

ST. FRANCIS REGIS CLET

"To the Extremes of Love"

from an article by Jean-Yves Ducourneau, C.M.

Childhood

- Francis Regis Clet was from Grenoble, France.
- He was the tenth of fifteen children, born 19 August 1748.
- He was a brilliant student so much so that he would later earn the nickname the “walking library.”



Vocation

- God knocked at the heart of the young man. His family was already accustomed to such calls, since one of the boys was a Carthusian, and one of the daughters was a Carmelite.
- Francis Regis experienced a call to the priestly vocation. He chose to knock at the door of the Congregation of the Mission.



Ordination and first assignment

- He entered the novitiate of the Congregation at Lyons and was ordained on the 27th of March 1773. 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.
- On his return to Lyons, he learned that he had been appointed professor of Moral Theology at the major seminary of Annecy. He would dedicate himself fully to this mission of priestly formation, despite his youth.



Valfleury as it appears today

Sorrows and transitions

- Soon Francis Regis was chosen as the new superior of the seminary. “With competence and self-denial, he settled into this 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, his Bishop Biord died and was replaced by Bishop Paget.
- A great loss struck the Congregation of the Mission, too. Its Superior General, Fr. Jacquier, died in 1787. Fr. Cayla de la Garde was elected Superior General in June 1788. he named Francis Regis director of the internal seminary (novitiate) of the Congregation.



The French Revolution breaks out

- 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. 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.
- On 13 July 1789, the gates of the Motherhouse, St. Lazare, were breached, and the house fell victim to bands of looters.



China mission

- The Superior General was well aware of the precarious situation of the Church in France. On the other hand, he was happy to read news that came from his confreres in China. He wanted to send more missionaries there, and Francis Regis presented himself as a volunteer.
- In February of 1791, three missionaries were supposed to leave for China. They were Frs. Lamiot and Pesné, accompanied by another priest, but he was momentarily kept behind in the country. 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.



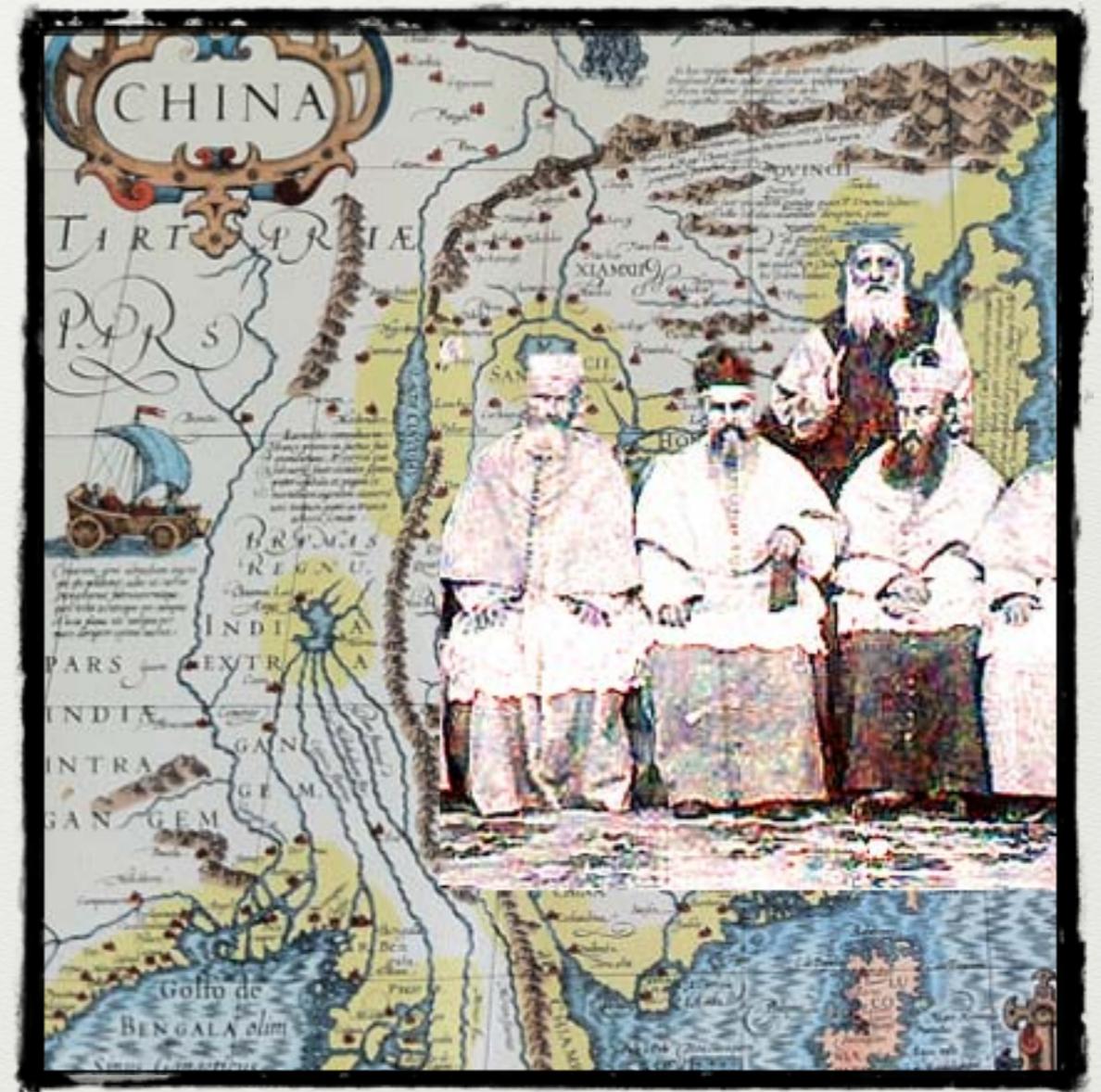
Leaving home and family behind

- 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.” His family kept hoping that he would change his mind, but he did not.



Six-Month Journey

- 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 they had to pass by this rocky peninsula, a Portuguese possession.
- For three months, the three Vincentians studied Chinese and prepared for their mission.



Separate Destinations

- Father Lamiot was sent to Beijing, Father Pesné to Huguang, and Francis Regis to the province of Kiangsi (Jiangxi).
- With the help of a Christian guide, they had to reach their missions as discreetly as possible, since an imperial edict prohibited foreigners from penetrating Chinese territory without permission, and preaching their religion there.



Putting down roots

- He dressed like a Chinese, but that did not help him to learn the language. 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 900 kilometers, the two men arrived at the home of the missionaries. The local Christians built the priest's house about 1700. Francis Regis described it as "vast but dilapidated."



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Putting down roots

- Kiangsi was one of the richest provinces in China. Its soil was fertile. The famous Chinese porcelain was made there. Its population was large, but its Christians were poor and isolated.
- Thus, 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.”



Alone on mission

- The Kiangsi mission would last only a year, however. And Fr. Clet was very alone. He was promised a confrere whom he already knew, Fr. Hurel. He wrote 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.” Sadly, Fr. Hurel was never sent.
- Meanwhile, he gave himself body and soul to his mission. He taught and baptized more than 100 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.”



Reunited

- 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 ill with a fatal disease, and Fr. Aubin, who was said to be quite worn out at the time.
- 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.”



Alone again

- 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.
- So once again, Francis Regis found himself alone in a huge mission territory. "Alone as I am ... I still have to travel across some 200 leagues where there are only 10,000 Christians." For three years, he did not receive even one confrere to help him in his mission.



Changing circumstances

- The political situation did not help matters. There was talk of rebellion.
- But soon other confreres were sent to help.... Some became ill and died, some were sent away to help in other missions. Fr. Paul Song arrived in 1804 and would work with Francis Regis until his martyrdom.



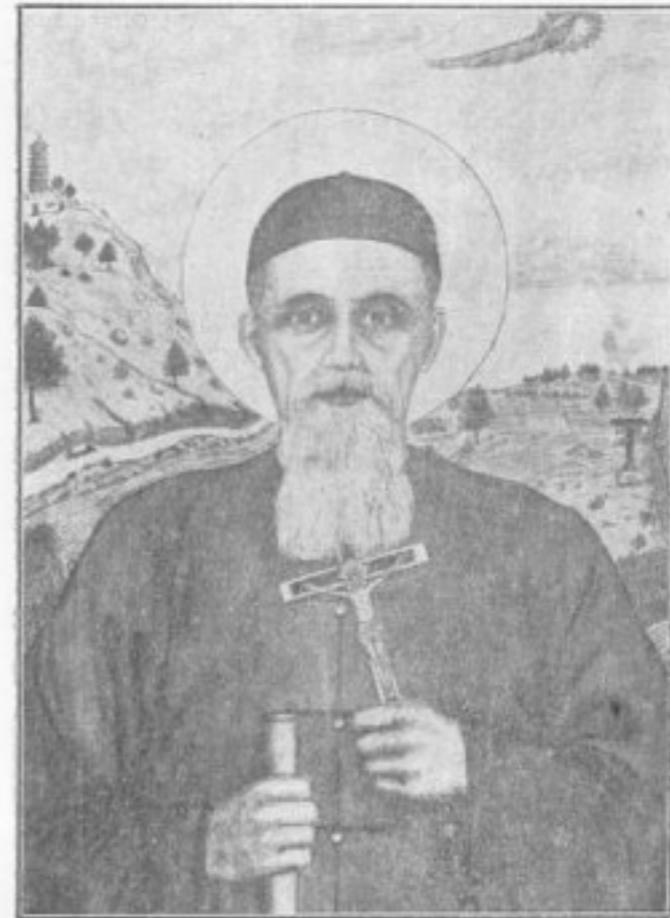
Dangers

- Francis Regis realized better than anyone that the China mission was dangerous. A civil war broke out in his province.
- There were troubles not only in China. Fr. Clet received letters from France describing the explosive situation there. His Carthusian brother, in exile in Rome, did not know what had become of their Carmelite sister. Even The Pope had been led away under escort from his palace to exile.
- He wrote from China: “In view of the disastrous state of Europe, I can only bless Providence for having removed me from so much evil.”



Hard times

- Fr. Clet's life in the mission was marked by poverty. If there was a drought, there was no rice. They had little to no money for food. The mission house was not palatial, and the missionaries joked in calling it their "straw castle". The floor was beaten earth, and the roof was straw. The mission church was built in the same way. The 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.



Fr. Verhoeven, C. M. pinxit

Bx François-Régis Clet

Illegals

- The majority of the missionaries had entered China illegally. 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.
- 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.



Persecution

- Some missionaries were being put under observation, others were exiled; Christians were being forced to deny their faith under threat of torture. All foreigners were ordered out of China. The Vincentians protested and continued their evangelization.
- 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 by the end of the year. Francis Regis, the missionaries and the Christians went into hiding. His “straw castle” was destroyed, and the school and church were torn down. The mission was a pile of ruins.



In hiding

- In 1818, another persecution. Beijing started having terrible rains. The emperor consulted his oracles, and they accused the Christians of “threats from heaven.”
- Arrests of Chinese priests 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”
- Francis Regis and his companions were forced to live as fugitive 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. He was now 71 years old.



The long march

- Now a refugee in Hunan, Fr. Clet 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. He was arrested.



Beaten and tortured

- While Fr. Clet 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.



Imprisoned

- 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.”



Violent transportation; failing health

- When the mandarins learned that Fr. Clet's mission had its headquarters in the province of Huguang, they sent him back there. The very difficult 500 kilometer 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."



Trust in the Lord

- 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."



Loyalty and strength

- Some bad news reached the ears of Francis Regis: Fr. Lamiot had been arrested. 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.”



Sentenced

- 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.
- On 17 February, the imperial decision arrived in Wuhan: 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.



Final hours

- Francis Regis 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.
- During the night of 17-18 February 1820 the sad cortège 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. He prayed one last time.



Martyred

- “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 until the martyr gave up his last breath. Francis Regis had spent 28 years in China. He was martyred at age 72.



Source:

*"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.

Vincentiana
Volume 45, No. 1 Article 7

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