

Jesus Christ in the Life of John Gabriel Perboyre¹

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Introduction

John Gabriel Perboyre “alter Christus,” was the image that was carved into my memory, from my years as a Vincentian seminarian.

In the varied iconography of John Gabriel, there are two well-known images that relate him directly to Jesus Christ. The first is that of his death on the cross, which has a powerful impact on the persons who see it for the first time and ask why “that saint” is on the cross like Jesus Christ. The other image is that of the saint with traditional Chinese attire, holding a crucifix in his hands and gazing at it with devotion, as though rapt in profound meditation.

1. His love for Jesus Christ

The biographers of John Gabriel recount that devotion to Jesus Christ was characteristic of him: his preferred readings were those that referred to Christ, and among the books of the New Testament, his favorites were the gospels and the letters of St. Paul. It was said that Our Lord was always on his lips and in his heart, and that he loved him more tenderly than a child loves his father. In all things he wished to please Jesus Christ, in his thoughts and actions, to such a degree that he became a living image of Jesus Christ. Speaking of Christ he would become enthusiastic and even eloquent.

He used to say: *Jesus Christ, is the great Teacher of knowledge; it is he alone who gives the true light.* For John Gabriel there was only one important thing: to know and love Jesus Christ. *When you study, ask him to teach you himself; if you speak to someone, ask him to inspire you with what you should say; if there is something to be done, ask him to let you know what he wants of you.*

John Gabriel was not content with studying about Jesus Christ; he strove to imitate him.

Jesus Christ did not come to earth only to instruct us with his doctrine, but above all to become a model for us. When his Father sent him, he told us all that which in another age he told his

¹ The texts in italics which refer to the saint are taken from: “Vie du Bienheureux Jean-Gabriel Perboyre” (Paris, Gaume et Cie, Libraires-Éditeurs, 1889).

servant Moses with regard to the tabernacle: look, and do according to the model that has been shown to you on the mountain. Jesus Christ himself has told us: "I have given you an example, so that you may do as you have seen me do" (...). There is only one thing necessary, Our Lord tells us in the gospel. But what is the one thing necessary? It is to imitate him. (...) Let us act as a painter who is on fire with the desire to reproduce faithfully a picture of great value: let us keep our eyes continually fixed on Jesus Christ. Let us not be content with imitating one or two traits of our model, let us enter into all of his sentiment. Let us appropriate for ourselves all of his virtues. Let us begin again and continue each day without ever tiring. (...) But, how can we come to experience perfectly the traits of such a beautiful model? For this is it sufficient to consent to the operations of the Holy Spirit in our hearts: this divine Spirit will take care of forming in us the image of Jesus Christ through the outpouring of his gifts.

On another occasion he says:

We should above all strive to imitate Jesus Christ in the deference that he had toward his Father, and in the perfect dependence on his will. (...) Let us think and act always with the spirit of Jesus Christ; let us remain united to him, in order to receive continually his divine influences.

Let us strive to grow each day in the love of Jesus Christ ... If we want to acquire this perfect love, let us turn frequently to Jesus, because he is the source of all grace. All comes to us from him, and we can do nothing except through him. It is he who gives life to our souls, just as food gives life to the body: let us cling to him like a child clings to its mother; let us drink in him the milk of all the virtues. The child drinks in the most pure substance of its mother and is nourished; in the same way if we embrace Jesus, we shall drink from him a life entirely divine.

To a priest who asked him for some edifying words, he responded:

Dear friend, do you judge me able to give you an edifying word? You would do better to direct yourself to Our Lord and to ask him to speak to your heart. (...) Or if you prefer, and want to do some reading that will be profitable, take as a book Our Lord himself ... compare all of your actions with his ... And so you shall see as in a mirror, which are the faults that you have committed.

2. “Sacerdos, alter Christus”

Once ordained a priest, although he had asked to go to the missions, he was assigned to the seminary of Saint-Flour. There he dedicated himself to forming priests with Jesus Christ as his model. He always had his eyes fixed on the model of the priests, Our Lord Jesus Christ; he strived to follow his maxims and to reproduce his examples. The thought *sacerdos, alter Christus*, was always present in his spirit, and he dedicated himself as never before, to form within himself the image of the divine Savior.

If John Gabriel insistently exhorted others to imitate Jesus Christ, he perfectly practiced what he recommended to others. Ardently desiring to imitate Jesus Christ, he thought of him without ceasing, and since the Holy Spirit found no obstacle in him to his divine operations, the Spirit perfected the image of the Savior more and more in his soul.

Following the example of St. Vincent who always proposed in the first place the example of Jesus Christ, John Gabriel had Jesus Christ as his model and teacher. *Our Lord*, he would say, *did thus. Do you not want to do as he did? Should a priest not be another Christ?*

Those who heard him speak of Jesus Christ would comment as the disciples of Emmaus: were not our hearts burning within us as he spoke to us?

One day, speaking with a cleric about the obligations that a minister of the altar should have, he said among other things:

The priest, who has received the same mission as Jesus Christ, being destined to work for the salvation of souls, must not only represent Jesus Christ by the divine character with which he has been clothed, and by the sacred functions that this divine Savior came to exercise on earth; it is necessary moreover that he reproduce him in his interior and his exterior.... Everyone must know that we speak, and that we work by means of a divine principle, so that we can say to all those around us: “Be imitators of me, as I am of Jesus Christ.” Jesus Christ tells us in the holy gospels that he is the life that we must live: “ego sum vita.” Whoever does not live this life remains in death. It is necessary that Jesus Christ flow through our soul, as blood flows in all the parts of our body to communicate life. And since the priest is called to great perfection, he should also possess this life in a perfect manner. But, how few priests really live this life!

When he preached, he insisted on union with Jesus Christ, since that was the surest way to acquire the perfection that God asks of the missionary. He prepared his instructions at the foot of the cross, kneeling in his room before the crucifix.

Filled with this thought of St. Paul, that Jesus Christ intercedes for us without ceasing before the Father, he was not afraid to present himself before God to ask for the graces he needed:

By our baptism we have become members of Jesus Christ; and as a consequence of this union, our needs are in a certain manner, the same needs of Jesus Christ. We cannot then ask for anything that is related to the salvation and perfection of our soul, that we do not ask by Jesus Christ himself, since the honor, and the glory of his members is also the honor and glory of his body.

3. The Crucifix

In his youth as a seminarian, John Gabriel wrote a literary composition titled: *The Cross is the most beautiful of the monuments*, and it was there that he wrote the well-known phrase that reflects his missionary spirit: *Ah! How beautiful is this cross, planted in the lands of infidels and often drenched with the blood of the apostles of Jesus Christ!*

When a student would stray from the path of virtue, he [John Gabriel] knelt before the crucifix praying for his conversion: *What sad moments, my friend, you have made me spend at the feet of Jesus crucified.*

The cross and the crucifix were for John Gabriel signs of the redeeming love of Jesus Christ *who gave himself up for me*. This thought was like a flame that seared his heart. Preparing himself for the celebration of Holy Mass, he remembered that this sacrifice was the same as that of the cross: *Jesus Christ was immolated for me, I should also immolate myself for him; it is necessary that my life be a continual sacrifice.*

The sight of a crucifix awakened in him sentiments of love, and he enjoyed gazing upon it. While he celebrated the sacrament of penance he would hold in his hands a crucifix that he looked at continually. In his room he would often kneel before the crucifix to meditate or prepare his sermons. In the crucifix he contemplated the greatest mystery of love: *Our Lord wants to find hearts that share his sorrows and that know how to recognize his love*. He recommended meditating on the Passion of the Lord:

Sometimes there are complaints about not knowing on what to meditate; it is enough to gaze for five minutes on the crucifix with a spirit of faith to feel oneself penetrated with love and appreciation for Our Lord, and to dispose oneself to serve him better. Yes, it is enough to look at the crucifix with faith to receive precious advantages. It is not necessary to know how to read, nor to have beautiful books; the crucifix is the most beautiful and the most impressive of all books.... Why do we so often change the theme of our meditation? One thing alone is necessary, 'porro unum est necessarium,' and he would show the crucifix.

Before giving his witness as a martyr, John Gabriel had his “dark night” during several months. His crucifix had become silent, or worse, he only heard from it voices of reproof. He even thought that while he was celebrating the Holy Sacrifice, that he was another Judas who was eating and drinking his own condemnation, that his whole life had been in vain. This tremendous suffering affected his physical health. Jesus Christ, whom he imitated faithfully, before allowing John Gabriel to experience the torments of Calvary, wanted him to share in his agony and his desolation in the Garden of Olives.

Jesus Christ, the divine Savior appeared to him bound to the cross, and after looking at him with ineffable goodness, he tenderly said to him: *What do you fear? Have I not died for you? Place your fingers in my side, and do not be afraid of being condemned.* Once the vision disappeared, John Gabriel felt that all his anguish had changed to a delightful peace, and his health improved.

His love for Jesus Christ crucified, symbolized in the crucifix, became manifest in a heroic manner during the days of his passion. Several times he was ordered to stomp on the image of the crucifix, and he would be freed from his torments and from death; but John Gabriel affirmed again and again: *I will never renounce my faith in Jesus Christ. I will resist to the death, but I will not deny my faith; I will not stomp on the crucifix. I will be happy if I die for my faith.*

It was a sublime moment when the mandarin asked him if he were a Christian, and he immediately responded: *Yes, I am a Christian, and of this I boast and am proud.* Then they placed a crucifix on the ground and told him: *If you want to stomp on the God whom you adore, I shall give you your freedom.* To this ungodly proposal, the confessor cried out with his eyes full of tears: *How could I insult in this way my God, my creator, and my savior?* And stooping down with great effort, he took the holy image and placed it over his heart, then he brought it to his lips and kissed it in the most tender and loving manner, drenching it with his tears. Once again the whips and blows of the bamboo fell over his body, and by order of the mandarin, some apostates spit on him, insulted him, pulled out his hair, and struck him in the face.

On another occasion they painted a cross on the ground, and violently forced him to step on it. John Gabriel said: *I am a Christian. It is not I, but you who are profaning this majestic symbol of redemption.* They dressed him in the sacred vestments, and making fun of him exclaimed: “It is the living God.”

4. Jesus Christ in the Eucharist

His love for Jesus Christ found a glorious manifestation in his love and adoration of the Eucharist, both in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, and in adoration of the Blessed Sacrament:

This fervent lover of Jesus Christ had built two tents, one at the foot of the cross, and the other before the holy tabernacle; and he constantly went from one to the other, to contemplate the charity of his God and to become inebriated with love.

His sweetest consolation was to celebrate the Eucharist, to receive Jesus in his heart: *I cannot be content until I have offered the sacrifice of the Mass.* In one of his letters written during his voyage to China, he says, referring without a doubt to the Eucharist: *Oh! How happy one feels on this vast desert of ocean, when one finds oneself from time to time in the company of Our Lord!*

He said to a priest who had told him that he had not celebrated the Eucharist because he had a headache: *You have done wrong; God does not ask for the head, he only asks for the heart.*

He prepared very carefully for Mass. *Before celebrating Holy Mass we should make every effort to enter into the same dispositions with which Our Lord offers himself for us on the altar.*

Each day before going up to the altar, John Gabriel would address Our Lord, telling him with great fervor:

Behold me here, oh my divine Savior! Despite my unworthiness I am going to give you a way of being that you do not have, sacramental being. And so, I beg you and I plead with you to work in me the same wonder that I will do with this bread, in virtue of the powers that you have entrusted me. When I say: this is my body, say also of your unworthy servant: “this is my body.” By your omnipotence and infinite mercy, make me change and be transformed totally into you. May my hands be the hands of Jesus, may my eyes be the eyes of Jesus, may my tongue be the tongue of Jesus; may all of my senses and my whole body serve only to glorify you; but above all transform my soul and all its faculties:

may my memory, my intelligence, my heart, be the memory, the intelligence and the heart of Jesus; may my operations and my feelings be likened to your operations and feelings; and as your Father said of you: "Today I have begotten you," may you be able to say the same of me, and also say along with your heavenly Father: "This is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased." Yes, destroy in me all that is not of you; may I never live except by you and for you, so that I may also say along with your great apostle: "I live no longer I, it is Jesus Christ who lives in me."

This same beautiful and profound prayer that he used to offer to God before celebrating the Eucharist with a burning heart, John Gabriel also would renew during the thanksgiving. One of the professors at Saint-Flour used to say: "When I consider the life that he lives, it all leads me to believe that God had listened to him. His heart lives only by Jesus Christ and for Jesus Christ. What St. John Chrysostom said of St. Paul: *Cor Christi, cor Pauli*, could equally be applied to him. Seeing him, it seems as though I were seeing Our Lord...."

He used to celebrate the Eucharist with great care and devotion:

We must take care in the manner we pronounce the different prayers that are prescribed; for it is a great disgrace for a priest not to pay attention to the meaning of the prayers which he addresses to God...

Ah! If there is a moment in which the priest should be on fire with zeal for the glory of God and the salvation of souls, it is above all when he is going to offer the holy sacrifice of the Mass, which reminds him of all that Jesus Christ desired to suffer in order to repair the injury done to his Father by sin, and to rescue the human race.

He explained that the words: *Dominus vobiscum. Et cum spiritu tuo*, are to enliven our devotion, and we priests should blush if instead of being with the Lord, we find ourselves dissipated.

At the beginning of the Eucharistic prayer the members of the assembly are invited to lift up their hearts to the Lord: *Sursum corda. Habemus ad Dominum*. John Gabriel would comment:

Oh what motive of confusion if your heart is still enmeshed in the thoughts of the earth! Is it not just that we should be the first to practice what we recommend to others? After the preface do not forget that you have just united yourself with Jesus Christ to sing

the praises of the Lord with the angels and that your heart should be on fire with charity.

And he added:

The nearer you draw to the consecration, the more your fervor should increase. Put your attention on what you are going to do in this most solemn moment; represent yourself to Our Lord when, in the midst of his disciples gathered in the cenacle, he instituted this sacrament of love, and act in the same spirit as this divine Savior. This is above all when we need to renew our faith; for it is not without reason that in the words of consecration this divine sacrifice is called a mystery of faith.

Address yourself to him with confidence and with humility (during the consecration) and ask him, by his omnipotence, to effect a consecration that changes you into himself, so that now you are no longer what you once were, but rather that you are transformed into Jesus Christ, and you can say as did the apostle Paul: "It is not I who live, it is Jesus Christ who lives in me." And you will do well to renew this petition during the thanksgiving after the Mass, and to ask him insistently to grant you this favor.

John Gabriel prolonged what he lived in the Eucharist in his visits to the Blessed Sacrament: he often found refuge near the tabernacle in order to drink of the graces that he needed, or to accompany him who was pleased to share the tribulations of our exile out of love for us.

"There he would spend hours in adoration, without moving, hardly breathing" ... "When he would leave the chapel, above all after a long visit, his language was more passionate, his face more joyful and smiling. It was obvious that his heart had been seared by a purely celestial flame that was reflected even in his body."

As a fruit of his faith and his experience, he affirmed:

The devotion to the Blessed Sacrament should be the characteristic of the priest. They should be the guardians of this sacrament and the companions of Jesus upon our altars.

5. In the poor

John Gabriel, like a good son of Vincent de Paul, also found Jesus Christ in the poor and needy. His charity toward the poor was quite special. He gave

them the first place in his heart; he would receive them and speak with them with great respect, for he considered that Jesus Christ was present in them, and he took great pleasure in speaking with them. They reminded him that Jesus Christ became poor in order to make holy their condition ... He never let them leave without giving them some kind of help:

Well! What do you want? We are happy to be like Our Lord, who lacked everything, who did not have a rock on which to lay his head, and yet nonetheless he was the lord of the world.

Our Lord was poor, St. Vincent has recommended poverty to us, and he himself practiced it in a perfect manner. My desire is to be poor like them.

6. The Passion of Jesus Christ and the passion of John Gabriel Perboyre

St. Vincent had told his missionaries several times that they had to be valiant:

And if God were to permit that (...) some of them should have to go and beg for bread or sleep outside against a wall, with their clothes tattered, and dying of the cold, and if in that same condition someone were to ask one of them: "Poor priest of the Mission, who has placed you in such a state?" What happiness, my brothers, to be able to respond: "It was charity!" How God and the angels would value that poor priest! (SV XI, 76-77).

Fr. André Sylvestre² presents us the extraordinary parallels between the passion of Jesus Christ and the passion of John Gabriel Perboyre:

1. "I must be baptized with a baptism and what anguish I feel until it is accomplished!"

John Gabriel desired martyrdom his whole life. He told his seminarians when he showed them the habit of Francis Regis Clet who died a martyr in 1820: *Here is the habit of a martyr. What happiness if we should someday meet the same fate!* And he expressed this desire on more than one occasion.

2. The passion of Jesus took place after three years of public life.

John Gabriel's passion occurred after three years of ministry.

² André Sylvestre, C.M.: *Jean-Gabriel Perboyre* (L'imprimerie J. M. Mothes, 82200, Moissac, 1991).

3. Jesus in the agony in the garden exclaimed: “my soul is saddened unto death.”

John Gabriel suffered a type of spiritual agony that lasted three months during which it seemed to him that God had abandoned him.

4. Jesus, in his agony, was comforted by an angel.

John Gabriel, in his “dark night of faith,” was comforted by a vision of Jesus Christ crucified that dispelled his anguish and gave him a profound peace.

5. Jesus was betrayed and handed over to the soldiers for 30 denarii.

John Gabriel was also betrayed and handed over for 30 taels by the son of a catechist.

6. Jesus had prayed with his three companions, Peter, James and John.

At the moment of his arrest, John Gabriel was also with three companions: Thomas, who remained faithful like John; Phillip, who escaped like James, and finally an old catechist who later on would deny him like Peter.

7. Jesus, at the time of his arrest, forbade Peter to use the sword to defend himself against the soldiers.

John Gabriel prohibited his disciple Thomas from using violence to defend himself against the soldiers who had arrested them.

8. Jesus was treated as an evildoer.

John Gabriel, at his arrest, was treated brutally, placed in chains, and beaten as a bandit.

9. Jesus was taken from tribunal to tribunal, before Caiaphas, Annas, Herod and Pilate.

John Gabriel was also taken from tribunal to tribunal: to the civil tribunal, to the military tribunal, and to the criminal tribunal, to the sub-prefecture and to the capital of the province, before the governor and the viceroy.

10. Jesus was helped by the Cyrenian on the way to the cross.

John Gabriel, exhausted, inspired Lieou Kiou Lin, a learned man, to respond with compassion. He insisted, paying the cost himself, that John Gabriel

be transported in a type of carriage, and he accompanied John Gabriel after his arrest during the two-day journey.

11. Jesus was mistreated, insulted, covered with spittle and beaten.

John Gabriel was cruelly beaten with bamboo canes and with leather whips. They spit in his face and punched him.

12. Jesus was abandoned by his disciples, except for John and the holy women.

John Gabriel suffered the pain of seeing two-thirds of the Christians who were arrested and jailed, apostatize and deny their faith. Only some remained faithful.

13. Jesus was denied by Peter.

John Gabriel suffered the pain of seeing his longtime catechist Ly, who was very close to the missionaries, deny his faith and his teacher. Overcome by his torments, he even insulted and beat John Gabriel.

14. Jesus was clothed with a purple garment in the house of Herod and sent to Pilate as a mock king.

John Gabriel, under orders of the mandarin, was dressed in priestly vestments and handed over to the people to mock him.

15. Jesus remained silent before Pilate.

John Gabriel, after professing his faith, suffered his torments in silence with heroic patience.

16. On the cross, Jesus prayed for his torturers.

John Gabriel, during a torture session, knelt down to thank God for allowing him to suffer for his name and he prayed for his torturers.

17. Jesus absolved the good thief saying: “This very day you shall be with me in paradise.”

John Gabriel, in the middle of the tribunal, gave absolution to an apostate several times.

18. Jesus heard the insults of the Pharisees and the crowd who said: “If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross and save yourself.”

John Gabriel heard this blasphemy from the mouth of the viceroy: “Now that you are suffering, beg your God to free you from my hands.”

19. On Calvary, they gave Jesus vinegar and gall to drink.

John Gabriel, in order to break a spell that according to the judge had made him insensitive to pain, was condemned to drink the hot blood of a dog whose throat had been slit.

20. Jesus, after being mocked by the soldiers, had a crown of thorns placed on His head.

John Gabriel suffered a similar punishment: with a sharp piece of metal heated in a fire, they wrote on his forehead in Chinese letters: “Propagator of an abominable sect.”

21. Jesus, in the light of the eternal joy prepared for him, suffered the cross disdaining its humiliation.

John Gabriel went to his torture with joy and his face became radiant.

22. Jesus went up to Calvary with two thieves.

John Gabriel was led to his death with various criminals who were executed along with him.

23. Jesus cried out from the cross: “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.”

John Gabriel, when he arrived at the site of his execution, knelt down, raised his eyes to heaven and commended his soul to God.

24. Jesus on the cross saw his executioners divide up his garments.

As John Gabriel was tied to the cross, his executioners took his garments to divide them up after his death, but his disciples rescued them along with the instruments of his torture to preserve them as relics.

25. Jesus suffered death outside the gates.

John Gabriel was executed outside the city, in the place where executions were held, near a lake.

26. Jesus was nailed to a cross.

John Gabriel was tied with ropes to a scaffold made in the form of a cross so that he could be strangled.

27. Jesus died on a Friday at three o'clock in the afternoon.

John Gabriel also died on a Friday at three in the afternoon.

28. Jesus was pierced with a lance in his right side by a Roman soldier to make sure that he was dead.

John Gabriel also received a deathblow: he was kicked violently in the abdomen by a soldier.

29. Jesus aroused the compassion of the holy women, the profession of faith of the centurion, and the remorse of the people.

John Gabriel inspired similar sentiments among the pagans, who had come in great numbers, and who murmured and protested against his death sentence.

30. Jesus appeared to Peter, to Mary Magdalene and to the eleven disciples.

John Gabriel appeared to the learned pagan, his Simon of Cyrene, who was quite ill, and he was converted to the faith. He also appeared to other credible persons. A great cross appeared in the heavens at the moment of his death and it was seen by a great multitude, even from a far distance.

31. Jesus saw his mother at the foot of the cross, filled with sublime resignation.

John Gabriel's mother, on learning of his death said: "Why should I doubt in making the sacrifice of my son to God, if the most holy Virgin did not hesitate in making the sacrifice of hers for our salvation?"

32. Those responsible for the death of Jesus met with a sad end: Herod and Pilate were deposed and died miserably in exile. Judas hanged himself and Caiaphas was removed from office a year later.

Those responsible for John Gabriel's death also met a miserable end: the mandarin who had him arrested was deposed and he hanged himself. The terribly cruel viceroy was denounced to the emperor, stripped of his goods, and sent into exile. Others also were condemned to exile or died prematurely.

7. Conclusion

I end my reflections, placing on the lips of St. John Gabriel Perboyre the words of Paul VI about Jesus Christ:

*I will never tire of speaking of him; he is the light, the truth and, moreover, he is **the way, the truth and the life**; he is the bread and the source of living water that satisfied our hunger and our thirst; he is our shepherd, our guide, our example, our consolation, our brother (Manila 29 November 1970).*

(GILBERT WALKER, C.M., translator)

Preghiera Perboyre

*Oh my divine Savior,
by your omnipotence and infinite mercy
may I be changed and transformed totally into you.
May my hands be the hands of Jesus,
may my eyes be the eyes of Jesus,
may my tongue be the tongue of Jesus;
may all my senses and my whole body serve only to glorify you;
but above all transform my soul and all its faculties;
may my memory, my intelligence, my heart,
be the memory, the intelligence and the heart of Jesus;
may my actions and feelings
be likened to your actions and feelings,
and, as your Father said of you:
'Today I have begotten you,'
may you be able to say the same of me,
and also say along with your heavenly Father:
'This is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased.'*

(Prayer attributed to J. G. Perboyre. Cf. François Vauris, C.M.: *Le disciple de Jésus ou Vie du Vénérable Perboyre*, Paris, 1853, p. 322)