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Roberto D'Amico C.M.

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## The History of the Canonization of St. Francis Regis Clet

by Roberto D'Amico, C.M.  
Postulator General

At the General Assembly of the Congregation of the Mission, held in Paris in 1835, in response to the proposal offered by the Province of Rome concerning the introduction of the cause of the beatification of our confrere Francis Folchi who died in 1823 in the odor of sanctity, the following decision was taken: "...this proposal is unanimously rejected ... because it is not in accord with the humble state of our institute...."<sup>1</sup>

This authoritative decree did not encourage, for at least a century, the processes of beatification and canonization in the Community. The result was that all the causes from the mid 1800's onward were initiated many years after the deaths of our confreres and our sisters, the Daughters of Charity. The postulators in presenting the "Positio" to the Congregation of the Causes of Saints, adopted the reason for the delay in the processes, the mind set that held sway in the Community caused by that decree.

A new intervention became necessary in 1931 by the Superior General, Fr. Francois Verdier, who abrogated that norm.<sup>2</sup>

But by the force of that decree the causes of the martyrs Sts. Francis Regis Clet and John Gabriel Perboyre were excluded.

The well attested to news of the martyrdom of Francis Regis Clet which occurred on 18 February 1820 arrived soon in Rome and Paris.

On 10 October 1821, not long after the martyrdom, Fr. Santucci, superior of the College of the Chinese in Naples, wrote to the superior of Montecitorio, Fr. Baccari:

*I have the honor of sending you a report about the martyrdom of Francis Clet of your respectable Congregation, written by a certain Francis Mu, a catechist. This came to me from Macao, together with letters for this College of the Chinese in Naples, sent by the procurator of the Mission of China, Fr. Marchini. As far as I am concerned, I am filled with joy together with my confreres for the glory of God which redounds to your community.... I would hope that the recent glorious martyr for Jesus Christ will intercede with the Almighty, in order to obtain an increase of fervor for your zealous confreres....*<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Acta conventum Congregationis Missionis*, p. 246; e *Conv. Gen. XVIII*, sess. 8, an 1835.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Circular letter 1 January 1931 in *Raccolta Circolari dei Superiori Generali*.

<sup>3</sup> Letter of Msgr. Santucci, Superior of the College of the Chinese in Naples to Fr. Baccari, Superior of Montecitorio in Rome.

After the martyrdom of the venerated confrere, such was the fame of his sanctity and of his martyrdom, that the Christians started as a sign of veneration to gather up everything that belonged to him and that touched his body, as precious relics: his garments soaked in blood, the instruments of his final torture, and the chains.

These relics were immediately brought to Paris and, in 1833, John Gabriel Perboyre, director of novices, showing them the relics of our saint said: "These are the garments of a martyr, these are the garments of Fr. Clet, this is the cord by which he was strangled. What a joy it would be for us if one day we would have the same fate."

Clet's example and the death of Brother Louis on his way to China pushed Perboyre to request and then to leave for China, where on 11 September 1840 hardly four years after his arrival, was realized the desire, expressed to his seminarians, of giving his life as a witness to the faith through martyrdom.

The news of this new martyr struck the Vincentian community deeply.

Fr. Nozo, the Superior General, in his circular on the first day of 1841, announcing Perboyre's death, wrote thus: "We have shed tears of sadness and of joy on learning of the martyrdom of our confrere and of the generous constancy by which he gave witness to Jesus Christ, through the cruelest torments, through the faith he manifested, and the love with which he embraced the cross before the judges who wanted him to trample it.... His blood, we are certain, will be the seed of new Christians and will cause to spring up for this mission, so dear to his heart, new workers capable of succeeding him...."<sup>4</sup>

In those years His Eminence Cardinal Filippo Frasoni was Prefect of the Congregation of Propaganda Fide, which had dealt with the Community about the opening of the mission in Ethiopia, and had a good rapport with the procurator to the Holy Sea, Fr. Vito Guarini.

Being made aware of this new martyr, it suggested to the Procurator that it was time to begin the process of canonization for the two martyrs.

Thus on 12 June 1843, following the formal request presented by Fr. Guarini, a commission was set up at the Vatican to decide on the opening of the process. On July 9, following the favorable opinion of the Commission, Pope Gregory XVI declared the martyrs Clet and Perboyre to be venerable, joining them to 42 other martyrs of China whose causes had already been examined in 1840.

Processes were initiated in Kiangsi and Hunan Provinces in China and the witnesses emphasized the reputation both of holiness and martyrdom which the two servants of God had among the Chinese Christians.

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<sup>4</sup> Recueil des Principales Circulaires des Supérieurs Généraux de la Congrégation de la Mission, Tome II, p. 524.

The cause of John Gabriel Perboyre was soon separated from that of the other Chinese martyrs achieving beatification in 1889.

The processes undertaken in Rome and the two done in China were presented to the Congregation of the Cause of Saints on 22 July 1893, in the ordinary congregation. Concerning the validity of the processes in Rome, the validity of the processes in China and the obedience to the decrees of Urban VIII regarding the “non Cult,” the response was favorable to the first and third question. As to the processes in China, it was agreed to ask the validation of Pope by the “sanation” for every defect of form.

The Holy Father on 23 July 1893, having received the report on all these matters, confirmed the decisions and validated the processes undertaken in China.

On 3 February 1900, the Particular Congregation met to discuss the question: “Is there evidence of the martyrdom and its cause, and also are there signs or miracles which confirm the martyrdom of the person in question.”

On February 25, the Holy Father handed down his favorable judgment, that is on the martyrdom, the cause of martyrdom and the miracles.

Finally in the General Congregation of 25 March, an affirmative response was given to the request for permission to proceed to the Beatification. The Holy Father reserved his judgement in order to seek divine help.

On 8 April, Palm Sunday, he promulgated the decree in which it was decided that the beatification of the Venerable could proceed together with the other Chinese martyrs.

On May 7, the Brief of Beatification was issued in which Clet was introduced with the following words:

*The Congregation of the Mission of St. Vincent de Paul which embraces every type of ministry and charity, and is spread out in various continents, offered as a companion to the other martyrs in China, the Servant of God, Francis Clet who, neither exhausted by his apostolic labors, nor frightened by dangers after long torments in harsh captivity, strangled and cruelly trampled, bore his long martyrdom with utmost constancy.*

On May 27 of that same year, Leo XIII beatified Francis Regis Clet together with 77 other martyrs of China and Vietnam. Forty-nine of these martyrs were members of the Foreign Mission Society of Paris, 26 were members of the Dominican family, and one was an Italian of the Friars Minor.

A solemn triduum was celebrated at St. Lazare in honor of the newly beatified Clet on 25, 26 and 27 June.

## **The Canonization**

The first petitions, at least in official form, to canonize together all the beatified martyrs of China, came through the direct involvement of the Chinese Episcopate of Taiwan.<sup>5</sup>

In 1984 a commission was convened to promote the cause, and the Bishops made a formal request to the Congregation of the Cause of Saints.

But the petition at that moment remained pending in the sense that the Holy Father, while fully committed to the project of one common canonization, did not think it to be an opportune moment to go further, given the extremely precarious political-religious situation on mainland China in that period. And so the “delay” order was issued.

At the consistory of 29 January 1996, the cause of John Gabriel Perboyre conducted independently by the normal process was concluded and his canonization was set for 2 June of the same year.

This news moved the new Bishop of Kaohsiung, Paul Shan Si, as president of the Chinese Regional Conference of Taiwan, to appeal again to John Paul II, on 28 February 1996, to declare all the other blessed martyrs to be saints.

1996 marked, in fact, the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the consecration of the first six native Chinese bishops and the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of the Catholic hierarchy in that nation which, for half a century, was beset by a cruel religious persecution and was sustained by the clergy and faithful with heroic perseverance in imitation of the blessed martyrs. Important pastoral reasons were offered on behalf of the Church of China for petitioning a dispensation from the miracle prescribed by canon law, among other reasons it being impossible to begin to conduct Diocesan inquests on eventual cases involving miracles.

The letter of the president of the council was followed on 10 April by a request signed by the nine bishops of Taiwan, inviting John Paul II to preside at a ceremony that same year, dedicated by the local church to catechetical studies and to evangelization, matters favored by the translation of the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

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<sup>5</sup> The blessed martyrs numbered 120, of whom 86 were of Chinese nationality and of these 4 were priests, 2 were seminarians, and 80 were lay people of various social levels. From 1684 to 1930, seven religious communities had members martyred in China: Franciscans, Dominicans, Jesuits, Foreign Mission Society of Paris, Vincentians, PIME and Salesians. These were of Italian, French, Spanish, Belgian and Dutch nationality: 6 bishops, 20 priests, and 7 Franciscan Missionary Sisters of Mary Immaculate. St. John Gabriel Perboyre, as he was in 1889 the first martyr of China to be beatified, so in 1996 he proceeded all the other martyrs of China in canonization.

On 16 April 1996, Cardinal Angelo Sodano, Secretary of State, responded: “Given the impossibility of postponing the canonization of Blessed Perboyre in order to join it with that of the other blessed, assurance is offered that the matter was being studied by the Congregation of the Causes of Saints for a quick and convenient solution.”

Actually the Holy Father thought it opportune to remove the “delay” issued in 1984 and had instructed the appropriate Office to examine the proposal of the Bishops.

Early in March of 1996, after an introductory meeting of the prelates of the Congregation of the Causes of Saints and three postulators, it was thought opportune to hold a meeting of all seven postulators who were involved with the various groups of martyrs.

At the meeting of 10 April, it was decided to send to John Paul II a common “Supplex libellus,” asking for the unification of the individual causes corresponding to the groups of martyrs, in order to have but one canonization. The postulators agreed to the ecclesial reasons presented by the bishops of Taiwan, and left the rest of the procedure to the Holy Father.

The same Holy Father John Paul II in his homily at the canonization of John Gabriel Perboyre on 2 June, expressed the following:

*To the remembrance of John Gabriel Perboyre, whom we celebrate today, we wish to join all those who gave testimony in the name of Jesus Christ in the land of China during past centuries. I am thinking especially of the blessed martyrs whose common canonization hoped for by numerous faithful, might one day be a sign of hope for the Church present in the bosom of that people to whom I am close in heart and in prayer....<sup>6</sup>*

On June 15, the seven postulators, encouraged by the words of the Holy Father, offered some observations regarding the process. They also presented two collections of similar cases containing the jurisprudence adopted by the Holy See dealing with the joining together of causes of Blessed Martyrs directed towards a single canonization and the related dispensation of the required miracle.

Having referred to the Holy Father the question to be examined in view of a definitive decision, the Secretariat of State by its letter of 31 October 1996, communicated to the Congregation the conditions with which it had to comply.

Therefore the postulators, notified by the Congregation for the Cause of Saints, undertook the preparation of the documentation or “dossier” for each group of martyrs which would answer these three questions:

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<sup>6</sup> L'Osservatore Romano 3-4 giugno 1996.

- the need to show a continuing “reputation of martyrdom”;
- a thoroughly examined documentation for every group of the said “reputation for signs”; also data about the perseverance of many Christians in the faith, and the survival of the Church in China, attributable to the invocation and the emulation of the martyrs; which conditions must be verified before it would be possible to petition the Holy Father to dispense from the miracle;
- The eventual unification of the seven groups of Chinese Blessed following the evaluation of the requirements.

On 27 April 1997 the various “dossiers” prepared by the seven postulators were presented to the Congregation of the Cause of Saints.

In the month of November 1999, three consultors of the Congregation, having thoroughly studied the various dossiers, gave a favorable vote to proceed.

On 11 January 2000, the decree to unify the causes was issued and on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of the same month the Holy Father decreed that they could proceed with the canonization of the 120 blessed.

On 10 March 10, His Holiness Pope John Paul II in a public consistory announced the canonization of the 120 martyrs of China for 1 October 2000.

### **The Cult of the Sainted Martyr**

The missionaries who labored in China affirmed that Clet was much venerated and recognized for his long apostolic activity of about 30 years, for his virtue, for his cultural preparation and, finally, for his glorious martyrdom.

Immediately after his martyrdom at U-tch’ang-fu, the executioners buried him near the place where he was executed, in the cemetery reserved for criminals. But the precious remains did not stay there for very long, because the faithful, having agreed among themselves, carried them off at night to Hong-cian, or Red Mountain, in the Christian Cemetery. There they were venerated with great fervor by the believers.

When, in 1843, he was declared venerable together with his saintly confrere John Gabriel Perboyre, the superiors of the Congregation of the Mission wished that the mortal remains of the two martyrs be brought to Paris and placed in the chapel of the Motherhouse of the Congregation, and had recourse to the confrere bishop in China, Msgr. Delaplace.

The Chinese faithful came to know of this request and entreated Msgr. Delaplace, imploring him to leave the relics of Father Lieu, the Chinese name of Clet, in the land of China.

*In the name of all the Christians of Hou-kouang we are sending you this petition, that you permit us to keep with us the holy body of the Venerable Clet as an eternal memory of his martyrdom....*

*Nevertheless we beg you to consider that, if the relics of the saints who gave us such admirable examples do not remain in their primitive place, it is to be feared that with the passing of time they will be wiped away from our memory.*

*For this reason we all together humbly petition, imploring you to take into account the effect that this would have on the flock of the faithful, and to leave it the body of its old pastor.<sup>7</sup>*

Notwithstanding the request, on 23 May 1853, the remains of Clet were exhumed under the care of Msgr. Delaplace, a Vincentian, and of Msgr. Spelta, successor to Msgr. Rizzolati, and were brought first to Ningpo, and then to Paris.

On 30 January 1869, the relics of the heroic martyr, after a long and adventurous journey, were received with great festivity in Paris at the Motherhouse of the Mission.

On 6 September 1878, in the relic room at the Motherhouse of St. Lazare, the Auxiliary Bishop of Paris, Msgr. Richard, after a very detailed examination by two physicians, completed the canonical identification of the Venerable's mortal remains.

A particular veneration developed after the mortal remains were brought back to Paris, and an altar was dedicated in his memory after the beatification.

Clet's figure remained somewhat in the shadow of his confrere St. John Gabriel Perboyre. The latter was named patron saint of our seminarians and was therefore better known and consequently more venerated.

In all the churches of the Congregation and of the Company of the Daughters of Charity, as well as in the chapels and on the altars dedicated to Perboyre, there are his image or portrait, depicting him at the foot of a gallows made in the form of a cross with a cord in his hands, signifying his death by strangulation.

In Grenoble next to the baptistery is a large stone which reminds the faithful of the baptism of their fellow citizen and martyr for the faith.

In the archives of the Motherhouse in Paris some letters are preserved which document several graces granted through the intercession of the saint: there are various cures often described by the Daughters of Charity, serving the sick in

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. *Annales de la Congrégation de la Mission*, Tome XXXIV, p. 306ff.

hospitals, or for personal situations in very serious cases one would turn to Blessed Francis Regis Clet<sup>8</sup> asking for his intercession, and the prayers were heard.

The Archbishop of Hankow, Msgr. Doug Guang Ding (now deceased), affirmed in 1988 that the memory of the martyrs Clet and Perboyre were still alive in the region.

In February 1994 he wrote: “At the beginning of the cultural revolution, the markers that were placed on the tombs of Clet and Perboyre in China were hidden by the Christians for fear that they would be profaned and broken.” He had the markers searched for and they were found. Perboyre’s was intact, while Clet’s was damaged, missing the Chinese inscription. He had the markers located with honor in the patriotic regional seminary in Wuhan, “so that the future priests of the region might remember those who were their fathers in the faith.”

## **Conclusion**

On 1 October 1 during the grand jubilee of 2000, the Church by the canonization of the Chinese martyrs, wished to exalt the sanctity and the constancy in the faith of the Church in China, not withstanding the persecutions.

It was beautiful that, on the same day, Chinese Christians were exalted together with European missionaries.

Francis Regis Clet, genial, amiable, cordial and always available, with a welcoming manner, loved the Chinese and was loved by them in return. The situation of extreme poverty in which he had to labor, moved him deeply. Fr. Joseph Ly who knew him as a child wrote with admiration: “The heart and the spirit of Fr. Lieu (the Chinese name of our martyr) was a great lantern.”

With the canonization the “great lantern” emerges from the shadows and enlightens all those in the Church who feel themselves called to announce the Gospel to the poor of today.

(STEPHEN J. INDIA, C. M., Translator)

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<sup>8</sup>Cf. *Annales de la Congrégation de la Mission* 65 (585-587); 66 (145, 497); 67 (459-460); 68 (132). The originals, which are preserved in the Archives of the Motherhouse, are numbered ... 27, 34, 39, 40 ... and one is without a number, are letters addressed to the Superior General.