


1-2001

"To the Extremes of Love" Francis Regis Clet (1748-1820): Priest of the Congregation of the Mission, Martyr in China

Jean-Yves Ducourneau C.M.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/vincentiana>

 Part of the [Catholic Studies Commons](#), [Comparative Methodologies and Theories Commons](#), [History of Christianity Commons](#), [Liturgy and Worship Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ducourneau, Jean-Yves C.M. (2001) ""To the Extremes of Love" Francis Regis Clet (1748-1820): Priest of the Congregation of the Mission, Martyr in China," *Vincentiana*: Vol. 45 : No. 1 , Article 7.
Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/vincentiana/vol45/iss1/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Vincentian Journals and Publications at Via Sapiientiae. It has been accepted for inclusion in Vincentiana by an authorized editor of Via Sapiientiae. For more information, please contact digitalservices@depaul.edu.

“To the extremes of Love”
FRANCIS REGIS CLET (1748-1820)
Priest of the Congregation of the Mission, Martyr in China

By Jean-Yves Ducourneau, C.M.
Province of Toulouse

Discovering love

1) His childhood

Grenoble, called “the rebellious,”¹ numbered about 30,000 inhabitants in 1748. The Clet family lived at 14, rue Porte Traine,² near the workshop of a cloth merchant who employed the father. Césaire Clet had married Claudine Bourquy, his employer’s daughter. They had fifteen children,³ of whom Francis Regis was the tenth, born 19 August 1748.

In his time, the people of the region still recalled the apostolic zeal of St. Francis Regis in the struggle against Protestantism. He died at his post and, by a charming coincidence, was canonized at the same time as Vincent de Paul, in 1737. The Clet family, all convinced Catholics, honored this missionary by bestowing his name on their son. As we know, he remained faithful to his patron’s name and zeal until his martyrdom. Young Francis Regis was baptized soon after his birth, at the church of St. Louis in Grenoble.

The boy’s childhood developed peacefully in Grenoble. He studied at the Royal College (run by diocesan clergy). He was then educated by the Oratorians (certainly at the minor seminary of St. Martin of Miséré, near Grenoble.) During these years, he was a brilliant student, all of whose good qualities would also be recognized in later years.

2) The yearnings of his heart

¹ Grenoble, in the Dauphiné, was one of the first French cities to light the fires of the French Revolution, beginning in July 1788, when it called for the convocation of the Estates General. In addition, Grenoble would be the first large city to open its gates to Napoleon I after his return from the island of Elba for his Hundred Days. For this, it would be severely punished during the restoration of the Bourbon monarchs.

² Today, Grande Rue.

³ See the appendix for the list of the brothers and sisters of Francis Regis

God knocked at the heart of the young man. His family was already accustomed to such calls, since one of the boys (Francis) was a Carthusian, and one of the daughters (Anne Constance) was a Carmelite. Francis Regis experienced a call to the priestly vocation. In the dioceses of France, it was customary to come to listen to missionaries and to erect “Calvaries,” crosses set up as a memorial of the mission and as Stations of the Cross. And so, with his family, Francis Regis listened to the long sermons of these men inflamed with the Gospel who were speaking long and loud about God’s goodness and mercy, as well as about the distant missions that were attracting young men. The Vincentians had already made inroads into the Grenoble region and were not unknown. Francis Regis was attracted by this congregation founded by St. Vincent de Paul. Besides, he had already had some experience of diocesan and Oratorian clergy. He might have entered the Augustinians, as his cousin did. Instead, he chose to knock at the door of the Congregation of the Mission.

On 6 March 1769, Francis Regis entered the novitiate of the Congregation at Lyons. The Vincentian house there, founded in 1669, was in Fourvière, a district shared by several other communities. On 18 March 1771, in this same house, he was admitted to profess simple vows in the presence of the local superior, Fr. Audiffred. The following year, he received minor orders (4 April), subdiaconate (13 June), and finally the diaconate (19 December). The 27th of March 1773 was a great day for Francis Regis. He received from the hands of Bishop Bron, Auxiliary and Vicar General of the Archbishop of Lyons, his priestly ordination in the chapel of the seminary of St. Charles. Some days later, he joyfully celebrated one of his first masses in the Marian shrine of Our Lady of Valfleury, near the city of Saint Etienne.⁴

On his return to Lyons, he learned that he had been appointed professor of Moral Theology at the major seminary of Annecy.⁵ This man, respectfully known in the diocese as a “walking library,” was henceforth to dedicate himself fully to this mission of priestly formation, despite his youth.

3) A well-deserved reputation

In the Diocese of Annecy, the young professor performed marvels. Bishop Biord appreciated him greatly. For this reason, he was chosen as the new superior of the seminary. With competence and self-denial, he settled into this

⁴ The Vincentians were present here beginning in 1687, and it is, in fact their oldest continuing house in France. A royal ordinance of 1711 confirmed their presence in this shrine, which they conduct even today.

⁵ The Vincentians were called to this “diocese of saints,” as Saint Vincent called it, beginning in 1638. After giving several missions, they established a place here for the retreats for ordinands. Afterwards, in 1642, this would become the major seminary. This seminary was the first established outside of Paris. In the time of Francis Regis, the theology studies lasted three years. The seminary no longer exists, but the building now houses the city library.

heavy responsibility. This was mixed with sorrows, since his father died on 15 July 1783 and four years later, he lost his mother. Between these two deaths, Bishop Biord returned to the Father, on 14 March 1785 and the diocesan clergy invited Francis Regis to pronounce the funeral discourse. The new ordinary, Bishop Paget, would show this Vincentian priest the same confidence that his predecessor had.

A great loss struck the Congregation of the Mission, too. Its Superior General, Fr. Jacquier,⁶ died in 1787 and a general assembly was convoked in Paris for the month of May to elect a successor. Each province of the Congregation had to elect delegates during a provincial assembly that brought together the superiors of each house. The house of Annecy was part of the Province of Lyons. Although not a delegate to the Provincial Assembly, Francis Regis was chosen to represent the province in Paris. At age 40, he was its youngest member. Fr. Cayla de la Garde was elected Superior General in June 1788.

As many of his confreres did, the new Superior General recognized the value of the superior of the Annecy seminary. Consequently, he named Francis Regis director of the internal seminary (novitiate) of the Congregation. He had already been fifteen years in the diocese whose bishop had been St. Francis de Sales, and now he found himself in the very heart of the Congregation of the Mission, which owed much to the spirituality of this saint from Savoy.

A short while after his appointment, the climate in Paris grew worse. The harvests were bad and prices were rising. Great poverty appeared and people began to cry out. The revolt even reached the provinces. In Paris, the events of 1789 shook the established powers. Everything that they touched, near and far, particularly the Church, would suffer during this difficult period that history calls the French Revolution. And so, on 13 July 1789, the gates of the Motherhouse, St. Lazare, were breached, and the house fell victim to bands of looters. For 15 long hours they destroyed everything in their terrible path, including the venerable room of St. Vincent. The priests and brothers had to flee, some half naked, to avoid the pillage. Practically nothing was left after the destruction — not books (some 50,000 volumes), not furniture, not even the garden and the sheep. The next day and in the days to follow, the confreres returned to put things in order, and Francis Regis unhesitatingly began again the formation of the young novices. The Superior General, too, returned to those terrible walls. As a deputy of the clergy of Paris in the National Assembly, he was in no doubt about the future of the Church in France. On the other hand, he was happy to read news about his confreres that came from far-off China.⁷ He wanted to send some other missionaries there, and Francis Regis presented himself as a volunteer.

⁶ During his generalate, a decree from the Sacred Congregation of the Propagation of the Faith (1783) substituted the Vincentians for the French Jesuits in the China missions. In 1784, three Vincentians were sent there on mission.

⁷ After this first departure, three other Vincentians left in 1788, and in 1791 there was a third departure.

Treading the paths of love

1) The call from afar

In February of 1791, three missionaries were supposed to leave for China. They were Frs. Lamiot and Pesné⁸, accompanied by another priest, but he was momentarily kept behind in the country. No one thought about Fr. Clet. But the time was approaching, and they had to do something since the ship could not wait beyond 15 March. Francis Regis insisted on replacing the absent priest and the Superior General agreed. Since it was then impossible to bid farewell to his family, he wrote a long letter to his eldest sister, Marie-Thérèse: *“At last my prayers have been answered.... Providence has destined me to work for the salvation of the infidels.... You will realize that I appreciate so greatly the merit of this favor from God that I can only agree with it perfectly. In a word, I am leaving shortly for China with two of my confreres, who are also as delighted as I am with our fortunate destination.”*⁹ His family kept hoping that he would change his mind, but just before leaving for the town of Lorient where he had to board ship, Francis Regis answered unflinchingly: *“I had already made my choice before writing you, and I was prepared for the assaults that your tenderness and sympathy would bring against me.... I am not sorry in the least for having acted in this way ... but I believe that in this way I am following the path that Providence has laid out before me.”*

At the beginning of April 1791, the ship weighed anchor. On 2 July it rounded the Cape of Good Hope. Three months later it arrived at Macao, on 15 October. To enter China he had to pass by this rocky peninsula, a Portuguese possession.¹⁰ For three months, the three Vincentians set to the task of studying Chinese and preparing for their mission. Father Lamiot was appointed to join the team in Beijing, and Father Pesné was to join Father Aubin (who had arrived the year before) in the province of Huguang.¹¹ Francis Regis was appointed to the province of Kiangsi (Jiangxi), east of Huguang. Each of them then, with the help of a Christian guide, had to reach his mission as discreetly as possible, since an imperial edict repeated the prohibition for foreigners to penetrate Chinese territory without permission, and to preach their religion there.

⁸ Louis Lamiot and Augustine Pesné would be ordained priests when they arrived in Macao in 1791. Lamiot would, in 1812, become superior of the French Vincentians and of the French mission. He died in Macao in 1831. Pesné would die shortly, in July 1795, in the province of Hubei, assisted by Francis Regis.

⁹ We have 72 letters from Father Clet, edited for the first time in Beijing in 1944 by Brother Van Den Brandt.

¹⁰ The territory of Macao depended on the Portuguese viceroy of Goa, India.

¹¹ Its capital was Wu-chang-fu, now Wuhan. This province is currently divided into two parts: Hubei and Hunan. It is in the southeast of the country.

2) Putting down roots

Kiangsi is one of the richest provinces in China. Its soil is very fertile. The famous Chinese porcelain is made in this province. Because of all this, its population is large, but its Christian inhabitants were poor and isolated. This is where Francis Regis worked. He dressed like a Chinese, but that did not help him to learn the language.¹² During the trip from Macao to Kiangsi, his guide presented him as a person in mourning, since local custom approved silence during mourning. After a long trip of some 800 kilometers, the two men arrived at Nanchang, the provincial capital. The home of the missionaries was another hundred kilometers farther, at Gucheng. The local Christians built the priest's house about 1700. Francis Regis described it as "vast but dilapidated." Also, he began to become aware of his new mission: "*A new career is opening up for me. It is a matter of renewing the spirit of religion among the former Christians who have been left to themselves for several years, and of converting the infidels. So, this is my vocation, I hope, until my death.*"¹³

The Kiangsi mission would last only a year, however, just time for him to put down roots. He was alone in the entire region. He was promised a confrere whom he already knew, Fr. Hurel, and he hastened to write him: "*it will be pleasant for me to embrace you, and to talk with you, after having thought that I would be separated from you for ever, and that I would never see you except in eternity.*" Unfortunately, this did not happen, and he remained alone. Nevertheless, he gave himself body and soul to his mission. He taught catechism, baptized more than one hundred adults, despite his continuing difficulty speaking Chinese. He thought: "*nonetheless, it is better that asses cultivate the ground than to leave it without any cultivation.*"¹⁴ He also realized that baptism administered too quickly in a pagan country is not without risk, and so he wrote: "*I would have been able to baptize a larger number. They were pressing me to grant them this grace, but they did not seem to me to be well instructed, and we noted that catechumens baptized quickly also apostatized quickly.*"¹⁵ At the end of a year of solitude, Fr. Raux, superior of the Vincentians in China, summoned him to leave Kiangsi for the neighboring province of Huguang where he found his two confreres, Fr. Pesné, whom he knew well, but who was sadly quite ill with a fatal disease, and Fr. Aubin, who was said to be quite worn out at the time.

3) An exacting mission

¹² He wrote to his Carthusian brother that this language is "unlearnable, and the characters that make it up are not for expressing sounds by ideas.... I was too old when I came to China to have a good grasp of it."

¹³ Letter 5, to his sister Marie Thérèse on his arrival at the house.

¹⁴ Letter 12, 1802, to his brother.

¹⁵ Letter 12.

The province of Huguang was so large that it was split in two in 1818: Hubei in the north, and Hunan in the south. Because of its fertile lands people described it as the breadbasket of the Empire.

Francis Regis wrote to his brother: *“I came to the northern part of Huguang, a mountainous region where I have near me more than 2000 Christians. Conversions of pagans here are rare, a testimony to the scandal given by some bad Christians. They refuse to be instructed in a religion which is so badly practiced.”*¹⁶

Bad luck then fell upon the missionaries' community. While traveling to meet the Bishop of Shaanxi, Fr. Aubin was arrested and imprisoned. He died there from poisoning. Fr. Pesné died at age 29 of extreme exhaustion. This was in 1795 and once again, Francis Regis found himself alone in this huge mission territory, where he found *“more than 2000 Christians, living in more than 20 districts.... Further, there is a large number of Christians living at 20, 40 or 50 leagues whom I should visit.... Alone as I am ... I still have to travel across some 200 leagues where there are only 10,000 Christians.”*¹⁷ Besides, the political situation did not help matters. There was talk in the province about rebellion. For three years, Francis Regis did not receive even one confrere to help him in his mission, aside from Fr. Joseph Ly, sent to Kiangsi. Then, in 1799 young Fr. John Chang arrived. Beginning in 1807, he would also have to go to Kiangsi. In 1800, Fr. Juventin Chang arrived, but he died three years later. Paul Song¹⁸ succeeded him in 1804. He would work with Francis Regis until his martyrdom. In 1808, it was the turn of Fr. Ignatius Ho¹⁹ to come and join Fr. Clet, who appreciated him highly. That same year, Fr. Francis Chen²⁰ arrived, the one who would be the prison companion of Francis Regis. One year after, Fr. Anthony Cheng came to reinforce the team, but he would be soon sent to help in the Kiangsi mission. A final Chinese confrere, Fr. Ai,²¹ joined the mission in 1817. Francis Regis would also receive help from Brother Paul Wang²² beginning in

¹⁶ Letter 12.

¹⁷ Letter 12.

¹⁸ Paul Song was born in Hunan in 1774. He entered the Congregation in Beijing in 1801. After his ordination in 1803, he was sent one year later on mission with Fr. Clet. He helped him, but also sometimes tried his patience. After Francis Regis's death, he continued his ministry in the same place until 1839, when he moved to Hunan. He was imprisoned in 1852, and died in 1854.

¹⁹ Ignatius Ho was 27 years old when he joined Francis Regis's mission. In 1819, when Fr. Clet was arrested, he was able to escape, but had to change his name to Tong. Nevertheless, he was arrested and exiled to Tartary (Chinese Turkestan), near the Russian frontier. His catechist accompanied him. He died in exile in 1846.

²⁰ Born in 1780 and ordained in 1808, he gave the final absolution to Fr. Clet. He was also exiled to Tartary, where he died after a massacre at the hands of Moslem rebels in 1825.

²¹ Fr. Stanislaus Ai was born in Hubei. When Francis Regis died, he succeeded him as administrator of the mission. He died in 1849.

²² Paul Wang, born in 1751, made his vows in 1790 in the C.M. He was a courier between Beijing and Macao before being sent to Hubei. He died in 1827.

1809. Francis Regis was also waiting for a French confrere, Fr. Dumazel.²³ After several adventures that would make this missionary a real hero, he finally arrived at the doors of Fr. Clet's mission, ten years after leaving France.

Life was hard for Francis Regis. He fell ill with pleurisy, and it made him fear the worse. He even thought about receiving the last sacraments. However, he improved and wrote to the Vincentian superior in China:²⁴ *"from this illness I have only some weakness and swelling of my legs.... I can now only go some 20 to 30 lis."*²⁵ As for Fr. Dumazel, a very scrupulous man and chronically unable to calm himself down in his mission rounds, he always concerned his superior. Francis Regis dared to write: *"Fr. Dumazel, this one man alone, gives me more trouble in directing him than the entire province of Hubei together."*²⁶ Unfortunately, this young confrere contracted typhoid fever, and died from it in December 1818 at age 49.

Francis Regis realized better than anyone that the China mission was not without danger. In 1799, when the emperor died, there was a half-religious, half-political custom to prostrate oneself before the body of the departed and make libations. The missionaries were strictly ordered not to attend these ceremonies lasting several days. At the time, they feared persecution for this refusal, but the wisdom of the authorities prevailed and they were left in peace. Nonetheless, with the arrival of the new emperor, Jiajing, a civil war broke out in Francis Regis's province. The rebels were assembled according to their sects, and they killed all those who did not wish to join them on their way. As it happened, they did not come to the house of the Congregation of the Mission.

There were troubles not only in China. Fr. Clet received letters from France describing the explosive situation there. His Carthusian brother,²⁷ in exile in Rome, did not know what had become of their Carmelite sister.²⁸ The news about Rome was no better. The pope had been led away under escort from his palace to exile, while enemies of the Church proclaimed the Roman republic.²⁹ The missionary wrote from China: *"In view of the disastrous state of Europe, I can only bless Providence for having removed me from so much evil."* And, comparing the state of Europe with that of the regions where he was living, he

²³ He left England in 1800, but was blocked for five years in Canton while trying to get the passport he needed for going to Beijing. He arrived near Beijing in 1806, but was ordered to return to Canton to leave from there to help Fr. Clet. Because of an internal rebellion, he returned to Macao to embark for Cochinchina (part of southern Vietnam). He fell ill while staying with the priests of the Paris Foreign Missions and they cared for him for an entire year. He then was able to start out again, turning east to reach Kiangsi, where Francis Regis was waiting.

²⁴ Fr. Ghislain who replaced Fr. Raux at his death in 1801.

²⁵ Letter 47. The *li* equals about 600 meters; and 20 to 30 *lis* equal 12 to 18 km.

²⁶ Letter 62.

²⁷ He would return to France and die at Grenoble in the Carthusian habit, 8 March 1812 at age 66.

²⁸ He would later learn that she had had to leave her convent and return to secular life.

²⁹ Pope Pius VII would return to Rome in 1800 and resume possession of the Vatican.

wrote to his brother: *“It is better to be in China than in France. Our infidels are far from practicing the atrocities that your impious people do. Those people justify the proverb: There is nothing worse than good when it is corrupted.”* He also said that no matter the situation of one country, *“all countries are good, provided that one can serve God ... our home is Heaven, which we can reach from every country in the world.”*³⁰

His life in the mission was marked by poverty. Francis Regis did not complain but was sorry that he could not help his confreres. He related his difficulties in his correspondence with the superior in Beijing: *“Our present famine has impoverished us tremendously. You did not ask me for money, and that was right, since I have nothing to send you. I have only about 18 taëls³¹ Looking ahead two weeks, I will have no money at all in the house.”* Likewise, he wrote: *“because of the drought this year, there is no rice. We have to buy nearly everything, and it is expensive. See if you are rich enough to help us in our poverty.”*³² Nonetheless, Francis Regis shared what he had with the less fortunate, recalling in this way what he had read in the New Testament: *“it is better to give than to receive.”*

The mission house was not palatial, and the missionaries joked in calling it their “straw castle,” a clear testimony to their poverty. The floor was beaten earth, and the roof was straw. The mission church was built in the same way. This house was used by all the missionaries who came to rest there and to regain their strength after long months of a painful and exhausting apostolate. They profited from this time to recover their spiritual and moral strength. The superior, Francis Regis, tried to recommend certain Gospel principles to his team: *“Let us put on tenderness and mercy, goodness, humility and patience, since we have to be stronger to support the weakness of the sick and not be satisfied with ourselves.”*³³ Francis Regis asked them to be united in their missionary work, so that *“our sheep might form only one flock, since there is only one shepherd, Our Lord Jesus Christ;”* and later on he wrote: *“we should urge our Christians to learn ... the catechism concerning the sacraments, but we cannot oblige them or force them to learn it. We should demand only that they know what is strictly required to receive the sacraments.”*³⁴ His confreres listened to Francis Regis, especially Fr. Song, who would develop a deep veneration for him.³⁵ Yet some found the work too hard, and vicious rumors began to reach Beijing. Francis Regis reacted: *“it seems to me that I never had the intention of ruining the health of my confreres through a work beyond their strength.”* On the contrary, he never stopped telling them to *“take care of their health ... in China especially*

³⁰ Letter 16, 1802.

³¹ The taël was worth 7 to 8 gold francs, or 38 grams of standard silver.

³² Letter 50, 1810, to Fr. Ghislain in Beijing.

³³ Letter 53, 1811, circular letter to the missionaries.

³⁴ Letter 59, 1813, circular letter to the missionaries.

³⁵ Thanks to him, we have 37 letters from Francis Regis.

where priests are rare, it is better to live than to die for the glory of God.” Providence, however, would prepare another path for Fr. Clet.

The fulfillment of love

1) The shadow of the Cross

The majority of the missionaries had entered China illegally.³⁶ The Vincentians sent to the 200,000 Christians in the Empire were spread around in several provinces, helped by Chinese priests whom they had formed.³⁷ The situation was always problematic for those missionaries since they had to avoid being openly recognized and arrested, either by the authority of the mandarins or by the rebels. For this reason, beginning in 1799, Francis Regis began to worry about the demands made by the rebels who were devastating the missions, since they were burning the houses and slaughtering those unable to flee. Their troops advanced to the gates of Beijing but were finally rebuffed by the central government. The Christians were even accused of flying the flag of this rebellion. The mandarins acknowledged this calumny and punished the guilty.

In 1805, while looking for a thief, the police arrested a Chinese Christian carrying a letter sent to the missionaries from the province of Jiangnan. A plot was suspected, and the mandarins seized the opportunity to embitter the emperor against foreigners. The missionaries in the capital were put under observation while others were exiled. The Christians were obliged to deny their faith under threat and torture. For the moment, Francis Regis's province was spared.

In 1811, a Chinese missionary was arrested as he was carrying some documents containing the spiritual powers granted him by the bishop. They included a list of the various mission districts. The mandarins saw in this an attempt by the foreigners to substitute for the governors of the cities some civil servants whom they, the Christians, would choose. A persecution against the Christians broke out in Beijing, and all foreigners were ordered out of the country.³⁸ The Vincentians protested and continued their evangelization. The same year, the emperor received a report that on the feast of the Assumption some Christians were planning to revolt. An imperial edict then ordered all Christians to renounce their religion before the end of the year, under pain of persecution. Francis Regis, the missionaries and the Christians were thus obliged to go into hiding. The persecution reached the provinces. His “straw castle” was destroyed, and the school and church were torn down. The mission was a pile of ruins.

³⁶ According to Fr. Richenet, procurator of the missions in Macao from 1801 to 1815, “the missionaries were permitted in ... only for the service of the emperor, and consequently only as artists, painters, clockmakers ... astronomers to draw up the lunar calendar” (Letter to the French government, 1817).

³⁷ Cf. the letter of Fr. Richenet mentioned above.

³⁸ With the exception of the members of the mathematics tribunal, who were three Portuguese missionaries.

An unwitting internal persecution broke out against the superior of the Kiangsi mission. Fr. Clet had received all the extraordinary [ecclesiastical] powers that could be granted to a priest, even the favor of administering Confirmation. Unfortunately, since the new vicar apostolic of the province had no confidence in Francis Regis and accused him of double-crossing him, all those powers were suddenly taken away. When the vicar later realized his error, he granted them again.

In 1818, another persecution loomed on the horizon. It began as a natural weather phenomenon that plunged Beijing and the imperial court into darkness and terrible rains. The emperor consulted his oracles, and they accused the Christians of these “threats from heaven.” The emperor’s advisers urged him to renew the persecution against the believers in this religion. Arrests of Chinese priests and missionaries were not long in coming, with some imprisoned and others exiled. Francis Regis reported the arrest of Fr. Chen, his Chinese confrere: “*Our ... cross is the capture of Fr. Chen. A new Judas sold him for 20,000 pieces He was then ... sent to Wuhan with 15 or 18 Christians arrested at the same time.*”³⁹ Francis Regis and his companions were once again forced to live as proscribed criminals. “*Fr. Ho and I have passed through I do not know how many holes and caves.*” For four months, he wandered from hiding place to hiding place before deciding to move from one province to another, where he thought he would have more security and would be able to help the mission. He was 71 years old.

2) *The long march*

Now a refugee in Hunan, he found hospitality with a Christian family for about six months. His final Calvary began there. An apostate whom Francis Regis had rebuked for his evil life found him and sought to have him arrested. A price of 1000 taëls was put on the missionary’s head. After a premonition awoke him, Fr. Clet left the house disguised as a merchant, but found himself facing a troop of soldiers who soon surrounded him. In the tense silence, he was arrested. We have a report of a conversation between the missionary and the traitor who had brought the soldiers: “*Friend, why have you come here? Oh, I pity you!*” The apostate answered: “*Why do you complain to me and pardon me; I do not need that.*” Then speaking to the soldiers, the apostate said: “*That is he. Take him away!*” Francis Regis was then loaded with chains on his wrists, neck and ankles. The inhabitants of the house were arrested in their turn, and the houses of the neighboring Christians were brutally pillaged. The arrest took place in the small village of Jinjiagang some four kilometers from the city of Nanyang. This sad parade moved on amid the howls of the bystanders aroused for the occasion.

³⁹ Letter 63, to Lamiot, successor of Fr. Ghislain.

While the missionary was forced to kneel on iron chains, the mandarin had him beaten on his face with 30 blows of a leather strap, and this caused blood to flow. *“My brother, you are judging me now, but in a short time, my Lord will be judging you.”* The mandarin responded quickly by giving him another 30 blows to his face.

Ten days later the prisoner was led in chains to the provincial capital, Kaifeng, some 200 kilometers away. He was tortured there as well for not having answered the questions that the mandarin asked him. For an entire month he was imprisoned in the city jail, spending the better part of his time in prayer and meditation, something that at times drew the admiration of his guards. He found the means to write: *“When night falls ... we have to lie down and put one of our legs into the fetters. These fetters are formed of two boards ... that the jailer joins and locks.... Besides, an iron chain binds us to our cot and keeps us from raising our head. It is very difficult to turn on our side or on our back.”*

When the mandarins learned that Fr. Clet’s mission had its headquarters in the province of Huguang, they sent him to Wuhan, the capital of that province. Five hundred kilometers separated the two cities. This very difficult trip lasted 20 days. The prisoners were secured in a wooden cage and held by heavy chains. In the evening, the group would halt at a prison. Francis Regis wrote: *“My stays in the prisons of Hunan and my long trip have gravely damaged my health I was already in a poor state, very thin, with a long beard crawling with fleas.”* When he arrived at his destination, he met Fr. Chen in the same prison, along with ten other Christians. They prayed together. They were able to walk somewhat at liberty during the day. They went to confession and even received communion from a missionary who continued his evangelization in secret. He described his captivity: *“The mandarins here are very mild.... Twelve taëls were enough to have them remove from our neck, hands and feet the handcuffs and fetters.... Each one can have his rice cooked.... As to us, we live in common. The Christians often bring us enough meat, fish and fruit.... In this way, you can tell that we do not have much to complain about. However ... once night falls, we have to lie down and put our legs into the fetters until the next day.”*⁴⁰ He also wrote: *“Admire divine Providence in this, since, against the basic intention of the mandarin, it has placed two priests in the same prison together with ten good Christians. I have heard their confessions many times, and they joined us in receiving Holy Communion from the hands of one of our confreres. This is probably unheard of in Chinese prisons.”*⁴¹

Some bad news reached the ears of Francis Regis: Fr. Lamiot had been arrested, since three letters written by the superior in Beijing were found in Fr.

⁴⁰ Letter 65, to Fr. Richenet.

⁴¹ Letter 67, 14 January 1820, to Fr. Marchini, procurator of Propaganda Fide at Macao.

Clet's mission house. Francis Regis thought he had caused this unfortunate arrest, but Fr. Lamiot believed it was due to the traitor who had had Francis Regis and Fr. Chen arrested. Fr. Lamiot was then brought to lodgings in Wuhan, but it was impossible for him to see Fr. Clet before his trial and confrontation demanded by the mandarin. Nonetheless, Francis Regis wrote to Lamiot to grant him pardon for having compromised him. He also said that he would assume all blame in his place since the Beijing mission had, above all, to be saved.⁴² The day after the arrival of the superior of the Beijing Vincentians, the tribunal was assembled. Francis Regis, Frs. Chen and Lamiot were kneeling. Fr. Lamiot was questioned about his knowledge of Fr. Clet. He wrote later: *"I said that I knew him, although his appearance had changed so thoroughly that I hardly recognized any of his traits.... I was struck by his wise responses. When they had me kneel at his side, he started to weep.... When they wanted to beat Fr. Chen, he cried: Why beat him? I alone am guilty. The mandarin replied: You old nothing! You have corrupted too many of our people, and the emperor demands your life!"* He then answered: *"Willingly."* *"I admired his extreme sensitivity for Fr. Chen and myself, his fearlessness concerning martyrdom and his strength of character. This made a strong impression on me that will never be erased from my soul."*⁴³

3) Death for the sake of Love

On 1 January 1820 all Christians had to appear before the tribunal. After several questions, Fr. Lamiot was acquitted but banished from China. He left for Macao. Francis Chen was condemned to exile in the west of China, in Tartary where he died. Francis Regis, for whom the governor had written a favorable report, waited peacefully but without many illusions: *"I am not counting on clemency from the emperor, and I am preparing to die. Thanks be to God, I am waiting with patience and tranquility."*⁴⁴ Although his days seemed numbered, Francis Regis's faith was unshakable. He celebrated the feast of the conversion of St. Paul, the anniversary of the foundation of the Congregation of the Mission, and could receive communion in prison. For Fr. Clet, this was his farewell meal, as Fr. Lamiot reported so well. On 17 February, the imperial decision arrived in

⁴² Following Fr. Lamiot's summary of the letter.

⁴³ Lamiot to Verbert, Vicar General of the Congregation of the Mission.

⁴⁴ Letter 72, to the Portuguese Vincentians in Beijing, in some conflict with their French confreres concerning their installation in the North Church in Beijing (church of Petang) after the exile of Fr. Lamiot. In the name of charity and because Fr. Lamiot had asked, Fr. Clet tried to resolve the problem: *"I thought it would be good to use my last breath of life to restore ... peace among you. Since it is charity alone, that is, love of God and love of neighbor, that moves me to write you, please read this letter with the same charity. Since I am about to appear before the fearsome judge, how could I obey any other spirit than the spirit of charity?"* The conflict lasted, however, and the Chinese government seized the house and razed the church. It was then recalled that Fr. Clet had written: *"If you do not hear my request, our houses ... will fall down on top of one other, and both will be destroyed to the great detriment of our holy religion"* (Letter 73, to the Portuguese).

Wuhan: Liu⁴⁵ Francis, secretly entered into China, has deceived many by preaching his doctrine. There is reason enough to strangle him. As was the custom, this had to be done immediately.⁴⁶

Then, soldiers were swiftly dispatched to the prison to announce to the condemned man the imperial sentence. Fr. Chen, perceiving the difficulty the officer had in announcing the news, told him that Christians and especially priests do not fear death. Francis Regis then tearfully asked absolution of Fr. Chen. He spoke a few words to the Christians gathered around him: “*Always be fervent servants of God and never give up the faith.*” Then he blessed them for the last time. Cold had invaded the deserted streets of the city, and night enveloped the prison. During the night of 17 and 18 February 1820 the sad cortege crossed through the city walls to accomplish its sad duty.

The group stopped near a post some two meters high solidly stuck into the ground. It looked a little like a cross, with its crossbar nailed to the top. Francis Regis was allowed to pray one last time. “*Tie me,*” he then said to the soldiers, who then tied his hands and his trunk behind the crosspiece. His feet were tied together to the upright post. Around his neck they passed a cord knotted over a length of bamboo. This was twisted three different times⁴⁷ until the martyr gave up his last breath. Francis Regis had spent 28 years in China. He was martyred at age 72. His body was first buried in the cemetery for the condemned before the Christians recovered it. They then interred it in the Christian cemetery of the Red Mountain, where other missionaries already rested. The inscription read: “*Here lie the bones of the venerable servant of God, Francis Clet, of the Congregation of the Mission, a Priest, full of merits, of the Church in Hebei. He accomplished great deeds in the Lord’s vineyard. Marked with old age, he merited the martyr’s crown in the year of the Lord 1820, the 14th of the Calends of March.*”

The remains of the martyr repose today in the chapel of the Motherhouse of the Congregation in Paris. Francis Regis Clet was beatified in 1900, and canonized a century later, in 2000.

Appendix 1: Brothers and Sisters of Francis Regis Clet

Marie Thérèse, b. 11 February 1733, d. 1821

Anne Constance, b. 11 August 1734, (Carmelite)

Dorothee Euphr. , b. 4 January 1736, d. 1749

⁴⁵ Chinese name of Francis Regis Clet.

⁴⁶ According to *La Congrégation de la Mission en Chine*, vol. II, p. 578.

⁴⁷ They needed two cords, since the first was worn out and snapped easily.

Françoise Julie, b. 28 February 1737, d. 1802
 Jeanne Marie, b. 11 May 1738
 Joseph (godfather), b. 19 January 1741, d. 1748
 Jacques, b. 3 August 1742
 François (Carthusian), b. 14 March 1744, d. 1812
 Césaire, b. 18 January 1747
 Francis Regis, b. 19 August 1748, d. 1820
 Euphr. Dorothee, b. 13 April 1751
 Hyacinthe Joseph, b. 22 October 1752
 Jeanne Marie, b. 12 May 1754, d. 1777
 Joseph Stanislas, b. 2 October 1755
 Anne Marie, b. 29 May 1757, d. 1757.

Appendix 2: principal dates in the life of Francis Regis Clet

19 August 1748: birth in Grenoble (baptism 23 August).
 6 March 1769: entry in the Congregation of the Mission in Lyons.
 18 March 1771: vows.
 27 March 1773: priesthood ordination, then departure for the seminary at Annecy.
 1788: General Assembly in Paris, appointment as novice director.
 13 July 1789: sack of St. Lazare.
 10 April 1791: departure for China from Lorient with Frs. Lamiot and Pesné.
 1792: departure for Kiangsi.
 1793: departure for Huguang.
 1804: arrival of Fr. Song at the mission.
 1810: arrival of Fr. Dumazel at the mission.
 1812: Fr. Lamiot succeeds Fr. Ghislain as superior of the Vincentians in China.
 1818: beginning of the great persecution against the Christians.
 1819: death of Fr. Dumazel, arrest of Frs. Chen, Francis Regis (16 June), and Lamiot.
 End 1819: meeting at the tribunal between Frs. Lamiot and Clet.
 1 January 1820: general appearance, and acquittal of Fr. Lamiot.
 16 February 1820: last letter to Fr. Lamiot.
 17 February 1820: Announcement of the death sentence.
 18 February 1820: Martyrdom of Francis Regis.
 1843: introduction of the cause of beatification.
 1859: transfer of his relics to the Vincentian Motherhouse in Paris.
 27 May 1900: beatification in Rome
 1 October 2000: canonization in Rome (with other Chinese martyrs).

Bibliography

Montgesty, G. de. [pseud. Gabriel Larigaldie] *Soldat du Christ, le Bienheureux F. R. Clet*. Paris: Lethellieux, 1906.

Sylvestre, André. *François-Régis Clet*. Moissac, 1998.

[Translator's note: Where possible, Chinese place names follow Romanization standards in use in China.]

(JOHN RYBOLT, C.M., translator)