

The Psycho-Spiritual Development of John-Gabriel Perboyre

By *Eugene Curran C.M.*
Province of Ireland

“The last temptation is the greatest treason;
To do the right thing for the wrong reason.”

T. S. Eliot, *Murder in the Cathedral*

At the end of the corridor in All Hallows' College, where my office is located, there stands a plaster statue of John Gabriel Perboyre. It is a classic early 20th-century model. John Gabriel hangs, head low, dressed in Chinese clothes. The figure looks relatively frail and weighed down. The colours are muted and subdued. It is an image that is probably repeated in Vincentian establishments across the globe. It speaks of a man who endured suffering with patience, who accepted the Will of God, who went meekly and piously to his martyrdom. Here was a good shepherd laying down his life for the flock; here was the grain of wheat ground to purity by his death.

In stark contrast was the painting of the newly canonised martyr which stood in the sanctuary of St. Paul's Outside-the-Walls last year. Here, our late confrere raises his head to heaven. The colours are deep and vibrant, rich blues and deep mauves. Most striking of all, however, is the portrayal of his body. This is no frail man but a “muscular Christian” in every sense. The clothes are torn back to reveal his musculature and strength. My immediate, if irreverent, response on seeing this was that this was John Gabriel as Rambo, as action hero. Here was the brave and valiant hero who faced death with courage and fortitude; here was a warrior and a hero.

Which, if either, is the true John-Gabriel? We know that his physical health was always a worry to him and that, for some time, he thought it would keep him from fulfilling his dream of going to the Chinese mission. We know that he suffered from a hernia which caused him great pain and sometimes incapacitated him. Yet we also know that, unlike his brother Louis, he survived the journey to China and the journeys within China. We know that, in fact, he found that the Chinese environment seemed to agree better with his health than the city of Paris had done (Letter 69).

Saints: Icons and Images

How we portray our saints says as much about them as it does about us. Just as they are offered to us as models whom we might emulate in our faith, so

we form them into the image of what we hope to be. They are icons of the divine for us; what Joan Chittister has called “Fragments of the Face of God.” Yet the images we paint, cast and mould of them, reveal also what we want them to be for us, and what we want them to be for us can and does alter through time.

The John Gabriel of the Devotional Revolution of the late 19th century and the John Gabriel of the post-Vatican II Church are the same man but viewed from very different perspectives. In the same way that the pre-Devotional-Revolution Vincent de Paul was (as in St. Peter’s in Rome) portrayed as the energetic missionary, mission cross in hand, pointing to heaven and exhorting the onlooker to faith, and the “Devotional” Vincent was portrayed as the kindly father of orphans, often braving the elements, sheltering the children beneath his cloak, and is now most often portrayed as the one “in the midst” (as in the Kurt Welther icon or the statue at DePaul, Chicago), so our portrayals of John Gabriel Perboyre have changed.

The inspiration for the current work is a book by Susan McMichaels. In *Out of the Garden*, she speaks of her desire to show St. Francis of Assisi as something other than a garden statue, “a static cultural icon of unattainable gentleness and peace.” In reaction to the sentimentalised view of Francis, she says that “we must appreciate the struggle he underwent and be willing to undergo that same transformation.”

The methodology for this current work, and which will be outlined later, I developed for an earlier work published in *Colloque*, Spring 2000; “The Transfiguration of the Commonplace; the psycho-spiritual development of Louise de Marillac,” which had the subtitle “Was Louise really neurotic?”

As with Louise, so with John Gabriel: one needs to exercise what Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza has called “a hermeneutic of suspicion.” Just like Francis and Louise, there is an enduring myth of John Gabriel, perpetuated in the oral tradition of the Congregation and in the portrayals of him in art: of one who, almost in parallel to the Passion of Christ, endured his own Via Crucis. He was betrayed by a companion, endured mockery and scorn and died on a cross. A hermeneutic of suspicion calls us to be wary of taking things at face value and to seek further for the motivation.

Furthermore, as a martyr, we are inclined to read his acceptance of martyrdom as a sign of a deep and developed spirituality. His sanctity is attested to by the declaration of his canonisation but it tells us little about the man who was martyred. In some ways, martyrdom is a direct intervention into the stream of one’s life and requires an immediate response. That John Gabriel was willing to respond and to witness to the faith even to death is incontestable; what this work will seek to explore is how he came to that point, from what perspective he

may have made that decision and how his life up to that moment had prepared him for the choice that he made. The quotation from Eliot's, *Murder in the Cathedral*, which deals with the martyrdom of Thomas à Becket, reminds us that the act of martyrdom in itself indicates little of the motivation for undergoing such martyrdom.

Let me make my own position clear from the outset: such an image of John Gabriel left me cold and untouched. A French confrere had died in China a century and a half before my birth. I knew little about him and did not seek to know more. The images did not attract me; I knew nothing of how he thought or felt. He had no personality for me, he had only a role; he was martyred and martyrdom did not attract me nor did it seem likely to be part of my own destiny or faith journey. China was thousands of miles from my home and a million miles from my consciousness. He did not attract me as Vincent himself, Louise, Catherine and Frederick attracted me. These were people who had lived in a milieu close to mine, who expressed a faith that spoke to mine, who, though separated from me by time and culture, seemed real, authentic and vibrant. I could resonate with their struggles and their endeavours to live committed and consecrated lives. In truth, I found it hard to muster any enthusiasm for the celebrations of John Gabriel's canonisation. I was more touched by the canonisation of Edith Stein of Auschwitz about the same time.

Then I was asked to write this piece for *Vincentiana*. Duties and tasks at work meant that I had to postpone it and I was late coming to reading his letters. They forced me into a relationship with my martyred confrere. One cannot read the letters of another without forming some opinion of them and, albeit at a remove, entering into a relationship with their author.

Methodology

In this text, I will examine Fr. Perboyre through the lens of his letters. John Gabriel did not write any spiritual texts or other writings which might have revealed to us something of his spiritual development. He did not consciously consider that his letters would be read by future generations (although he was aware that many of them would be read by people other than the addressee). His letters are conscious constructions rather than unstructured subconscious jottings or ramblings. He wrote with purpose and intent yet, nonetheless, they are revelatory of his psychological state. They can fulfil the same functions as Thematic Apperception Tests (TATs) in psychological profiling. In these tests, the candidates are asked to write a short story or piece about a picture which is presented to them. Like letters, these are conscious constructs but are revelatory of certain fundamental needs, attitudes and desires.

The letters will then be set against two “structure texts,” which will seek to set the subject’s responses against some external criteria. The texts in this case are *The Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola and the *Anthropology of the Christian Vocation* of Luigi Rulla, S.J.

Limitations and Presuppositions

The primary limitation of this work is that of space; even such a cursory study as this present work can only touch on certain aspects of John Gabriel’s life and then only on those revealed through the letters. It cannot seek to justify at length the anthropological and psychological underpinnings of Rulla’s work.

A further, and considerable, limitation is that of language. John Gabriel and I speak very different languages — not simply 19th-century Parisian French and 20th-century Hiberno-English, but also a different language of constructs, worldviews and understandings. The translations in this work are my own. Proficient as I may be in French, I cannot understand all the nuances and niceties and French is not my mother tongue.

John Gabriel and I are members of the same Congregation but his was the refounded Congregation in France and China in a time of increase after the turmoil of the French Revolution. Mine is the post-Vatican II Congregation in a time of declining membership in Europe and other parts of the West. The models of community life and authority out of which we both live are, ostensibly, similar but also radically different.

The letters which remain are, necessarily, only a fraction of all those that he wrote (although he does not seem to have been a frequent letter writer, even in his early days) and, in the 1940 edition of Van Den Brandt, letters 1 to 64 are transcriptions of copies made by Joseph Baros CM, the originals having been lost. It is attested that they are true and accurate but we cannot guarantee that they have not been altered, just as Baros had transcribed them into a more modern orthography (Preface). We know that just as Otto Frank edited and changed his daughter Anne’s diary, so religious congregations have altered aspects of their founders’ lives which did not sit easy with early audiences, especially in light of the Devotional Revolution mentioned earlier (see my article on Louise de Marillac cited earlier and on Margaret Aylward, Cornelia Connolly and Margaret Anna Cusack in *Colloque*, Autumn 1999).

I do not claim that John Gabriel was, in any significant way, au fait with Loyola’s Exercises; rather I see them as a text which gives a structure and outline to the Christian journey to follow the will of God and to clarify the presence and workings of the Divine in human life.

Similarly, my basic presupposition is that all Christians are called to follow Christ and to do so with their whole selves: with their gifts and their limitations, of perspective, psychology, personality and experience. Furthermore, I hold that we respond not simply from the “area” of our conscious decisions but also from other unconscious motivations. It is this area especially that I seek to examine in the life of our late confrere, John Gabriel Perboyre: how, carrying with him the weight of his unconscious motivations and concerns which, to some extent, limited his freedom, he was able to respond to the call of God as he recognised it in his life and, thus, was able to move along the way of sanctity.

My purpose in undertaking this work

It is important for an author to acknowledge his own concerns and preoccupations, his biases and prejudices, at least to the extent that he is aware of them.

I undertook this work because I was requested to do so but also because I am intrigued by how our nature and psychology contribute to our faith formation and development. I also undertook it because it was a challenge and because it called me to make the acquaintance of a confrere of whom I had often heard but of whom I had no personal knowledge.

I undertook it at a time when I thought that I would have more time at my disposal than, in fact, turned out to be the case.

I undertook it with the sneaking suspicion that I was not going to like John Gabriel Perboyre. I am less attracted by martyrs than by those who seek to live out their faith over the years of a long life. I am less attracted by missionaries *ad gentes* than I am by those who remain to serve among their own. I am less attracted by those who express their faith in “exotic” locations than by those who live out their commitment in the quotidian and the repetition of the ordinary. I am more attracted by the ordinarily sacred than by deeds of “daring do.” I was inclined to see John Gabriel as one who, in one moment of grace, gained the crown of martyrdom, but who did not have his faith tested by the years, by monotony and by age.

The Four Selves

I have always found the work of Jones and Harrington most helpful in this regard. They have presented the JoHari window which enables us to see, imagistically, that each of us is a combination of four selves.

On the first axis they posit two manifestations of the subject: those things which are known and accessible and those which are unknown and inaccessible. On the other, they posit aspects known or unknown to others. Where these meet, they name four different selves. Thus, what is known and accessible to me and others is the Public Self, while what is known to me but hidden from others is the Private Self. What others can observe but is hidden from the self is the Blind Self, while that which remains inaccessible to both self and others is the Hidden Self.

In the context of the letters, John Gabriel reveals his Public Self and, in some letters certainly, his Private Self. Both of these are in the realm of consciousness; he chooses what he reveals and how he reveals it. The reader, however, using certain tools, can have some insight into the Hidden Self: the subconscious motivations, needs and drives that were at work in him. Combining all of these, one can make some tentative suggestions about his unconscious, Blind Self, but it needs to be remembered that these are only ever tentative. The person who emerges from a study, however in-depth and in the hands of however gifted and impartial an observer or biographer, is only ever a pale shadow of the person who emerged as a result of the life.

Examining John Gabriel's life in the light of modern psychological insights

In his *Anthropology of the Christian Vocation*, Rulla indicates three basic tests for assessing pathological aspects of a person's mental state. They are:

1. Affectivity: the person's sense of self and psychological boundaries.
2. Reality Testing: the person's ability to express and acknowledge concrete reality
3. Concrete Operations: the person's ability to work and to interact with others.

In these terms, while there are, as we will see, areas of conflict in Perboyre's life, there is nothing to indicate pathology. As the letters attest, he had, and maintained, long and lasting relationships, with family, especially his uncle, Jacques Perboyre CM, and those others who joined the Vincentian family: his brothers Louis (Pierre) and (Jean) Jacques CM and sister, Antoinette DC. He used letters constantly to send greetings to other relatives, friends and confreres and he takes an evident and real delight in letters from them: "Three people whom I love equally and each of whom is as dear to me as my own life, came into my room at the same time ... three letters ... from Paris, Montdidier and Le Puech ... three letters signed: Louis, Jacques ... Antoine Perboyre" (20).

His work and his "promotions" (Superior at St. Flour one year after ordination at the age of 25, sub-Director of the Seminary in Paris at 30) indicate

that he was held in respect by his superiors. There is no indication, either in the letters or in recorded or oral history, that he was, or was considered, delusional in any way.

Rulla also outlines, however, three dimensions of the human person and in this, as he acknowledges, he draws on his own founder's *Spiritual Exercises*.

1. The area of good and evil; discernment between the two. This operates primarily at the level of conscious structures. It may be termed the "manifest self." Lack of maturity at this level will generally be conscious; the person, aware of tensions within, chooses to behave in a certain way.
2. The area of the real good and the apparent good. It is the area of the concomitant action of conscious and unconscious structures. Lack of maturity here is generally unconscious and is more likely to be a result of unrecognised inner tensions.
3. The area of normality or pathology; here the freedom to act in a mature way is seriously undermined by unconscious motivations.

It should be understood that Rulla sees these dimensions in every human life and not as distinctions between different types of person. Nor is he suggesting that the boundaries between "areas" are hard and fast; even that which I consciously choose may be dictated to some extent by unrecognised unconscious motivations.

John Gabriel's life and willingness to embrace the isolation of the mission (while maintaining links with home) and, subsequently, to accept martyrdom indicate that, in the first dimension, he freely and consciously chose "the good" and sought to discern the will of God in his life.

We have seen that there is nothing to indicate that there was anything pathological about him or any manifestation of organic disorder. Therefore, we can assume that his freedom to choose was not seriously impaired.

The area of interest then, is that of the second dimension and, in order to clarify the implications of this dimension, we need to look further into Rulla's work, into what he terms Needs and Attitudes, which he sees as directional: giving orientation or tendency to the person. In John Gabriel's case we will examine how possible unconscious motivations may have been at work in his life and, more importantly, how he operated within his "field of freedom."

Rulla defines needs as "innate tendencies related to objects as important to oneself," in contrast to values which are "innate tendencies to respond to objects as important in themselves." Attitudes are "habitual dispositions" which may

arise directly from a fundamental need or in reaction to a fundamental need. Once again, space precludes any in-depth examination of the full list of such needs and attitudes but a glance at some may give us a greater insight into John Gabriel.

In dealing with needs and attitudes, Rulla distinguishes them thus:

- Those which were considered as relevant for the Christian vocation and, thus, vocationally dissonant.
 - Those considered as less relevant for Christian vocation and, thus, vocationally neutral.
- *Abasement*: to submit passively to an external force.
Even given the mores of the time and the devotional register of language which called on one to speak of oneself as one abased, one is constantly struck by how John Gabriel abases himself before authority. See, for example, letter 99 to Aladel, Assistant General in Paris: “you desired to address two words to me ... your humility brings you to ask for a share in the good works of a poor man who never does such a thing and probably never will; rather have pity on his poverty and give him, please, a part in your spiritual riches.” Even given the style then in vogue, his use of terminology for God indicates a similar attitude before the divine. In his letter 19, to his brother, Louis, he contrasts Louis’ zeal with his own sinfulness.
 - *Achievement*: to accomplish something difficult, to master/organise objects, peoples and ideas.
Perboyre was certainly an organiser and accomplished a great deal. In letter 93, to his cousin the Pastor at Caviolle, he outlines what a priest must do and, by extension, and directly what he himself has done in China. Letter 10, to the Rector of the Academy at Clermont, is a clearly thought-out piece which seeks to underline “the absurdity of your thesis” in order to regularise the situation of his students who were aspirants to the clerical state.
 - *Affiliation*: to draw near and enjoyably cooperate with an allied other.
One thing that is immediately remarkable is John Gabriel’s identification with the Community. He ends many letters with greetings to, or a request for information on, confreres in other houses. In the Miraculous Medal he especially sees a sign of God’s favour and Mary’s protection over the community (40, 44 to his uncle) and St. Vincent “brings many blessings on his family” (45) and during troubles in 1834 “our *quartier* has been very tranquil since we are under the protection of our good father, St. Vincent de Paul” (47). He is conscious of the privileges and obligations

of belonging to the CM (41, to his cousin Gabriel CM). As we have remarked, he is closest to those of his own family who join the Vincentian family and delights when Antoinette joins the Daughters of Charity and worries that Marie-Anne might not (44). Family, in itself, seems less important to him. Of the extant letters, 12 are addressed directly to his parents, 17 to his uncle. Moreover, the affairs of those at home seem of somewhat less concern to him; he did not know the name of his brother-in-law, spouse of his sister, Jeanne, the only one of his siblings to marry.

- *Aggression*: to overcome opposition forcefully.
The letter to the Rector at Clermont (10, cited above) shows a man who can channel aggression to make a point forcefully. The aggression, however, was not always as well channelled. In earlier letters to Louis (11, 13 and 17) he corrects his brother's orthography, grammar and spelling. Yet, as the corrections in the Van Den Brandt edition show, he was not invariably correct himself.

Later in his career, he takes a similar stance with Torrette, the Superior in Macao and offers some corrections for Torrette's letter published in the 48th edition of the *Annals of Propaganda Fidei* (96). He had attempted something similar in letter 91 (1838?) in which he has also proffered his unsolicited opinion with regard to the appointment of Apostolic Vicars. Both letters, in style and content, seem to indicate an aggression that is expressed with a certain grandiosity, an assumption of superiority. While Louis seems, judging by the tone of succeeding letters, to have taken the corrections in good part, Torrette did not; to which consideration we now come.

- *Censure Avoidance*: to conceal or justify a misdeed, failure or humiliation.
There is no evidence in the letters that John Gabriel ever told a direct lie to conceal a shame. However, it is clear that Torrette did not take kindly to the subtle reprimand and belittling. He accused Perboyre of "amusing himself with trivialities" and being pedantic (98) and John Gabriel's reply shows him trying to defend himself. More serious than the charges of pedantry were the charges (as are implicit in the phrases he uses in reply) that Perboyre was trying to set himself up in opposition to the procurators in Macao in general and Torrette in particular. Torrette must have accused him of portraying himself (still a relatively recent arrival in China) as an "old missionary" even to seeking, perhaps, to usurp his position (98). He may also have accused John Gabriel of reporting everything to Paris ("I have no observation at all to make to Paris on this subject"). Perboyre goes, in letter 98, to considerable lengths to justify himself, even as he submits. This same tone can be seen in letter 101, when he comments to Torrette; "When I observed to you last year that the things you sent me

(trusses) didn't work, I had no intention at all of complaining, but rather that, even more, I owe you a great debt of gratitude for your kindness in aiding me.”

Even in the earlier letter (98) he continues to press home his own position: “Do you not fear that, by acting thus, you may arouse the suspicions of the Portuguese Government...? Do you not fear that this government seeing our P(ortuguese) confreres as being incapable of doing this work themselves may use the occasion to grab their possessions?”

- *Knowledge*: to know, to explore to acquire information and knowledge. Perboyre was, as is clear from the letters, possessed of a sharp intelligence. His focus on details (as in the letters cited above) indicates a slightly obsessive personality in this regard and a high emphasis on form rather than content. We see this also in letter 84, in which he cites an extract in Latin on the faculties of missionaries. Letter 89, to Pierre Martin in Paris sets out the situation in China lucidly and succinctly. His letter, of 24 May 1828 (11) to Louis, shows his esteem of learning and, perhaps also a touch of envy that Louis (whose grammar he corrects) seems to be on a more “academic” track than he. The list of authors whom he recommends to Louis shows both his own erudition and also, again, something of the grandiosity mentioned above.
- *Submission (Deference)*: to admire and support a superior. This is different to abasement (seen above) and there is little doubt that, allied to his sense of affiliation to the Community, John Gabriel supported those in authority, both in the Congregation and elsewhere. A recurring theme in the letters to his uncle, Jacques CM, is the debt that he owes this man (e.g. 38 and 40). He accepts appointments well.
- *Domination*; to control one's human environment. John Gabriel Perboyre was certainly capable of controlling his environment and, again, perhaps some of this desire to control can be seen as symptomatic of a tendency to grandiosity, as in his unsolicited advice to Torrette. Yet, we see it manifest also in his work and his missionary activity. He comments on what he observes (90 and 93) and he had certainly learned to master his environment in the long sea journey to China (cf., his letter to Salhorgne, Superior General, (58) and the letters that follow to his brother, his uncle and Torrette). In fact, in letter 62, he rails against the spirit of domination and pride which has led to a situation in which “A European ... can neither travel on foot or do any kind of servile work without dishonouring himself” and which has led the Europeans to look on their servants as “people of some other kind to himself.” That said, he also suggests (79) that the Chinese in the seminary

should have “a spirit of submission ... towards their European fathers and confreres” and cites a comment that “as soon as the Chinese have had the chalice on their lips (ordination) one can no longer be master of them.”

- *Exhibition:* to make an impression, to amaze, fascinate or shock.
There is little of the exhibitionist in Perboyre. His accounts of the sea voyage and of his time in China, while vivid in image and detail, do not cast himself in the role of hero or saviour. He does, however, seem to want to make something of an impression with his opinions of the situation in China (cf., letter 89, an extensive one to Pierre Martin CM). While these are tendered in the somewhat abased style that we have earlier noted (“while I am the most useless of all the workers who labour here...”), nonetheless it is clear that he intends them to be considered as valid and important.
- *Harm avoidance:* to avoid pain, physical injury, illness and death.
It can be clearly seen that John Gabriel does not seek his own comfort. Even in the matter of the truss, which recurs in a number of letters (96, 100, 101), he does not use his infirmity as an excuse for non-activity (they sent him two trusses; one too small, the other left-sided while his hernia was on the right!). He was mindful of his physical lack of strength and his infirmities (94) but they do not stop him from exercising his mission (94, to his brother, Jacques). Letter 84 describes his suffering from an illness that lasted from mid-August to 8 September 1836. This was followed by two fevers; a ‘tertiary’ which lasted from mid-September to the start of October and another, less powerful, which included night sweats and affected his eyesight.
- *Nurturance:* give sympathy, gratify the needs of a helpless other; to feed, help, support, etc.
Again, there is no doubt that he nurtured others. Although his style of support seems dictated by the mores of the time, he does seek to support his parents and family on the death of Louis (29, 30, 31) and his letters from China tell of some of the aid he proffered (even giving a slightly used truss to a Chinese man; the result of which was that the man went running and singing the commandments of the Lord and was, eventually, baptised (100).
- *Organisation (Order):* to achieve cleanliness, balance, neatness and precision.
As we have seen, John Gabriel sought and admired order. We can see this in his attention to detail, not to say sometimes even to minutiae; in 78, he notes that, while he has heard that St. Bernard has been declared a doctor, the Ordo does not mention it. In the same letter, he seeks a clear

declaration of the privileges enjoyed by the Congregation in China. Letter 41, to his cousin, Gabriel CM, deals with Mass stipends and intentions and is set out clearly in six subsections.

It is a quality he admires in others also; to Nozo (70) he writes that Torrette has two qualities most suitable for his position, “wisdom and an effective will that the Rule be followed.”

- *Playfulness*: to act for “fun” without further purpose.
There is little that is playful about John Gabriel, although 20 (which announces the arrival of letters from Louis, Jacques and Antoine) has a jollier tone than many others. Most strikingly, his letters to his youngest brother, Antoine, at home with his parents in Le Puech, tend, in contrast to those to his confrere-brothers Louis and Jacques, to be rather moralising in tone and contain little of the friendliness or lightness of touch that mark the others (13, 34, 54, 65) and, perhaps most tellingly, those to his parents, while polite, reveal little of himself and focus mainly on practicalities and on extending greetings to others. It is worth noting that only 29 (dealing with the death of Louis) is addressed to both parents; all others are directed to his father with greetings, sometimes as an afterthought (7), to his mother. All of them are signed J. G. Perboyre: marked by formality even in their conclusion.
- *Recognition (Social Approval)*: to gain prestige, win honours, get praise or recognition.
John Gabriel does not seem to seek social approval in itself and is careful to avoid anything that would seem to imply that he seeks honour in itself (speaking of his role as superior in St. Flour he says: *quotidie morior* — each day I die). He has, as has been noted, a very high opinion of the priest and missionary, which he attributes (89) to the Chinese. Here he says: “The priest ... can fulfil his divine functions with all the authority and all the liberty proper to his character.”

Later, he disavows any interest in being named as a superior in China or of seeking any other role (98). Nonetheless, he has a very high understanding of the role and vocation of the priest (not uncommon at that time) and his letters to Torrette about the situation in China seem to imply that he considers his a voice that ought to be heard: for example, 90 and 91 which deals with the appointment of Apostolic Vicars.
- *Sexual Gratification*: to form and further an erotic relationship.
Apart from his sister, Antoinette (Sr. Josephine, DC) no other woman is the direct recipient of a letter. Antoinette, and his cousin Sr. Apollonie Perboyre, DC (36 and others), are mentioned directly in letters to Jacques

and Gabriel, as his mother and sisters, Jeanne and Marie-Anne, are mentioned in letters home and that not always by name; in letter 18, to his father, Antoinette is described as “my sister who is in the convent.” Some sisters, Pellet (40) and Boulet (50), Superioress General, are mentioned by name but others are greeted in general: “the Mothers of the Seminary” (40). No woman in China is mentioned by name, even the woman whom he cured of possession.

His relationships with men, apart from relation-confreres, are affable but not particularly close; there is no one who receives more letters than any other, apart from Louis and his uncle. He reveals a touching emotion in his farewell letter to Louis before the latter sets out for China: “forgive me if I acknowledge to you that I am not the master of holding back my tears” (23). To his uncle, after Louis’ death, he writes (30):

Whom did I have dearer to me among men than this poor brother. I am inconsolable. My heart is broken; streams of tears run ceaselessly from my eyes; I water the altars each day....

yet he goes on almost in sermonic form:

Oh, my well-beloved brother, for almost a year now your body has been wrapped in the deep abysses of the sea and your soul reposes in the bosom of eternity. Compensate us for our sorrow by your blessed protection and obtain for us who weep for you the grace of sharing one day in your glory and your happiness.

Uncle Jacques is described in letters to Louis (8 and 9) as “mon oncle,” though he was uncle also to Louis. As has been observed, his relationship with his own father is marked more by filial duty than by affection. Most tellingly (though it may have been a convention of the time), he “vousvoyers” (uses the formal “vous” in place of the familiar “tu”) even Louis, Jacques and Gabriel. Only Jacques (Jacou) and Jeanne (Jeanneton) have pet-names.

- *Succorance*: to have one’s needs gratified by an allied object, constantly to seek support.
As we have observed, in some sense John Gabriel allied himself to the Congregation as the source of emotional support yet, within that framework, he does not seem to be particularly dependent on that support.

- *Counteraction*: to strive persistently to overcome difficult or humiliating experiences.

While we have observed his tendency to avoid censure, nonetheless, it is clear that this need for counteraction was, in many ways, the mark of his life. He strove, particularly in his mission to China, to overcome limitations and, also, his physical frailty.

Some conclusions

From the above, we can conclude that, while there were some areas of significant conflict in his life, John Gabriel Perboyre was, in the main, suited for the life to which he felt called. His defences, particularly his tendency to a certain grandiosity and, by extension, to diminishing others, may indicate somewhat of an immaturity and this may be borne out by his apparent lack of attachment to others, though this latter must be understood in the context of the era in which he lived. There is also a degree of procrastination; a great many letters (1, 3, 4, 5, 11, etc.) begin with apologies for not writing sooner and it is clear that people noted this; “you must find it strange that I have put off writing to you for so long” (3, to his father); “I admit that I have been a little to negligent” (4, to his father); “You seem to be complaining that I don’t write to you more often” (11, to Louis). It may also have been indicative of a certain passive aggression; (17, to Louis) “...calm your anger and, please, do not excite mine.”

There seems also to have been a certain emotional distance; in 18 he writes to his father: “While I am very busy at the moment, I will use this occasion ... to write two words to you. I have to tell you first off that I will not go to see you this year....” The fact is stated baldly and there is little to soften it, nor any regret at being unable to return home. He continues . “I will tell you also that I would be delighted to procure a horse for you”! His letter (6) announcing his ordination is written on 2 November 1826; he was ordained on 23 September of that year.

Nonetheless, there is no real denial, no true projection or any other of the more “infantile” defences and the other defences which he uses: altruism, humour and counteraction, indicate a degree of maturity. He is aware of the world in which he lives, even beyond the confines of France: “the poor Catholics of Ireland are dying of hunger (this was an earlier famine of 1831, not the Gorta Mor of 1847). This comes in letter 26, to Louis (John Gabriel is unaware that his brother has already died during the sea crossing) and in it he mentions also the situation in Italy, Poland, Belgium and Holland, almost all from a Catholic perspective.

Given that we have here, with all the caveats noted, some idea of the personality of John Gabriel Perboyre, and, in particular, some understanding of where he stood in what Rulla has termed the Second Dimension (Real and Apparent Good) how can we understand his progress in sanctity?

The Journey of the Spiritual Exercises

This work does not in any way imply that John Gabriel Perboyre was “au fait” with the *Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola. It sees them, rather, as a guide to the progress of a soul in sanctity. Ignatius divided the exercises into four weeks (although these are not necessarily chronological weeks) each with a particular purpose. It must be remembered that the Exercises presuppose a prior commitment to Jesus Christ and to the service of people, in public life or in the Church. We can take this commitment as a given in Perboyre’s case.

The exercises of the First Week “turn the memory, understanding and free will toward ... sins” and, certainly, John Gabriel’s early letters show this conviction of sin in his life: “I fear greatly, dear brother, that I have smothered by my infidelity to grace, the seeds of a vocation (to China) similar to yours” (19) and “have compassion on a miserable one who is only amassing treasures of anger for eternity” (same letter). “I fear I have not been faithful to the vocation which the Lord has given you ... obtain for me, from his merciful bounty, pardon for my misery ... that I may become a good Christian, a good priest, a good missionary” (23, to Louis). From Macao, in 1835, he writes to Antoinette:

I do not fear even the Emperor, or the Mandarins or their lackeys. But I have here in this country a particular enemy whom I must defy a great deal. This one is greatly to be feared; he is the most wicked that I know; not Chinese, he is European. He was baptised as an infant; since then he has been ordained priest. From France he has come to China with us in the same ship. I cannot doubt but that he will follow me everywhere and he will certainly cause my ruin if I have the misfortune to fall entirely into his hands. I will not name him to you, for you know him. If you can obtain his conversion you will do him a great service and your brother will owe you his happiness.

It may be the language of another time, expressed in a devotional piety, but it is clear that he is mindful of his sins and limitations.

This sense of the call to fidelity and right living is not confined to himself; to Antoine (34) he writes: “reconcile yourself to God from time to time by a good confession” and from Macao he writes: “I will not cease to exhort and encourage you to virtue and the practice of all your duties” (65).

Ignatius' Second Week focuses on the Incarnation and the earthly life of Jesus. It is notable that John Gabriel has a very "high" Christianity; writing to Jacou (31) he says:

Seek to avoid a pitfall which students of philosophy often meet: becoming familiar with talking about God with a liberty that is not always respectful, they weaken steadily in themselves the religious sentiments which the idea of this adorable Majesty should inspire in them.

His father's illness (43) is seen as for the man's own good and in suffering he expiates the pains which he would have to endure in purgatory.

... thus I pray him to benefit from the graces of the illness with a holy resignation and perfect patience. I urge him greatly during his convalescence to make a general confession of his whole life.

God is envisaged, above all else, as the powerful one with authority over life and death, the Eternal and Mysterious.

The Third Week focuses on the Passion and Death of Jesus. Although there is little direct reference to Jesus' own life, we can see John Gabriel's understanding of the Paschal Mystery. The focus is rather more Good Friday than Easter morning; to Jean-Baptiste Nozo, Superior General, he writes (70):

A soldier in whom temerity takes the place of courage, I have felt my heart tremble at the approach of combat. I have never been more content than in these circumstances. I do not know what is in store for me on the path which opens before me; certainly many crosses, that is the daily bread of the missionary. And what better might one hope for, going to preach a crucified God? May he make me taste the sweetnesses of his chalice of bitterness! ... May he grant that none of us fail to live up to those beautiful models that our Congregation sets before us in these far-off countries!

Faith is understood as participation in this mystery and, in particular, in suffering. Evangelisation is understood in terms of conversion of the pagans in order that their souls might not be damned.

There are incomparably more pagans than Christians. You must pray for their conversion. Every year a good number are converted (83, to his father) and the number of workers is not yet sufficient to care for the lone Christians who, however, in the midst of this

innumerable population of Chinese who serve the Demon, seem like the scattered stalks that escape the scythe of the harvester (86).

Conclusion

What then can we say of the psycho-spiritual development of our late confrere and recent saint?

He seems somewhat remote in personality, not really close to anyone and sometimes oblivious of the sensitivities of others. He manifests certain immature defences in his grandiosity and, in truth, he sometimes sounds a little pompous. The attention to detail and minutiae may indicate a certain obsessive or compulsive quality and he seems more concerned with form and order than with content and spirit. Authority is seen as hierarchical and as something before which to abase oneself. Although he uses expressions which “belittle” himself, he shows little insight into his own character and, in many ways, seems, at root, to be the same John Gabriel in letter 101 as he was in letter 1. His image of God seems quite remote and majestic; there is little that is incarnational in his thinking or his expression. I think that, like Torrette, I might have found my confrere to be something of a “dry stick” and yet, at the same time, a willing worker, a loyal confrere and an enthusiastic missionary.

His martyrdom seems somewhat of an interruption in his journey; one could hardly claim that he was the most rounded of men or that his spirituality was truly profound. This does not, in any way, diminish the courage, valour and faith which underpinned his acceptance of martyrdom. Within the area of freedom which was open to him, he chose to respond in faith, to work with others for the kingdom of God and, when it was necessary, to lay down his life for God, for the faith and for those whom he served.