

**HOMILY — PRAYER VIGIL in PREPARATION
for the CANONIZATION of FRANCIS REGIS CLET
Rome, Italy, Church of San Gioacchino, September 30, 2000**

Last year I visited Wuhan, the city where Francis Regis Clet was killed. I walked down to the river to a place where I was reasonably sure that his execution had taken place. I moved about very cautiously because I was concerned about surveillance. It is still hard for us, who have so much liberty, to believe that millions of Catholics continue to live underground and suffer for their faith in continental China. I was deeply moved as I thought of Francis Regis Clet, a 72-year old man, walking calmly to his death. There, at the side of the river, he was tied to a cross, strangled three times, and died.

Clet was an extraordinary man. Let me try to tell you why.

1. First, he was a whole person, genuinely integrated. His friends described him as filled with tenderness and compassion. He lived a long, full life. Can you imagine: he was right there at the beginning of the French Revolution. An angry mob invaded the Motherhouse where he was living and destroyed everything. He was the Director of Novices in Paris at the time, a talented, intelligent, friendly man. Sensing that the Congregation was about to be suppressed in France, he offered to go to China and within a few weeks was on his way, knowing that he would never return to see those whom he loved.

His letters from China are wonderful. They show good humor, his love for his family, his deep concern for the poverty and the faith of the Chinese people he served. They also show a million other little preoccupations that all of us can understand. He hated being superior. He needed oil for anointing the sick, candles and wine for Mass. He asked for a watch that would keep good time. At times he had no money. He complains that his letters and those of others got lost. He laments about the ongoing violent revolution in France.

His confreres and the Chinese people liked Francis Regis Clet very much. It is evident too that the mandarin who presided at his final trial admired him greatly. In fact, he recommended that Clet would not be executed. But the emperor decided otherwise.

2. He trusted deeply in God's providence. As he arrived in China he wrote: "I believe that I am following the will of providence." All through his years there he tells his friends, "We must adore providence in good times and in bad." Even in prison, he sees God's hand in everything. And, writing to his confreres, he reminds them of how important trust in God's providence was for St. Vincent. We must follow it in everything, he states. It seems to me that this was the secret of his holiness: Clet found meaning in life because he was

able to find God in all life's events. Trust in providence is precisely that. It is the virtue of meaning. It finds meaning in abundance and poverty, light and darkness, love and hate, grace and sin, plan and disruption, peace and violence, health and sickness, life and death.

3. Clet shows an astounding peacefulness about dying. Months before the end, he realized that a great hurricane was engulfing him and that it would soon lead him to death. After his capture he passed through 27 different prisons. He was beaten and made to kneel for hours on chains. He was dirty, hungry, dressed in rags, and covered with fleas when he arrived in Wuhan. But here too, he said, providence intervened. He was so poor and dirty that the jailors in one place refused to receive him and he was sent to another where he found priest friends and a group of Christians. He told everyone that his final months in jail were relatively pleasant — much better, he states, than in French jails — and there he peacefully awaited death. He wrote to friends during this period: "For me, to live means Christ and to die is a gain." In the final letter he wrote, addressed to his superior, he concludes simply: "This is probably the last sign of life that you will see from me." Then he walked to his execution.

My brothers and sisters, the saints make holiness real for 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.

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