can make up for being away from him. However, I congratulate myself on getting a dedicated fellow-worker who will help me to cultivate the Lord's vineyard. What increases my joy and my trust is that you came without any sinister prejudice against the European with whom you have to live; because of this I'm confident there'll be complete understanding between us, understanding which will underlie all our plans for the glory of God. If at any time I was to become prejudiced against you, or you against me, from that moment on no more good could be achieved *quia*

Deus non est Deus dissensionis sed pacis. I'm telling you this because I must warn you that you need a certain amount of patience to live with me; I suggest you prepare for this while I'm away. The fact that I'm absent means that I can't for the moment discuss with you the work you'll be doing when the summer heat is over; I won't let you start work until the autumn. Have a chat with dear Father Tchang; I rely more on his prudence than I do on myself. Be on your guard against indiscreet zeal, wanting to get everything done at once; this ruins a missionary's health and forces him to take time off for convalescence, during which the enemy rushes in to sow cockle in the field.

Since I left Father Tchang our Apostolic Administrator has renewed my faculties, so now in his name I renew yours in accordance with the document I'm sending Father Tchang; he'll pass it on to you to copy out for yourself so that you can act accordingly. He'll also show you the previous Pastoral Letter to which the Administrator refers.

I expect you got my letter answering the one you sent me some months ago. I didn't expect to have the pleasure of speaking to you face to face at that time and now that pleasure, for God's good reasons, has been put off for some more months. Looking forward to that time I assure you of the deep respect and friendship with which I am, reverend and dear confrere,

Your very humble and obedient servant,
Clet, i.s. C.M., [17]

Francis' warning to Song about his health must have been necessary because two years later he wrote:

I hear your health is getting worse; you keep denying this but no one believes you. [21]

Francis wrote to him later on:

A retreat, even a short one, renews our spiritual strength which continuous ministry weakens little by little. [35]

Paul Song was not too good at being present at such Community functions:

I presume you're back at the house; if you're still out on your rounds, I hope that as soon as you get my letter you'll do what I strongly recommend, or even order; go back to the house and stay there doing no work until at least the Assumption, or even later if the heat is still as bad as at present. [23]

In one letter Francis told him that a French confrere, Lazare-Marius Dumazel, had just arrived and was hoping to see Song

...at the residence where we are all planning to meet during the period of the great heat. Father Chen is back; Father Ho will be back from Fang-Hien in ten days at the most; I'll be back after visiting Chang-pe-yu-Keou. You'd certainly add to our joy if you could bring our community up to five. [48]

This had no effect, so Francis has to write again:

In a few days we'll be four at the house, all of whom send you friendly greetings and want you to come back, and are sad that your poor health prevents your speedy return. [49]

The arrival of Dumazel was the occasion of an unfortunate incident with Song; he had first heard about it on the grapevine, and took a poor view of this; Francis had to placate him:

It would have been the right thing for me to have made your heart happy by passing on the very welcome news of our dear Father Dumazel's arrival; however, lack of opportunity, the hope of your early return, and a certain amount of laziness all combined to keep me silent on the matter. [48]

Dumazel's arrival was also the occasion for Francis to raise something else, not for the first time. He never wanted to be the local Superior and always hoped another Frenchman would arrive to take over from him; almost every time he wrote to Peking he put in a plea to get off the job, and he also used to refer to the matter in letters to Song:

Normally when I'm away act as Superior in all matters;
everyone knows I'm unfit for the responsibility.[23]

or:

I've a great dislike of being Superior, but they forced
me to accept, in spite of my obvious unsuitability. [33]

In spite of these, and many similar statements, he seems to have been well capable of carrying out his duties.

Another source of trouble with Song was that he tended to be scrupulous, going back over parts of his breviary if he felt he had let his attention wander. In a letter of November 19, 1807 Francis explained, like the ex-professor of moral theology that he was, all about grades of attention, ending up this way:

Therefore I order you to say your breviary and other
prayers in a common-sense way, never going back over them,
provided you prepared yourself for these actions by a
moment of recollection in the presence of God. [29]

All these various frictions between himself and his Superior caused Song to ask for a change of appointment, back to Peking. Francis, of course, learnt of this request, and wrote to him:

You want to go back to the capital, and you'll probably
get your way next year. If this departure is for God's glory

and your spiritual good, I congratulate you and am glad of it *in Domino*. By leaving you lose nothing and gain much. I'm the only one who loses by our parting.... [33]

In the letter he admits that he also would like a change of appointment:

For eight years now I've wanted to be relieved of the pastoral burden and get into student formation; I've always found the ministry of the confessional a crushing load. I've written to Fathers Raux and Ghislain about this and they promised to appoint me to a house some distance from Peking where I'd be given charge of the young students, but I've almost given up hope of this; blessed be God! Obedience is better than any sacrifice. Hearing confessions is my cross; perhaps God wants me to carry it till death; may His Will be done. [33]

Neither of them got their hoped-for changes, and two letters of the following year, 1808, show that things remained very much the same between them:

It's important, and justice demands it, that I quickly put you right about a wrong meaning you took from a sentence in Father Lamiot's letter which you didn't understand. Read over again carefully the bit in question and you'll see that it doesn't refer to Paul Song but to a young man from Han-keou called Francois Lieóu; I sent him to Peking about four years ago as a student for our Congregation; he was dismissed for laziness, lack of application and want of steadiness. When Father Lamiot saw he was no good at study he tried him working with his hands, *verbi gratia* at watchmaking and printing, but since he showed a similar lack of interest he was put out digging. So, re-read it and join me in a good laugh at your mistake. How could you have thought I'd be so stupid as to give you a letter to read which contained complaints about yourself? [34]

Towards the end of the year Francis had to remind him that real spirituality isn't scrupulous. [35]

The arrival of Dumazel, referred to already out of chronological sequence, was in 1810; he had been expected for some time. Early that year Francis had nearly died, as he told Father Ghislain in Peking in a letter:

There was very nearly question of my being unable to have any further communication with you except in Heaven. The day after the Epiphany I was attacked by a chan-han-ping, a sort of pleurisy, I think, which in a couple of days reduced me to such a state that the doctors feared for my life. A fierce sweat came on so conveniently to help them that when Father Ho arrived—I had sent for him to give me the Last Sacraments—he found me out of danger. At the height of my illness I was thinking of Father Dumazel and saying to myself: I'll never see this new, dear comfrere....[47]

That led on, naturally enough, to raising once again the matter of being relieved of the superiorship:

I'm asking you to remember what you and Father Raux promised me several times, that the arrival of a European would mean that I'd get off being Superior, an appointment I never agreed with; you know I was given this job only because of the need to make do with what was available. [47]

Later in the year he returned to the same theme, after Dumazel had safely arrived:

I can now die happy since I have a successor who can repair my stupid mistakes and I seriously urge you to make him my replacement pure and simple; what I mean is that you appoint him Superior instead of me. I've never had the knack of getting myself either loved or feared; I'm tired of being in charge....[50]

In a letter of 3 May 1810 he expresses an opinion of Dumazel which probably would have militated against his appointment:

He's much more in need of a bridle than spurs; he always wants to go at full gallop; if you stop him he gets into bad form and easily gives in to depression. [47]

Paul Song was still a bit of a problem. Back in 1805 Francis had written:

Your letter gave me both joy and sorrow; joy that your health is good, sorrow that your return is further postponed, till the sixth moon. Actually eight months have passed since you set out for Ho-nan where you were to hear four hundred confessions; now obviously eight months are not needed for four hundred confessions, so, seeing that you were slow about returning, I was afraid that you had caught some illness. Now be quite sure I am not accusing you of laziness....[19]

Now, five years later, he has to touch on the same point:

I'll tell you in a whisper that everyone here is very surprised at your long absence; I cover up for you by saying your health isn't good....I readily give you the benefit of the doubt that you've done all you could and all you should, since I know how delicate your conscience is....[51]

Song complained to Father Ghislain in Peking about Francis, which was the occasion of the following from Francis:

Father Ghislain complains very strongly in a letter he wrote to me that I give my confreres more work than they can handle, so much in fact that even the strongest constitutions are ruined, and that I never allow them to have a break. I'm not annoyed that people complain about me to Superiors; I only wish they'd make such strong complaints

that my Superiors would be forced to relieve me of a weight or burden which I can't carry. Anyway, making an examination of conscience, I find that I've never had the intention of ruining confreres' health by work beyond their capacities. Therefore, I urge you to take care of your health because I've always said that it's better to live for the glory of God than to die for it, and also for the work of our Congregation, of which you are a member; this is especially so in China where priests are scarce. [55]

The year of that letter, 1811, was a very significant one for two reasons: Paul Song finally got over his prejudices and suspicions of Francis and became a great admirer of his: there must have been something of that there all the time, because he kept all the letters he received from him. The second important happening in 1811 was that anti-Christian persecution again broke out. A Chinese priest was arrested for something or other; unfortunately, he was carrying documents which marked out the territorial divisions of ecclesiastical administration, which the authorities interpreted as plans for a Christian take-over of the civil administration; as a result, priests were expelled and churches burnt. To avoid such misinterpretation again Francis wrote his letters in allegorical form:

Business in Babylon is precarious. The shop in the west is closed; the assistants sold everything and left of their own accord. The shop in the east and the one in the south have also sold everything and the assistants are ready to leave at the first sign. In the northern shop it's still business as usual. [55]

This was his way of letting Song know about the four churches of Peking. In the same year he used the same allegorical form to Father Richenet in Canton when talking about China; about France he was more explicit:

Bonaparte's carry-on proves more and more that his religion is in proportion to his politics; but at least he's less of a hypocrite than Charles V who, after imprisoning the Pope, had prayers for his delivery said throughout the land.[52]

For the years 1812-1820 we have far less information about Francis than for the earlier years. In April 1813 he sent a long Latin letter to each member of his scattered Community. He starts by calling for unity among themselves as a Community, and for the avoidance of the sort of dissensions which occurred in the early church in Corinth, where Paul, Cephas, and Apollo all had their fans; he continued:

While I'm still alive and before fast-approaching death snatches me away to appear before the awesome Judge Who will demand an account of my stewardship, it seems a good idea to pass on some advice to my confreres, whose care has been entrusted to me in spite of my unsuitability and reluctance....

He then outlines various areas where confreres should have a uniform approach in their ministry. Every Sunday and feastday each one who was celebrating a public Mass should read out a specified section of the Chinese catechism, clearly, distinctly and slowly; to avoid tired knees the people are to be allowed to stand during this. The reading is to be from the old catechism and not the new one which leaves out many things. Then come points about drunkenness at weddings; Christians can't excuse themselves by saying that this is a Chinese custom; Christ said "I am the truth," not "I am the custom." Towards the end of the letter he says:

But all these rules, and any which may be added later, will be of little or no good if we don't take care that our people see us as true "stewards entrusted with the mysteries of

God," so that each of us can say with St. Paul: "Be imitators of me as I am of Christ." We should remember these words: "Whose friend is he, that is his own enemy?"⁸ We have to avoid being misled by indiscreet zeal and letting all our time be taken up with our pastoral ministry to others. We should follow in the footsteps of the Apostles who said: "We will continue to devote ourselves to prayer and the service of the word." [59]

In the earlier part of the letter he had made reference to approaching death; he was 65 that year. Two years later, on December 28, 1815, he wrote to Paul Song:

I had the idea of going over to see you next Spring, staying for a few days rest, and then returning to our house, but Father Dumazel says I'm too old and too much needed here to take on such a journey. [60]

In 1818 some sort of a sore developed on one of his ankles and kept him inactive for months. It must have cleared up, though, as he suddenly had to do a lot of travelling, as he told Lamiot in a letter:

Our first cross is the death of Father Dumazel in Changtsin-hien; in his last moments he was assisted by Father Song....Our second cross is the capture of Father Chen. He was sold by a new Judas for 20,000 pence to some civil guards and other wretches, of which China is so full, called Houo-hoei. He was taken to Kou-tching and sent from there to Ou-tchang-fou with fifteen or eighteen Christians who were arrested at more or less the same time; his fate hasn't yet been decided. This persecution we're going through started in the first few days of the first moon this year in this way: A pagan, known everywhere as a bad lot, made a charge against me eight years ago, and all he achieved was to get himself twenty lashes. This year he

⁸Ecclesiasticus 14:5, Knox translation.

had a more successful idea. He set fire to his house and put the blame on two families, saying I had put them up to it. He accused even Fathers Ho and Ngay; the latter, without saying a word, took off to Chang-tsin-hien. This ridiculous slander was believed in Court. The capture of Father Chen a few days later made things worse.

Then come details of Francis "going on the run" with a price on his head, staying short spells in safe hiding places and having some providential escapes; Father Ho was with him. He eventually got to Ho-nan, from where he wrote the letter; it ends this way:

While waiting for a chance to get back to our Kou-tching mountains, I'll look after the administration of Ho-nan. My health is keeping up in spite of our setbacks and my more than seventy years. I want none of this world's goods, apart from a decent watch; only one of the ones you sent two years ago was any good. The others began by gaining an hour every day, and later two hours; then they all contracted a recurrent fever which led to their deaths; so, if you've anything in the line of a decent watch I'd like you to send it along, and some money after it....[63]

He was eventually caught on Trinity Sunday, June 16, 1819; he was betrayed by a schoolmaster, the one who had betrayed Father Chen the previous year. This man was a Catholic who led a scandalous life and who had been warned severely by Francis about his conduct, which made him a bitter enemy of priests. The following year he wrote to a priest in Macao:

My capture was due to the imprudence of a family who used always assure me, while I was staying with them, that I had nothing to fear.[67]

In the middle of July he was transferred to Ou-tchang-fou, the capital of the province where he had spent most of his time; the journey was about 320 miles and took twenty days; he was handcuffed, wearing neck and foot chains.

Around the same time several Catholic families were arrested, and so was Lamiot in Peking. Francis got the idea that he was indirectly responsible for these arrests; he was convinced that subtle questioning by his judges had elicited information from him which led to the arrests. In his letters of this period he mentions that he was guilty of this and, therefore, was being justly punished. On December 28, 1819 he wrote to Richenet:

The Mandarin's idea was to send me to a jail where I'd be the only Christian and where perhaps I'd die through want of help; I was very weak after my stay in Ho-nan jails and my long journey and a kind Providence arranged it that my jailers wouldn't accept me. I was in a very bad way, very thin, with a long beard crawling with lice, a rather dirty shirt over a similar pair of pants, all of which indicated a man without money. Because of their refusal, I had to be taken to another jail nearby where I had the pleasure of meeting Father Chen and ten good Christians, all in the one room. We have morning and evening prayer in common, and can even celebrate feastdays; no one bothers us, neither the jailers nor the crowd of pagan prisoners who occupy other rooms all around a large open yard; we are free to roam around this from morning till evening. When I saw all this, I must admit that I couldn't help weeping with joy, consoled by the fatherly care God has for his undeserving servant and his faithful children; if it weren't for me they couldn't get absolution. We all went to confession, and Father Tchang, who maintains an underground ministry to the Christian communities round about this town, celebrated Mass in a nearby house and brought Communion to us all, without our fellow-prisoners noticing....

Father Lamiot's safety was endangered by me. He has arrived here and it seems his case will have a happy ending.

Mine, though, is almost over; I've just been told I'll be executed shortly, perhaps tomorrow. Make sure you don't think of me as a martyr; my imprudence jeopardised both our house in Peking and some Christian communities who are now being persecuted, so I can be thought of only as someone who murdered several souls, who is guilty of want of respect towards God, and who is getting only what he deserves. [65]

He also mentions in this letter that he has only just heard of the official legal re-establishment of the Congregation in France, where it had been suppressed at the Revolution.

As a matter of fact Francis was not responsible for Lamiot's arrest; he was arrested because letters found in the confreres' house in Hou-kouang had his signature; at that time he was the only other French confrere in China. He was found not guilty of any charge and released; he died in Macao eleven years later. Francis and Chen were found guilty on January 1, 1820; in the case of Francis, his crime was clearly spelt out: he had deceived and corrupted Chinese people by preaching Christianity to them. His sentence was strangulation on a gibbet; as this had to be confirmed by the Emperor, there was an interval of seven weeks between sentence and execution.

This was a rather interesting period in his life. The prison was one of detention, not punishment. The big wooden board around his neck, and the handcuffs and chains, shown in many drawings of him, were features only of his appearances in Court and were described by him as his ornaments, which he did not wear in prison. The kneeling on chains, mentioned as part of his sufferings, seems to have been confined to his short spell in Ho-nan jail. In the letter to Richenet already quoted he explained the different treatment he had received:

In Ho-nan the mandarins who dealt with me were rather cruel, but the ones here are very kind; they are considerate towards us and invite us to sit down when the Court hearings are too prolonged; on three occasions they got us dinner when they heard we hadn't eaten, and once they asked if it was a day of abstinence, and when we said "no" they got us meat.[65]

He also used the freedom of the prison regime to write a letter to the French newspapers, contrasting Chinese and French jails; it is rather long but some of it is worth quoting:

As I often heard in France of dungeons and gloomy cells where prisoners are locked up until the end of their trial, I feel obliged to give you a brief description of Chinese prisons, if only to make Christians blush at being less human than the Chinese towards the unfortunate victims of human vengeance, sad prelude to the Divine vengeance from which so little is done to save them. I can speak from experience since in being transferred from Ho-nan to Ouchang-fou I passed through twenty-seven jails. Now, nowhere are there dungeons or gloomy cells. In the jail I am in at the moment there are murderers, robbers, thieves; from dawn till dusk they all enjoy the freedom to walk about, to play in a huge yard, and breathe the fresh air so necessary for health. I saw a man who had committed the horrible crime of poisoning his mother, and he had the freedom of that yard till the day of his execution... This yard is swept every day and kept very clean...the inside of the building is like a long hall. This huge room is lit by a big door with a window each side; the door is locked only at night. The prisoners sleep side by side on planks, which are raised a foot above the floor to avoid the damp. When it begins to get cold in winter each prisoner is given a straw mat to keep out the cold, and when it gets hotter in summer they are given fans to counteract the heat....

I must not forget to mention that Chinese kindness goes so far as to give the prisoners lots of tea or cool drinks in hot weather, and in winter padded clothing for the worst-

off. In France they preach about kindness to prisoners; the so-called philosophers, motivated rather by the chance of insulting our holy religion than by charity, raise their voices to rant against the severity, not to say the inhumanity, shown to prisoners; I raise my dying voice to praise the pagans above the Christians. Preachers in Christian pulpits ask the faithful to show charity to prisoners; I ask Christianity, the goodness of our rulers, the care of our judges, to look at the huge number of wretches who die thousands and thousands of times before they actually give up their lives in their final suffering. The help which good people give to prisoners is only for a moment; it is up to the civil authorities, who have a duty in the matter, to better their lot so that with patience and resignation they can face their approaching execution; this is a punishment which gives them an opportunity of satisfying divine justice and gives them the right to the eternal happiness promised to repentant sinners.... [65]

The prisoners had access to cooks to prepare their own meals, and Francis and Chen employed a messenger to do their shopping for them; neighboring Christians also sent in food, mainly meat, fish and fruit.

The letter was sent to a confrere in Paris with instructions to obtain the Superior General's permission to send it to the papers, with the author's name suppressed; the covering letter had this postscript:

Today January 26, I am still alive. Yesterday, the feast of the Conversion of St. Paul, a day to be remembered for the foundation of our Congregation, Father Chen and I received Communion from Father Tchang, and we had a feastday dinner at mid-day, three priests and six laymen; two were prisoners and four visitors. The only one missing was Father Lamiot, who paid for the meal.[65]

In these weeks before his sentence was confirmed, Francis found himself in a rather unexpected role,

considering his circumstances. Lamiot asked him to mediate in a dispute which had arisen between the French and Portuguese confreres in Peking. It would appear that Lamiot himself was in fact the person at fault; he was being too French in some matters, and also was trying to rush things. Several letters were exchanged between Francis and the Portuguese, and then Francis wrote to Lamiot, telling him off in a quiet way; he reminded him that Adrien Bourdoise was too impetuous while Vincent de Paul took things more quietly; Bourdoise called Vincent a wet hen, but Francis reminded Lamiot that Vincent's methods produced better results than those of Bourdoise.[74]. The very last letter Francis wrote was to Lamiot, winding up this matter:

Father and very dear Superior,

Rightly or wrongly I consider I have done the job you gave me; all that's now left is to prepare for dying, which attracts me more than living on. I must admit I think I'm better off than you; here I am not far from harbor, I hope, while you are still out on the open sea. But have confidence; the storms which will toss you about will drive you towards the harbor while they send lots of others down to the bottom of the sea. Anyway, alive or dead, you can be sure I'll never forget you; do the same for me.

One thing that still bothers me is the business about the three Christian communities of Ho-nan whom I injured both spiritually and temporally by my imprudent admissions before the mandarin. To ease my conscience I'm very anxious that they should be helped spiritually and temporally in the future. The three areas are Sse-tchouang, Kio-chang and Lou-y-hien.

This is perhaps my last sign of life to you.

Clet

P.S. Should I burn the notes you sent me, or return them to you?[75]

On the morning of February 18, 1820 he was informed that the Emperor had confirmed his sentence; he received absolution from Chen and was taken out and strangled.

Zeal consists in a pure love of rendering oneself pleasing to God and useful to our neighbor: zeal to extend the empire of God, zeal to procure the salvation of our neighbor. Is there anything in the world more perfect? If the love of God is a fire, zeal is its flame; if love is a sun, zeal is its rays.

St. Vincent de Paul



The way by which God wants you to go to Him is the royal road of the Cross. I have no doubt that you will allow yourself to be led very cheerfully and willingly through the accomplishment of His holy Will.

St. Louise de Marillac



Communicate freely with one another, tell each other everything. There is nothing more necessary. It unites hearts, and God gives His blessing to the asking of counsel so that things go better for it. What is insupportable is when one acts independently and says nothing about it.

St. Vincent de Paul