

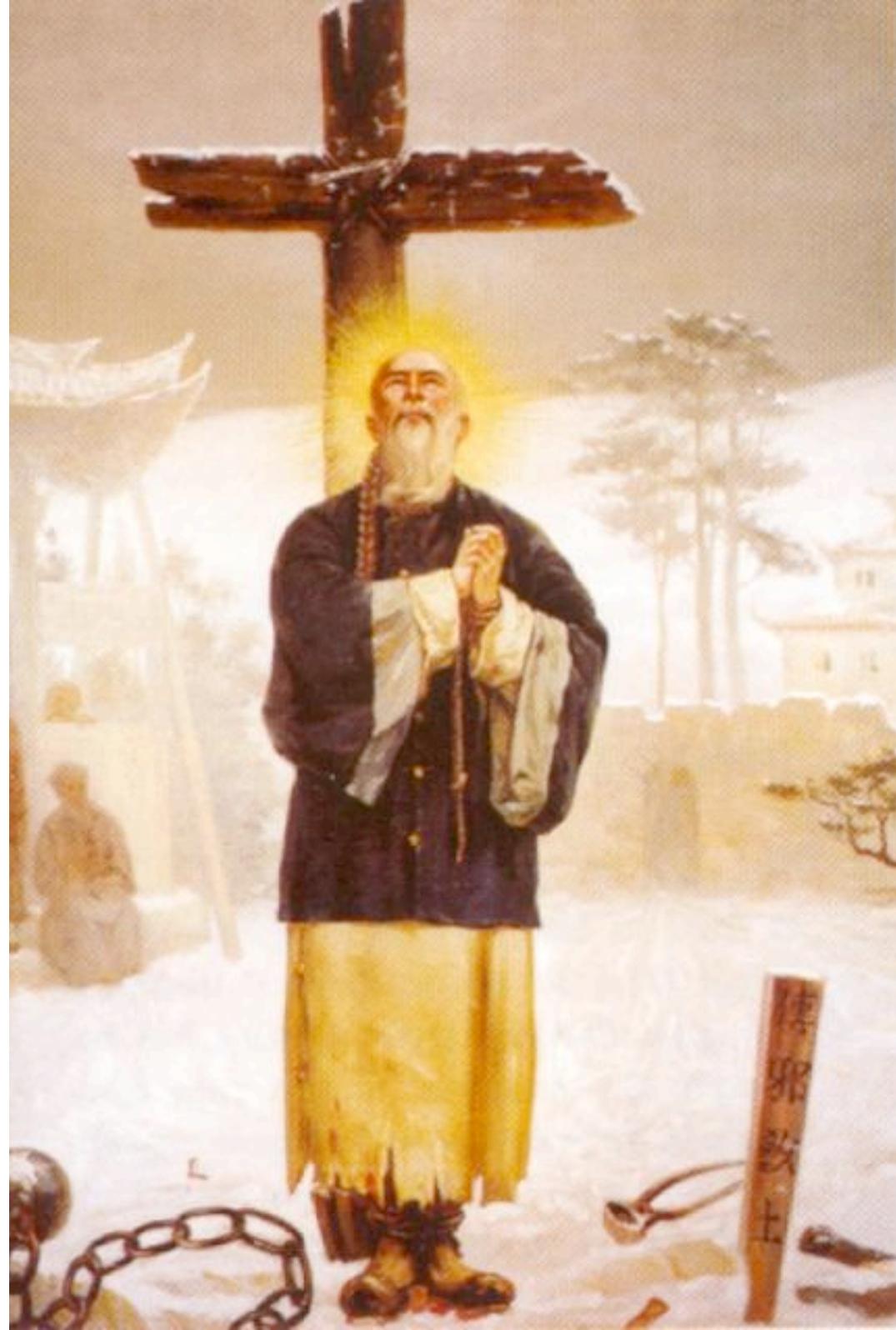


St. Francis Regis Clet

Confreere, Missioner, Martyr

They accepted death rather than compromise on their faith

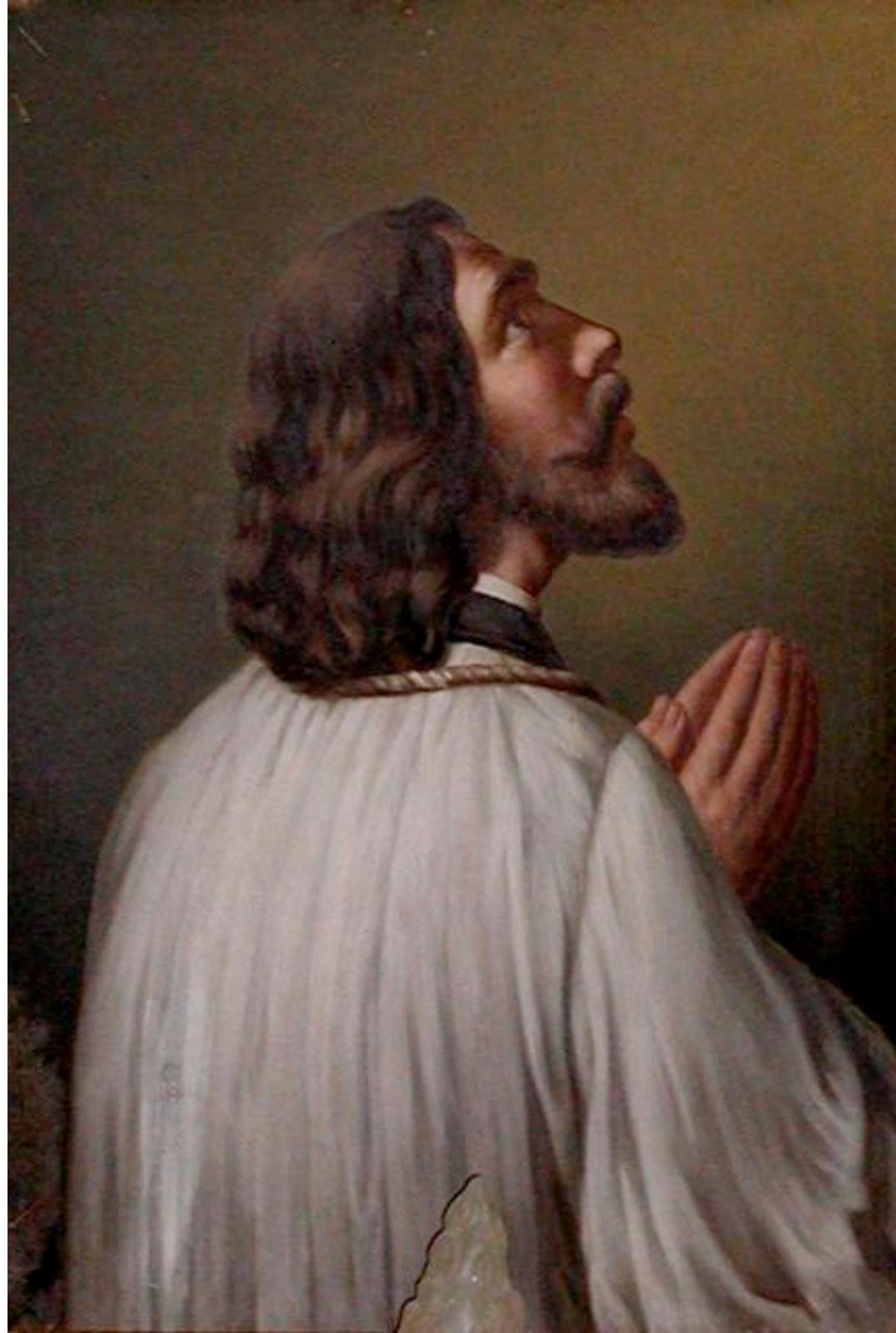
Vincent de Paul and Justin De Jacobis were canonized because they lived lives of heroic virtue. Francis Clet and John Gabriel Perboyre were canonized because they accepted death rather than compromise on their faith. This is something expected of every Christian in similar circumstances and it does not imply heroicity of virtue during the previous years. Francis Clet and 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.



Early Years in France

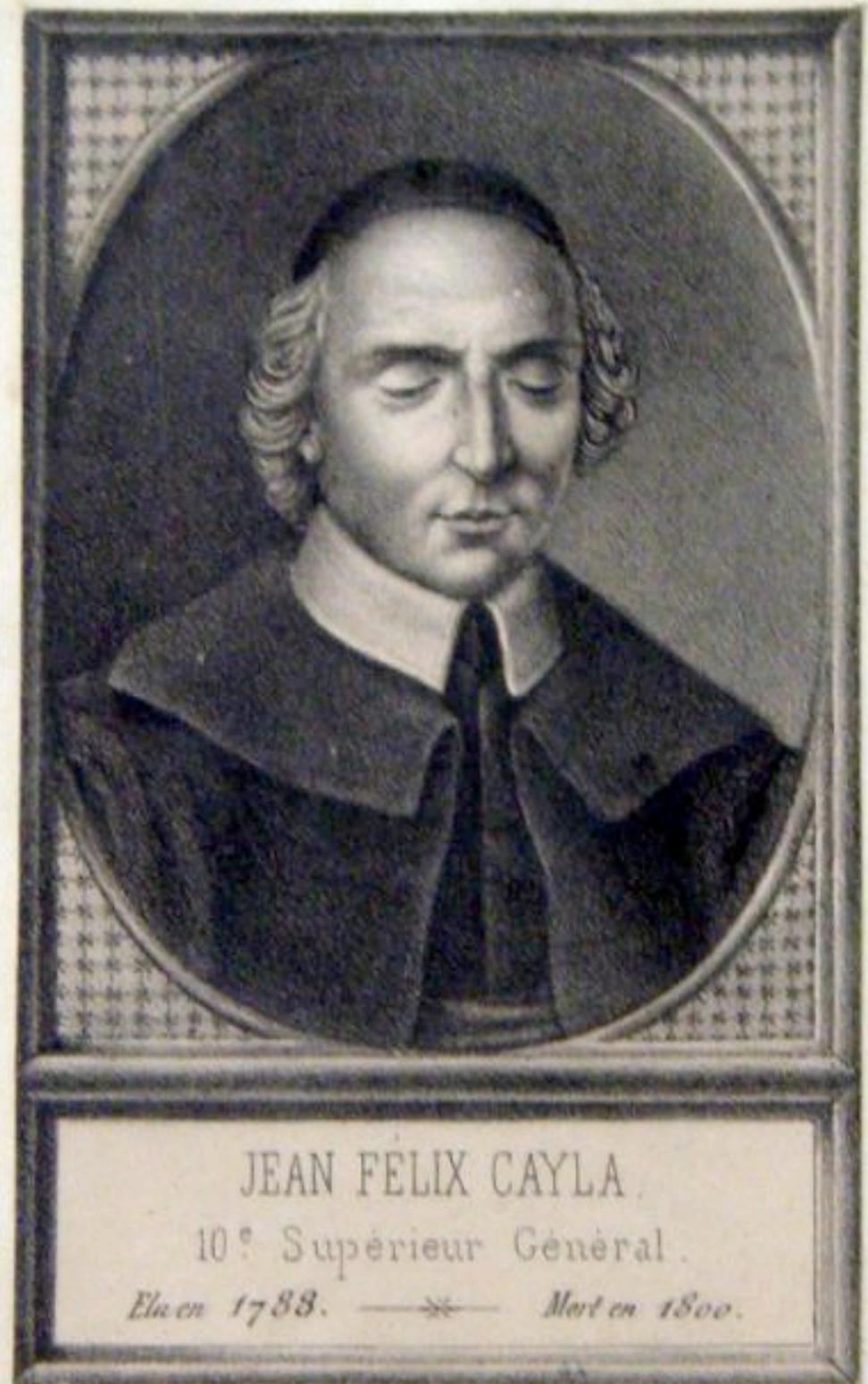
Francis Clet entered the entered the Congregation of the Mission at the age of twenty-one in Lyons, in 1769; he had possibly spent a couple of years in a seminary. He probably came into contact with the Congregation during a mission or retreat. He was ordained in 1773 and appointed to teach Moral Theology in Annecy; he spent fifteen years there, the final ones as Superior.

The sixteenth General Assembly of the Congregation of the Mission 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.



Mission to China

When the Assembly was over, the Superior General asked Francis to remain on in Paris as Director of the internal seminary (novitiate). The following year the French Revolution started. One of the effects of this was that the Jesuits were suppressed in France. Nine years after that, in 1773, Pope Clement XIV ordered the total suppression of the Jesuits. All the missions in China which had previously been in Jesuit hands were to be handed over to the Congregation of the Mission. Francis volunteered to go, and was accepted.



Letter from Jean-Francois Daudet in Saint Lazare, to an Irish confrere in China:

"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 everything you could ask for, holiness, learning, health and charm."



Letter from Francis to his older sister, Marie-Therese

After telling her he was off to China:

"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 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."



Journey to China

On their way to Lorient, where they were to board ship, Fr. Clet and two deacons 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. Francis and his two companions became numbers 25, 26 and 27 in the chronological list of Vincentians in China.



Francis' first letter to his sister,
October 15, 1792 to let her
know he'd arrived in Kiang-si

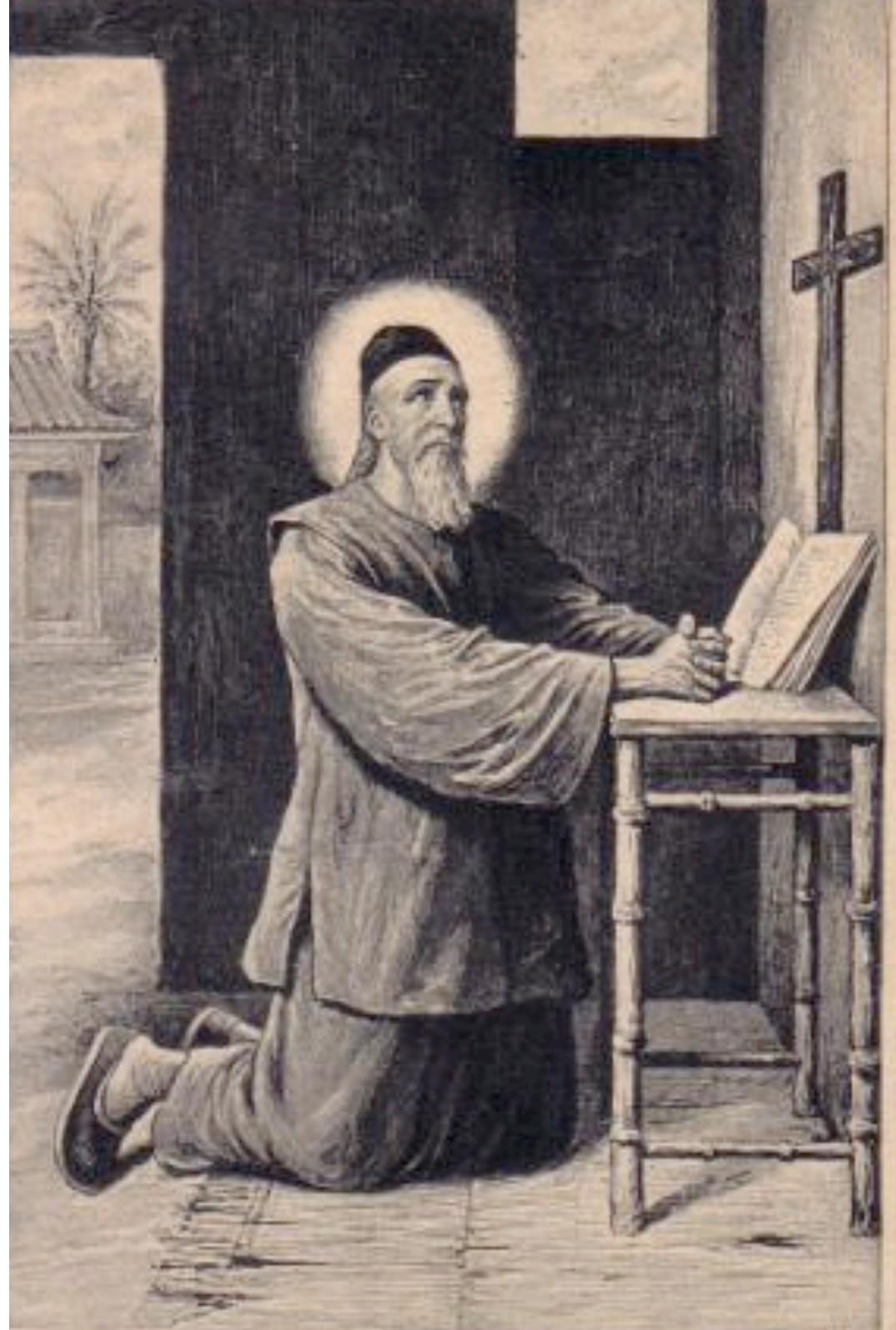
"At the moment I'm living in a house which is rather large but totally dilapidated; they're going to start repairing it at once, and as it's wooden it won't be unhealthy in the winter, which, anyway, isn't very bad in these parts. A new life is starting for me, re-awakening religion in former Christians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



Life & Work in China

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.



Language Barrier

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

"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."



Adjusting to a New Culture

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."

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..."



1798 Letter to His 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, 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.”



1798 Letter to His Brother

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 antireligious people, who prove the truth of *corruptio optimi pessima...* (the corruption of the best is the worst)”



Reports from Francis the Missionary

“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 baptized something over a hundred adults who were reasonably well instructed. I could have baptized 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 baptized too easily apostatize equally easily...”



Reports from Francis the Missionary

“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.”



Francis' candid commentaries
on the times-- from a letter to
his brother (or, "sound bites"
from 1799)

"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..."



From letters to his brother:

"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."

"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."



More from letters to his brother:

Though he is undercover, he adds that his pagan neighbors know he is 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..."



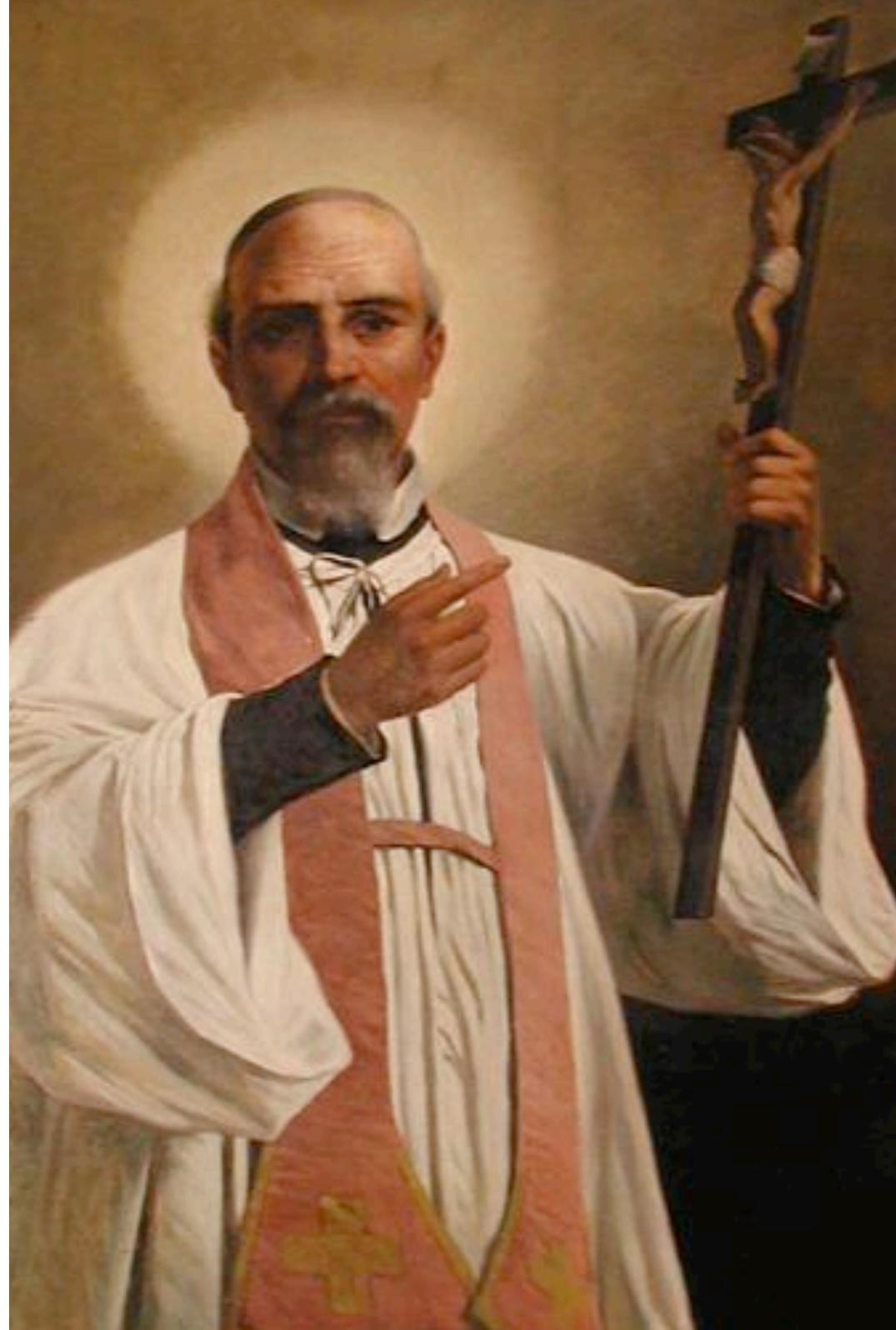
From Francis' letter to a new Chinese confrere appointed to work with him:

“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. ... 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.”



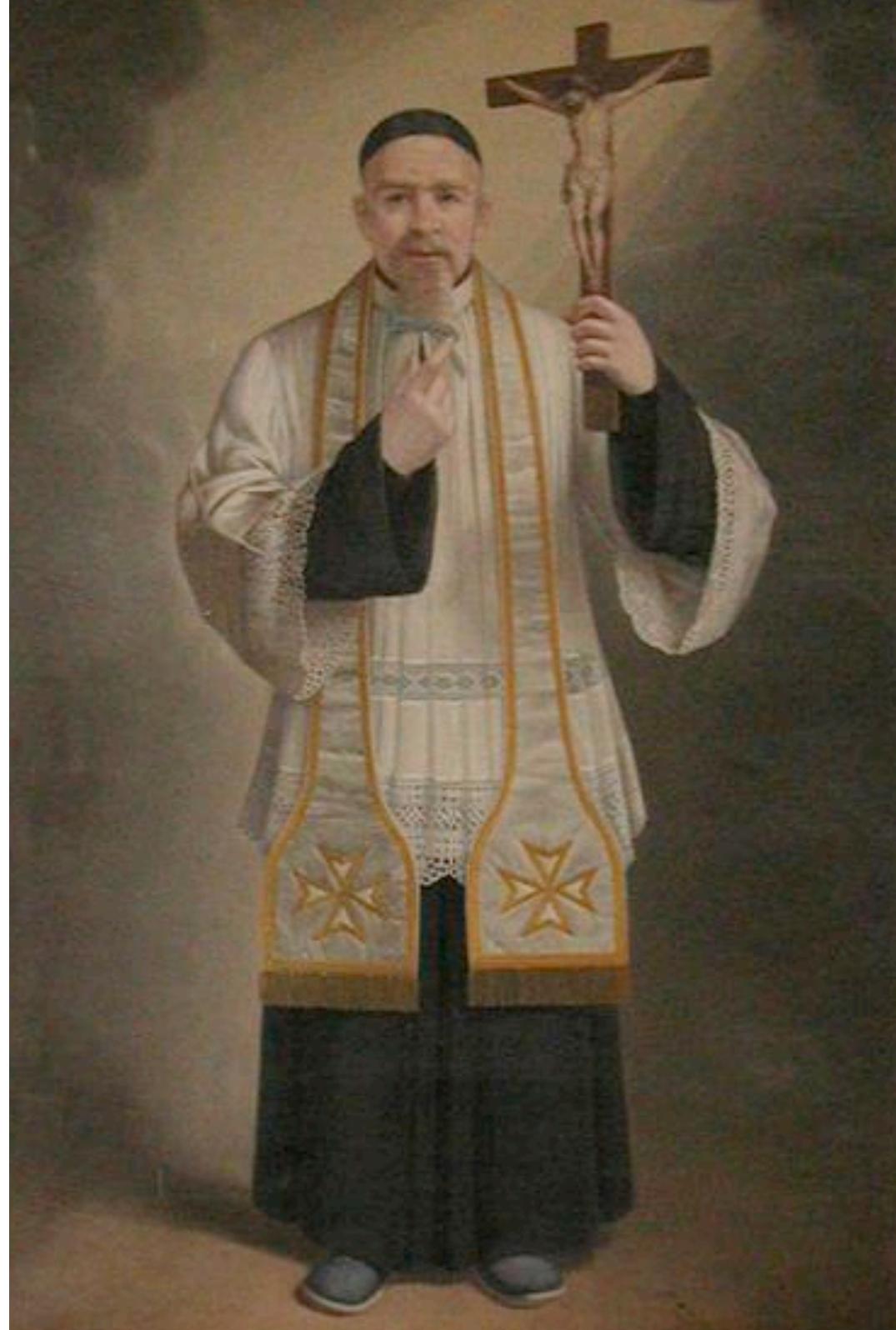
From Francis' letter to a new Chinese confrere appointed to work with him:

“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*. (for God is not the author of confusion but of peace). 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.”



From Francis' letter to a new Chinese confrere appointed to work with him:

“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.”



Francis never wanted to be the local Superior

Francis 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 his Chinese confrere, Paul Song:

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

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

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



In another letter he admits that he 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. [Fathers Raux and Ghislain 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.” (Francis would never get his hoped-for changes.)



Francis nearly died in 1810, as he told Fr. 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... when Father Ho arrived - I had sent for him to give me the Last Sacraments - he found me out of danger."

"... 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."



Anti-Christian persecution breaks out in 1811

A Chinese priest was arrested for something or other; unfortunately, he was carrying documents 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."

This was Francis' way of letting his confrere know about the four churches of Peking.



Trouble (from Francis' letter to his confrere, Father Louis-François Lamiot):

“Father Chen [...] 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 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. This ridiculous slander was believed in Court. The capture of Father Chen a few days later made things worse.”



Francis “on the run” with a price on his head

Francis stayed short spells in safe hiding places and had some providential escapes; Father Ho was with him. He eventually got to Ho-nan, from where he wrote:

"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."



Francis is captured

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 to always assure me, while I was staying with them, that I had nothing to fear."



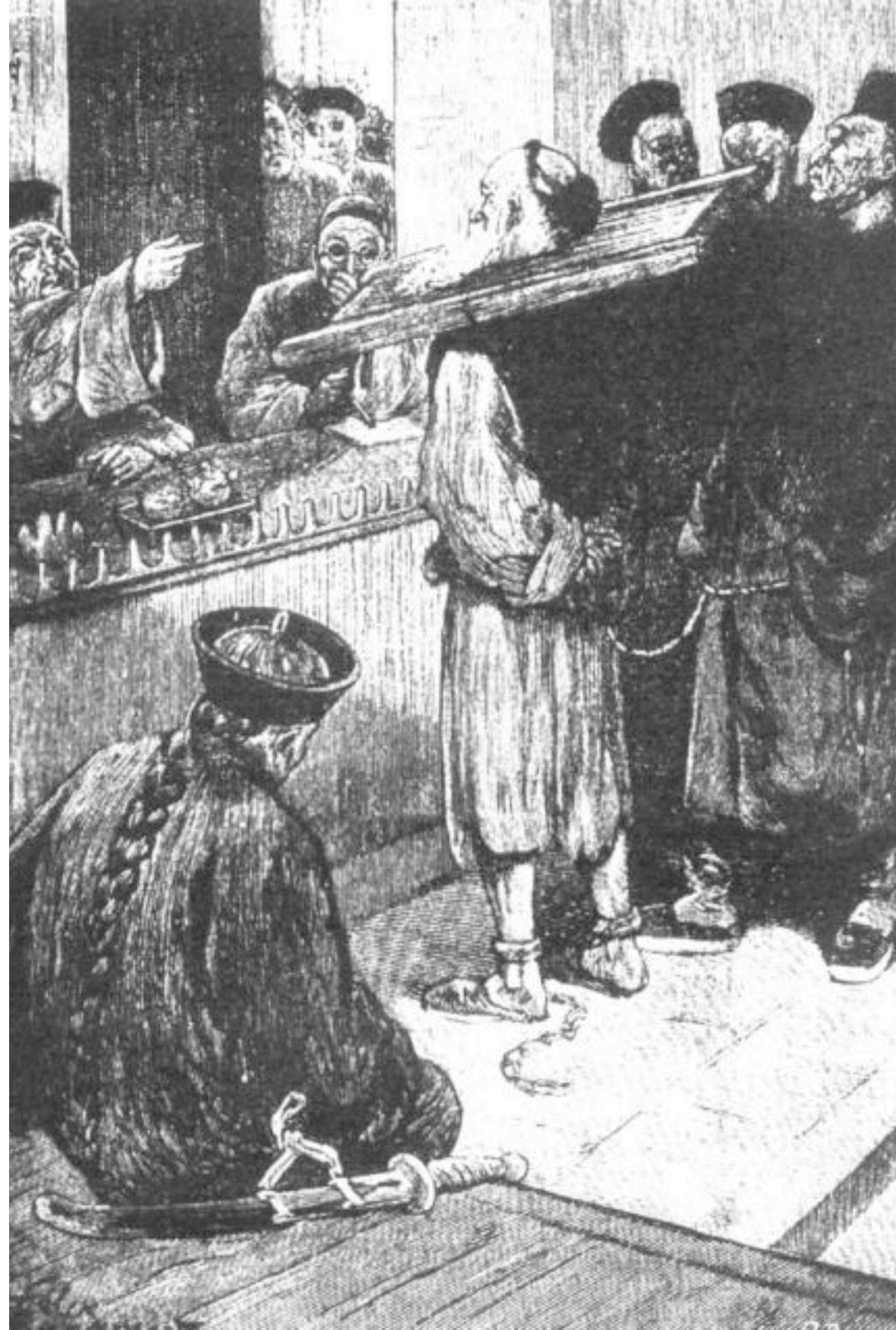
Arrest and imprisonment

In the middle of July 1819 Francis 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 Fr. 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.



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“a kind Providence arranged it that my jailers wouldn't accept me”

As Francis' death sentence had to be confirmed by the Emperor, there was an interval of seven weeks between sentence and execution.

"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 [...] 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.”

And so the jailers refused to take him.

“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.”



Forming a Christian community in prison

“We have morning and evening prayer in common, and can even celebrate feast days; 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.”



Francis writes a letter to the French newspapers contrasting Chinese and French jails

“...nowhere [here] 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 [...] This yard is swept every day and kept very clean...each prisoner is given a straw mat to keep out the cold [...] 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.”



Last letter to his 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. [...] 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?"



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



from ***A Fresh Look at Francis Clet***
by Thomas Davitt, CM

<http://via.library.depaul.edu>