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Vincentian Chinese Pilgrimage to Rome

*By Thomas Sendlein, C.M.
Province of China*

The journey of Francis Regis Clet was long and exhausting – six long months. In his day, there were no airplanes, just a boat. The way was roundabout. The exact destination was unsure. The terrain was difficult. The political situation was hostile. The language was a mystery. It was a journey from France to the so-called “Middle Kingdom,” which seemed to the French the far side of the world and from which Francis Regis Clet realized that he would never return. Only his remains made the journey back to France.

Two hundred and nine years later, the journey or “pilgrimage” was the same distance, but only took an exhausting day. The means of transport was not a ship, but a crowded uncomfortable airplane. The way was not as roundabout as before, just stops in Bangkok and in the Netherlands. The destinations were Paris and Rome. The political situation was again hostile. A fresh controversy, precisely because of the canonizations, was erupting between the Vatican and the People’s Republic of China. The languages of French and Italian seemed mysterious to the Chinese pilgrims from Taiwan. We were on a pilgrimage to Paris to pay respects to Clet where his remains are entombed at the Chapel of St. Vincent de Paul and a pilgrimage to Rome to share in the ceremony, which publicly elevated Francis Regis Clet to the ranks of the saints.

Visiting the tomb of Francis Regis Clet

In planning the pilgrimage, we felt that the first stop should be Paris. Although the Vincentian priests, seminarian and Vincentian parishioners were exhausted after the long journey, we immediately celebrated the Eucharist at rue de Bac, asking the assistance of Mary to accompany us on our spiritual journey and on the constant journey of the Chinese people in history. The next day was September 27th, St. Vincent de Paul’s feast day. We celebrated the Mass with St. Vincent looking down upon us and St. John Gabriel Perboyre and St. Francis Regis Clet on each side looking up to us. We were surrounded by our Vincentian roots, from where many missionaries left for China. From Appiani and Muellner (1699) to the present, Vincentian missionaries have shared in the evangelization of China. Throughout our 300-year history in China and with well over 1,000 Vincentians, both Chinese and foreign, the Congregation has influenced the history of the Catholic Church in China.

As we, the Vincentian Chinese pilgrim group, made our prayerful way from St. Vincent de Paul to St. John Gabriel Perboyre and then to St. Francis

Regis Clet, we reflected on their lives and sufferings and even more, prayed to them to intercede for the Chinese people. From the church we moved to the relic room at the Maison-Mère. There we saw instruments used in the martyrdom of our saints and the clothes worn by them. Our understanding was widened when we realized that many more Vincentians and Daughters of Charity had died violent deaths as they served God's people in China. One particular section was dedicated to Bishop Schraven and his companions (a total of 3 Dutch, 2 French, 1 Polish and 1 Austrian confreres), who were killed by the Japanese in 1937 in Zhengding (Chengtingfu). The sole survivor of the massacre, Fr. Joseph Chow (Zhou), lives in Taiwan and just celebrated his 94th birthday.

Prayer Vigil in Preparation for the Canonization of Francis Regis Clet

In Rome the Chinese group could feel the spirit of the canonization rising as we entered the Church of San Gioacchino, where the Vincentian prayer vigil was just about to start. From the side altar right next to the sanctuary, we could hear and see the ceremony and enter into prayer with the other members of our Vincentian family. As we sang, prayed and listened to God's word together, one had a deep sense that the Vincentian Family was bigger than just one parish or just one part of the world. We were united in true family spirit both with those present at the prayer vigil and with those who could not be there. The ceremony brought together both the present and the past. The Vincentian heritage was being celebrated and being continued at the same time. This became more real as we gazed on the pictures of our various saints and blessed, which were being elevated in the sanctuary by various members of the Vincentian Family.

Rev. Robert Maloney, C.M., Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission and of the Daughters of Charity, gave his personal testimony of visiting the place of Francis Regis Clet's execution. He summed up the reasons why Clet was such an extraordinary person:

Clet was a whole person, genuinely integrated;
Clet trusted deeply in God's providence, where he found meaning in life;
Clet shows an astounding peacefulness about dying.

Father Maloney concludes: "My brothers and sisters, the saints make holiness real to us. They make it concrete. In them holiness comes alive. Their lives are not books of abstract theology, nor manuals of dry spirituality. They are the real thing. I encourage you today to rejoice in, and of course learn from, this wonderful man. He was a whole person, filled with tenderness and compassion. He trusted deeply in God's providence in his life and, with God leading the way, he walked peacefully to his death. Is there much more that we need to learn about

living than that? If Francis Regis Clet can teach us these lessons, then his martyrdom was surely not in vain.”

The Canonization of 120 Martyr Saints of China

The morning was overcast. A light drizzle could be felt now and then. As we arrived at St. Peter’s Square, we were all praying for a miracle – that it would not rain! A strong sun or a heavy rain would make the ceremony really miserable. The Vincentian Chinese delegation made its way up front toward the center where we had tickets for prearranged seats. We met another delegation from Taiwan and a Chinese delegation from Canada. We were all armed with our umbrellas and properly dressed for the occasion – in plastic raincoats.

Throughout the waiting and the ceremony, thousands of people worked in unison as all opened their umbrellas as it began to rain and closed them when it stopped. This happened innumerable times and it became so natural that no one seemed to mind. As I reflected during those moments, I thought of Francis Regis Clet who was dragged from place to place and from prison to prison – 33 in all. It must have been raining on some of those occasions and with what great physical suffering!

In the biographical profile for the canonization, we read:

“Blessed Francis Regis Clet of the Congregation of the Mission (Vincentians). After obtaining permission to go to the Missions in China, he embarked for the Orient in 1791. Having reached there, for thirty years he spent a life of missionary sacrifice. Upheld by an untiring zeal, he evangelized three immense provinces of the Chinese Empire: Jiangxi, Hubei, Hunan. Betrayed by a Christian, he was arrested and thrown into prison where he underwent atrocious tortures. Following sentence by the Emperor he was killed by strangling on 17 February 1820.”

Eighty-seven of those newly canonized were Chinese and Pope John Paul II said in his homily that with this solemn proclamation of holiness, the Church intends “to recognize that those martyrs are an example of courage and consistency to us all, and that they honor the noble Chinese people.” Referring to the 33 foreign missionaries, His Holiness said, “Resplendent in this host of martyrs are also the 33 missionaries who left their land and sought to immerse themselves in the Chinese world, lovingly assimilating its features in the desire to proclaim Christ and to serve those people.”

As the formula of canonization was read we sang in unison: “Amen. Alleluia,” as we gave praise to the Lord for the example of our brothers and sisters who gave their lives for the faith and the Chinese people.

At the “*Angelus*” that day, Pope John Paul II greeted the faithful assembled for the canonization: “With affection, I greet all the faithful gathered here to honor the Chinese Martyrs, especially those of you of Chinese origin, who are seeing for the first time the canonization of martyrs belonging to your own people. Likewise, my thoughts reach out to all the Catholic faithful in China. I know that you are spiritually united with us, and I am certain that you understand that this is a special moment of grace for the whole Church and for the entire Catholic community in China. I wish to assure you once more that I pray for you every day. May the Holy Martyrs comfort you and sustain you as, like them, you bravely and generously bear witness both to your fidelity to Jesus Christ and to your genuine love of your people. [Then in Chinese he said] I wish you peace.”

The Banquet after the Canonization

Several members of the Vincentian Chinese delegation were invited immediately after the canonization to a banquet. Both for me and for them the highlight of the meal was the possibility of meeting personally many relatives of Francis Regis Clet. The connection with Clet continued to become real.

The Get-together of the confreres in the evening

As evening came, so did a great number of confreres who joined together for a buffet meal at Via Pompeo Magno. Old acquaintances, distant friends, classmates dispersed on mission around the world had come to Rome for the canonization of our confrere. After lively conversations, everyone enjoyed a great meal and the Polish confreres belted out songs to enrich the already pleasant atmosphere.

The Mass of Thanksgiving on October 2, 2000

Cardinal Shan from Kaohsiung, Taiwan celebrated the Mass of Thanksgiving for the canonization of the Chinese martyr saints. Many of the confreres concelebrated this outdoor Mass in St. Peter’s Square. Once again, we had the orchestra of the opening and closing of the umbrellas as the rains came and left at various moments during the Mass. Once again, we did not mind as we concentrated on giving thanks to the Lord for these great Christian examples.

The Continuation of the Jubilee Pilgrimage

The Vincentian Chinese Pilgrimage continued as we visited the remaining three Basilicas of St. Paul, St. John Lateran and St. Maria Major. At each, we gave thanks to the Lord for the opportunity to participate at the canonization and the Jubilee Year 2000 and we prayed for our brothers and sisters in China.

Meanwhile in Mainland China

Before October 1st, a vigorous anti-canonization campaign was launched through state media, press and television. All sorts of accusations were broadcast against the foreign missionaries and their “infamous Chinese henchmen.” Interference in China’s internal religious affairs was again brought up. The government pressured the official bishops and priests to avoid speaking publicly about the canonization during the Masses on Sunday, October 1st. Many analysts see the intensity of the campaign as the government’s concern more about the official Church than about the unofficial one because more and more bishops and young priests are moving towards Rome.

Despite the ban on even mentioning the word “canonization,” on October 1st fresh flowers appeared on two side altars in a church, a silent, but *simple and profound proclamation* of the deep appreciation of our brothers and sisters in China toward St. John Gabriel Perboyre and St. Francis Regis Clet.

Explanation of the Calligraphy given to the Pope by the Chinese Pilgrims

This Chinese calligraphy/painting, which was presented to the Pope, was done by Huang Chung Jen of Taiwan. The Chinese character is “hú,” a single character which conveys many thoughts. This “hú” is a teapot. It is a gift from the community in Taiwan and China.

Chinese culture, Chinese hospitality and family custom can be defined by the teapot. It is a symbol of ceremony. It is a tradition of hospitality. This central theme to the culture of life can be seen in a teapot. At a gathering of friends, a family meal or reunion, a holiday or a celebration, the teapot is the vessel which carries the comfort, pleasure, warmth, health and healing of the tea liquid.

It can bring cheer, consolation, calm and peacefulness to those who share its content. It serves the rich and poor alike.

The martyrs being canonized could be easily seen as the teapots of Christianity in the Chinese culture.