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Francis clet as seen in his letters

by Thomas Davitt CM

When we wish to get to know John Gabriel Perboyre we are fortunate in being able to read 102 of his letters which have survived. They throw light on every stage of his life from his first letter written when he was fourteen years old to his last written shortly before his execution.

We are less fortunate in the case of Francis Clet. Seventy-five of his letters are still extant, but the earliest of these was written when he was forty-two years old ⁽¹⁾. We have no letters from his childhood, from his student days or from his time as a seminary professor in France.

He was born in Grenoble on 19 August 1748, the tenth of the fifteen children born to his parents ⁽²⁾. He was christened François-Régis after St Jean-François Régis who was canonised only nine years previously and to whom there was great devotion in the district. He entered the Congregation of the Mission in Lyons in 1769 and was ordained priest in 1772. These dates indicate that he had done most of his seminary studies before entering the Congregation. After his ordination he was appointed to the major seminary in Annecy as professor of moral theology. In his last years there he was also superior. In 1788 he was elected a delegate of the Province of Lyons to go to the sixteenth General Assembly of the Congregation in Paris; he was the youngest delegate present. The newly-elected Superior General, Jean-Félix Cayla de la Garde, asked Francis to remain in Paris as director of the internal seminary. In 1789 the Revolution began. In 1791 the Superior General decided to send three priests to China. One of them was unable to be ready in time for the departure and Francis volunteered to go in his place and was accepted.

His earliest surviving letter was written to his sister Marie-Thérèse, the eldest of the family, on 10 March 1791. It is quite a long letter, beginning as follows:

My very dear sister,

At last my wishes have been granted and I am at the peak of happiness. Providence wants me to go to work for the salvation of the heathens. The opportunity has just cropped up and I eagerly grabbed it; I've just had a chat with the Superior General about it, and he is quite willing to go along with my wishes. Various circumstances

⁽¹⁾ Van den Brandt, CM, Joseph (Ed.): *Lettres du Bienheureux François-Régis Clet*, Pékin, 1944.

⁽²⁾ His parents were well-off business people who lived in No. 14, Grande Rue, Grenoble.

involved in this opportunity indicate that it is God's will, and you know that I value this divine favour too much not to accept it completely. In a word, I'm off to China, with two confreres, in the immediate future.

Further down he deals with practical matters:

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 get an answer from you before I leave Paris, so waste no time about 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 I've made my will. But it's important to fix things up for any eventuality. I'm not handing over to you complete control of all my property because, absolutely speaking, I could come back, and then, if you were dead, I'd have no claim (Letter 1).

It is interesting that he had to pay for his journey to China out of his own pocket. He tells his sister that the bursar in St Lazare, Jean-François Daudet, is willing to lend him 1,000 francs on condition that she repay them from Francis' funds.

His sister received his letter in Grenoble, answered it, and he was able to send another to her on 20 March, the eve of his departure from Paris. The postal service in revolutionary France was obviously quite efficient. She had tried, naturally enough, to dissuade him from what he planned. In his reply he said:

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 (Letter 2).

He wrote to her again from Lorient on 2 April, the day he was due to set sail:

I won't tell you again that I'm very pleased with my appointment. Not, of course, that nature does not put in its many claims on me, nor that my expatriation does not leave me unaffected, but I believe Providence has spoken, I believe I must obey its orders. "God wills it", that's my motto; you never had any other (Letter 3).

Around the time of his departure the bursar in St Lazare, Jean-François Daudet, already referred to, wrote to an Irish confrere, Robert Hanna, who was in Macao waiting for the chance to get to Peking:

Father Clet, who had been teaching theology with success for fourteen years, arrived here for the General Assembly; they got to know him well enough to appreciate his worth and made him director of the internal seminary, 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. To sum him up briefly, he's very gifted ⁽³⁾.

He wrote to his sister from the Cape of Good Hope on 2 July:

The sea had only the usual effect on me. While almost all the first-time sailors paid their tax to the sea by wearying vomiting, I myself felt merely a sort of interior lassitude (Letter 4).

He arrived in the Portuguese colony of Macao on 15 October 1791 and exactly a year later he wrote to his sister from his final destination in the interior of China, in the province of Kiang-si. After reporting persistent constipation he continues:

At the moment I'm living in a house which is rather large but totally dilapidated. They're going to start fixing it immediately, and as it's wooden it will not be unhealthy in the winter, which isn't very bad in these parts anyway.

A new life is beginning for me. I have to revive religious feeling in former Christians who have been left on their own for many years, and to convert heathens. That, I hope, is my work up till my death (Letter 5).

Francis was forty-four at this time, and learning Chinese was a big problem. Nearly fifty years later John Gabriel Perboyre wrote that he had heard that Francis spoke Chinese only with great difficulty ⁽⁴⁾. On 29 August 1798, six years after arriving at his mission station, he wrote to one of his older brothers François, who was a Carthusian in Rome. (Our man was François-Régis, his brother just François):

The Chinese language is hopeless. The characters which make it up don't represent sounds but ideas; this means that there is 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 daily living, for hearing confessions and for giving some advice to Christians... (Letter 12).

Earlier in the same long letter he had written:

My being transplanted to a country and climate so different from ours hasn't affected my health in any way; I've been seriously ill twice, but God did not want to take me from this world so as to leave me more time to do penance. 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 staple food of the

⁽³⁾ Quoted in Demimuid: *Vie du Vénérable François-Régis Clet*, Paris, 1893, p. 64. For Robert Hanna see my article in *Colloque* 25, Spring 1992, pp. 40-54.

⁽⁴⁾ Van den Brandt CM, Joseph (Ed.): *Lettres du Bienheureux Jean-Gabriel Perboyre*, Pékin 1940, p. 119.

Chinese; we have fowl, pork and plants from which to make soup to give taste to our bread. Conversions of heathens 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... (Letter 12).

In a letter of 6 November 1799, to the same brother, he made another comparison with France:

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". Proportionately, 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 only once really seriously. I'm slim now instead of fat, so I can cross mountains more easily. I make all my trips on foot as I find it less tiring than on horseback. I am often offered the latter but always refuse. (Letter 15).

He also mentions that letters from France are not reaching him.

The latest surviving letter to his Carthusian brother is undated, but appears to be from 1801-02. He had received a letter from his brother in which there was reference to other letters which never reached him:

... 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...

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 his capital and not in the interior of the provinces; we slip secretly into such 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...

I see no gleam of hope for martyrdom; anyway I've no problem 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 (Letter 16).

The majority of the remainder of the surviving letters were written to a Chinese confrere Paul Song. He was born in 1774 and ordained in 1803, and appointed to work with Francis. For eight years there was much misunderstanding and tension between them, though Song kept all the letters he received from Francis. In 1811 there came a change and Song's attitude changed into one of admiration. At the start he was scrupulous, did not take good care of his health and was not good at being present at community functions.

Francis was Song's superior, an office which he did not want and which he asked to be

relieved of many times (*Letters 23, 33, 47, 50*). But as his superior he had to deal with Song's problems, and sometimes the tone of the former teacher of moral theology can be detected in his letters. In one, dealing with Song's worries about distractions while praying his office, he explains the various grades of attention, and concludes:

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 (Letter 29).

Song appears to have also been unduly sensitive, to accusations of laziness, for example, sometimes seeing references to himself which were not there. Francis' mild sense of humour was probably lost on Song:

Your letter gave me both joy and sorrow; joy that your health is good, sorrow that your return is further delayed 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 coming back I was afraid that you had caught some illness. Now be quite sure I am not accusing you of laziness... (Letter 19).

That last sentence clearly did not have a lasting effect:

It's important, and justice demands it, that I quickly put you right about a wrong meaning you took from a sentence in a letter from Father [Louis] Lamiot [CM] which you did not understand. Read over again carefully the bit in question and you'll see that it does not refer to Paul Song but to a young man from Han-keou called François Lieou... He was dismissed for laziness, lack of application and want of steadiness... How could you have thought I'd be so stupid as to give you a letter to read which contained complaints about yourself? (Letter 34).

Song wrote later to Jean-Joseph Ghislain in Peking, complaining about Francis. Francis replied, again with a touch of humour:

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 major superiors; I only wish they'd make such strong complaints that my superiors would be forced to relieve me of a weight or load which I cannot 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 have always said that it is better to live for the glory of God than to die for it, especially in China where priests are scarce... (Letter 55).

That letter was written in December 1811. From then until his execution in 1820 there are fewer surviving letters than from the earlier period. In 1818 he wrote to Louis Lamiot, his superior in Peking:

Our first cross is the death of Father [Lazare] Dumazel [CM] in Chang-tsin-hien; in his last moments he was assisted by Father Song... Our second cross is the capture of Father [François] Chen [CM]. He was sold by a new Judas for 20,000 deniers 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 has not yet been decided. This persecution we are experiencing started in the first few days of the first moon this year in this way: A heathen, known everywhere as a bad lot, laid 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 blamed two families for it, alleging that I had put them up to it. He even accused Fathers [Nicolas] Ho and [Stanislas] Ngay [CM]; the latter, without saying a word, took off for Chang-tsin-hien. This ridiculous slander was believed in court. The capture of Father Chen a few days later made things worse...

While waiting for a chance to get back to our Cou-tching mountains I'll look after the administration of Ho-nan. My health is keeping up in spite of our set-backs and my seventy-plus 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 started 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 have anything in the line of a decent watch I'd like you to send it along, and some money after it, and some red pills... (Letter 63).

He was captured on Trinity Sunday, June 16, 1819, betrayed by the school teacher who had betrayed François Chen the previous year, a Catholic whose scandalous life had led to bad feeling between himself and priests. Six months later he wrote to Jean-François Richenet CM in Paris:

The Mandarin's idea was to send me to a jail where I'd be the sole Christian and where perhaps I'd die through lack 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 would not 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 brought to another jail nearby where I had the pleasure of meeting Father Chen and ten good Christians, all in the same 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 heathen prisoners who occupy other rooms around a large open yard, where we are free to roam around 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 were not for me they could not receive absolution. We all went to confession, and Father [Antoine]

Tcheng [CM], who maintains an underground ministry to the Christian communities around this town, celebrated mass in a nearby house and brought Communion to us all without our fellow-prisoners noticing...

My case 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 P[e]K[ing] and three 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 to God, and who is getting only what he deserves (Letter 65).

He wrote that on 28 December 1819. On 1 January 1820 he was found guilty of deceiving and corrupting Chinese people by preaching Christianity to them, and was sentenced to be strangled on a gibbet; the sentence had to be confirmed by the Emperor.

On 26 January he added a postscript to this letter:

Today, 26 January, 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 Tcheng, and we had a feastday dinner at midday with three priests and six laymen, two of whom were prisoners and four visitors. The only one missing was Father Lamiot, who paid for the meal.

These things were possible because they were in a detention prison, not a punishment one, and this fact led him to enclose with the above-quoted letter a letter for publication in French newspapers. It would be interesting to know if it was ever published:

As I often heard in France of dungeons and gloomy cells where prisoners are locked up till 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 Ou-tchang-seng 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 fresh air so necessary for health. I saw a man who had poisoned his mother. What a terrible crime! 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 starts 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 heathens 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... (Letter 65).

This fact also permitted him to take on a role which was rather unusual for someone in his position. A disagreement had arisen between the French and Portuguese confreres in Peking and Louis Lamiot asked Francis to act as mediator. Several letters were exchanged between Francis and the Portuguese, and it emerged that Lamiot was really the person at fault; he was being too French and was trying to rush things. Francis reminded Lamiot that Adrien Bourdoise was too impetuous while Vincent de Paul was more cautious. Bourdoise called Vincent a wet hen, but Vincent's methods were the better (*Letter 74*).

His last letter, to Lamiot, was un-dated:

Rightly or wrongly I consider that 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 am better off than you. Here I am not far from harbour, 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 harbour while they send lots of others 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 in Ho-nan province 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 Sze-tchoang, Kio-chan and Lou-y-hien.

This is perhaps my last sign of life to you.

Clet

P.S. Should I burn all the notes you sent me, or return them to you? (*Letter 75*).

On the morning of 18 February 1820 he was executed.