

# VINCENTIANA

46<sup>th</sup> YEAR - N. 6

NOVEMBER-DECEMBER 2002



*Saint John Gabriel Perboyre:  
Bicentennial of his Birth,  
1802-2002*

CONGREGATION OF THE MISSION  
GENERAL CURIA

## Holy See

**Appointment.** The Holy Father has named **Fr. Milan Šášik, C.M.**, Apostolic Administrator *ad nutum Sanctae Sedis* of the Eparchy of Mukachevo, assigning him the Titular See of Bononia. Until now Fr. Šášik has been pastor of Perečín, in Zakarpatskaya (Ruthenia).

(*L'Osservatore Romano*, 13 November 2002, p. 1)

Rome, October 15, 2002

*To the members of the Congregation of the Mission*

My very dear Confreres,

May the grace of Our Lord be always with you!

One day, when speaking to the confreres, St. Vincent cried out: “How happy, yes how happy, is the state of that missionary who knows no other boundaries than the whole world for the work and mission he has undertaken for Jesus Christ” (Abelly, Book II, Chapter I, 91).

Few topics excited St. Vincent more than the foreign missions. The reader immediately senses the energy and enthusiasm in his conferences and letters about the missions, as he speaks of Madagascar, Algeria, Poland, Scotland and other places. He weeps at the death of great missionaries, but does not hesitate to send others to replace them. He perseveres even when new beginnings seem to present insurmountable obstacles.

Today I write, as I do each October, to appeal for volunteers for our new missions, as well as for other urgent missionary needs. As usual, I will begin by offering you some news; then I will make several appeals, including some new ones.

### **SOME NEWS BRIEFS**

- ***RATIO MISSIONUM*** — I am delighted with the publication, several months ago, of the *Ratio Missionum (Vincentiana 2002, N°1)* which the General Assembly of 1998 requested, and am very grateful to those who helped in preparing it. I urge all the members of the Congregation to read it and trust that it will be a very useful document, especially for those in formation and for those going off to foreign missions. Several provinces have already used the document as the basis for retreats or ongoing formation sessions.
- **THE VICE-PROVINCE OF STS. CYRIL AND METHODIUS** — I just got back from the first-ever meeting of the members of the new vice-province, which took place in Kiev on September 16-20. It was a wonderful occasion. Almost all the members of the vice-province were there, plus nine students in formation. Also attending were the Visitors of Poland, Slovakia and Hungary. Four laypersons came from Germany and Italy to represent AIC. Józef Kapuściak and I were there on behalf of the General Curia. On this occasion we not only dreamed about the future of

the new vice-province, but also talked concretely about the importance of a healthy, integral spirituality for the individual missionaries, encouraging them to draw up a personal plan that encompasses the human, spiritual, Vincentian-apostolic, community, and ongoing formation dimensions of their lives. Fr. Paul Roche, the Vice-Visitor, has just purchased a house and is adding an addition. This will serve as a Provincial House and Internal Seminary. The province, thanks be to God, has vocations. Recently, four of its students began the Internal Seminary in Slovakia with Fr. Tomaz Mavric as Director.

- **CHINA** — There is good news and bad news here. The bad news is that there was a government crackdown at the end of 2001 that all of us here found very preoccupying. The good news is that things are moving forward on the mainland in positive ways that I had not anticipated. I wish I could fill you in on these developments in greater detail, but I trust that you understand the need for my being vague. Two more volunteers from Poland are joining the mission: Fr. Andrzej Stepańczuk has already arrived in Taiwan; Marek Dabrowski, a seminarian, is studying English in Ireland in preparation for the mission. Two confreres from the Philippines have also joined the mission, Ferdinand Labitag and Domingo Seong Doh Hong.
- **PAPUA NEW GUINEA** — Homero Marín has arrived and is adjusting well. Tulio Cordero is at present studying English at St. John's University in New York and will be in Papua New Guinea at the beginning of next year. Political and social conditions in Port Moresby remain turbulent. The confreres bear up under these conditions patiently and courageously.
- **SOLOMON ISLANDS** — In addition to the seminary, the confreres will be taking over the running of a missionary parish. Fr. Chacko Panathara, who along with Fr. Dick Kehoe was a founder of the mission in Tanzania, is presently on sabbatical in the United States. He will arrive in the Solomons at the beginning of 2003 to take over this parish.
- **TANZANIA** — As I mentioned in last year's letter, the Province of Southern India has very generously taken over the responsibility for the mission in Tanzania in order better to guarantee its future. Fr. Mathew Onatt, formerly the Visitor in India, is now the superior of the mission. He arrived in Tanzania this year, as did Varghese Ayyampilly and Babu Mattappillil. There are seven missionaries there at present. Soon, seminarians from India will be going to Tanzania to do their formation there in order to absorb better the local culture and the language, Swahili. The Visitor and Fr. Onatt are eager to build a house of formation in Morogoro and a small new central house in Songea. Of course, the

Province of Southern India has limited financial resources, so they will be searching for funds to start these projects.

- **MOZAMBIQUE**

a. The Vice-Province of Mozambique — I am most grateful to the Visitors of Brazil for taking a special interest in Mozambique. Each of the three Visitors has agreed to send one confrere to the vice-province. The Province of Portugal, likewise, continues to provide confreres for Mozambique, despite its personnel limitations. José Luis Fernandes Azevedo, formerly the National Director of JMV in Portugal and then a military chaplain in Bosnia, has just arrived in Mozambique.

b. Nacala — This year Sergio Asenjo, from Costa Rica, joined José Eugenio López García and David Fernández, both from the Province of Salamanca, and Emmanuel Ugwuoke, from Nigeria, as well as four young lay missionaries (Consuelo Plaza Nieto, María del Carmen Lupiañez Castillo, Silvia Bravo Grau, María Jesús Cuenca Ramos). This mission of the Province of Salamanca has many prospective vocations to the priesthood. The team has been very creative in participating in the Campaign Against Hunger that the worldwide Vincentian Family has mounted over the past year. They have a very interesting, attractive web site, which you can find at: [www.nacalavicenciana.org](http://www.nacalavicenciana.org). As I have mentioned in previous letters, malaria is one of our greatest enemies in Mozambique. Just about all of our missionaries have had difficult bouts with it.

- **RWANDA/BURUNDI** — I am very grateful to the Visitor of Colombia and his council, as well as to the many Colombian confreres who have volunteered for this difficult mission. There are now seven confreres there. Things are moving ahead rapidly. The mission in Rwanda/Burundi is now juridically a “region,” with its own superior. The confreres will be opening a house for ten candidates who are interested in joining the Congregation. Another house, to be opened in Rwisabi, where the Daughters of Charity also serve, is in an area with a high percentage of AIDS victims. The confreres in this house may also be able to extend their services to the National Philosophy Seminary, which is nearby. This past year Fenelón Castillo went to Rwanda as Director of the Daughters of Charity. A student from Colombia, Félix Eduardo Osorio, will soon be joining the mission. Other confreres from Colombia will be sent there in the future, so that each house has at least a three-man team.

- **BOLIVIA** — The confreres there now have a new house for the initial formation of their students, who then move on to the seminary in Chile.

Recently they completed a lengthy process of formulating an overall pastoral and community plan.

- **ALBANIA** — Our confrere Cristoforo Palmieri, who is the Apostolic Administrator for the Diocese of Rrëshen, has just completed the new cathedral for his diocese, where the Congregation began its new mission in 1993. This mission too is now a “region” with a superior who has specified, delegated powers. The Daughters of Charity have also constituted an Albania-Kosovo Region which they hope will soon become a province.
- **CUBA** — Conditions are not easy in Cuba. It remains difficult for foreign confreres to obtain permission to minister there permanently, though recently we have received some encouragement in that regard. Meanwhile, missionaries from Spain, Colombia, Panama, and Santo Domingo help out for short periods of time, as we wait for future developments.
- **IRAN** — Lazare de Gérin continues to work alone here, in very difficult circumstances, in two parishes. Fr. José Antonio Ubillús, Assistant General, visited him there this past April. At present, a young Iranian is making the Internal Seminary in France.

## **FIRST APPEAL**

In the last few years, I have mentioned that our first priority now is to consolidate the new missions that we have already begun, so that they will have firm foundations for the future. Nonetheless, I still receive many appeals, some of which I would love to respond to.

- **ANGOLA** — At table recently in Paris, a young confrere asked me: “Are there any other missions you would like to begin before you finish your mandate as Superior General?” Without much hesitation I answered: “Yes, I would like to begin a new mission in Angola.” I cannot tell you how many times the Mother General, the Visitatrix of Madrid St. Vincent, and other Daughters of Charity have appealed to me to send confreres to accompany the sisters in the mission there. On top of that, we already have candidates for the Congregation of the Mission from Angola! So, my first appeal this year is for Angola. The bishop has invited us to come. The language is Portuguese. Peace seems to have been reestablished, though life conditions are by no means easy. I would love to have at least two volunteers.

- **EQUATORIAL GUINEA** — Our confrere Msgr. Jorge Ávila, after many years as bishop in El Petén and then in Jalapa, Guatemala, is now retired. Having always desired to serve on the missions, he then volunteered to go as a missionary to Equatorial Guinea! He departed on October 4. I can only express my deepest gratitude and thanks to him. He is now accompanying the Daughters of Charity in Equatorial Guinea; they live in an area where there is no other priest. Here too, as in Angola, we already have candidates for the Congregation of the Mission! It would be wonderful to have a couple of volunteers to join Msgr. Ávila there. The language is Spanish. This mission is very poor, with difficult living conditions. Geographically, however, it is not too far from our mission in Cameroon. There are already initial contacts between the two missions.
- **SOLOMON ISLANDS** — We need at least one confrere to accompany Fr. Chacko in the new missionary parish. Since the parish is adjacent to the seminary, there will be abundant contact with the confreres there and cooperation between the seminary and the parish.
- **PAPUA NEW GUINEA** — The Archbishop of Port Moresby keeps asking for more confreres for the interdiocesan formation program at Holy Spirit Seminary. The language at the seminary is English, though among the people Pidgin English is spoken. I do not wish to disguise from you that living conditions are difficult in Papua New Guinea, where there continues to be much violence.
- **VICE-PROVINCE OF STS. CYRIL AND METHODIUS** — The vice-province has 22 confreres spread out over a huge territory in Siberia, Belarus and Ukraine. Will we soon be able to reopen the house that belongs to the Congregation in Lithuania? Will we be able one day to join the sisters in Kazakhstan? This depends, in large part, on volunteers. The official language of the vice-province is Russian. The confreres, who come from Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Ireland, made courageous efforts to learn the language.
- **ROMANIA** — Before the Communist takeover, the confreres worked in Romania; in fact, you will still find our house in Bucharest listed in the *Catalogue*, though it does not appear likely that we will get it back. Recently, two Romanian confreres were ordained in the Province of Toulouse. There are several others in formation. The Visitor of the Province of Toulouse has asked me if we could envision the opening of a house in Romania. If such a mission were to be opened, it would be important to have some more experienced confreres to accompany the younger Romanians. The language is Romanian.

- **EL ALTO** — We need at least one more confrere to fill out the team in El Alto, where the confreres serve very generously under difficult climatic conditions, because of the altitude, and in difficult pastoral circumstances. The languages are Spanish and Aymara.

## **SECOND APPEAL**

Provinces continue to be enormously generous in contributing to IMF:2000-2004. Because of depressed market conditions, this fund is not growing as rapidly as its predecessor (IMF:2000) did, but it is doing reasonably well, given the present situation.

Each quarter at a *tempo forte* meeting of the General Council, the Treasurer General makes a report that also includes the contributions that individual confreres have made to IMF:2000-2004. The members of the General Council always express astonishment at how abundant these contributions are. When I made the first appeal several years ago, none of us anticipated how generous the response of individual confreres would be.

Apart from IMF:2000 and IMF:2000-2004, one of my goals in recent years has been to set up patrimonial funds for our poorest provinces. The revenues from such funds, whose capital remains untouched, will help guarantee the future of those provinces and will be used for the formation of their members, their works among the poor, and the care of their aging missionaries. To create such funds, I have appealed to several better-off provinces, who have shown extraordinary generosity in sharing their resources with our poorest provinces.

I am very grateful too to confreres and friends of the Congregation who have, in their wills, left legacies, which are now bearing fruit in the missions. I can only encourage others to do the same. It is a very concrete way of expressing one's love and zeal for the missions, even after one's death.

This year's appeal is like that of other years. I make it with less embarrassment than in the past, since I see how generously you have responded to it. I ask you, with simplicity, to reflect on whether you as an individual can make a contribution, small or large, to IMF: 2000-2004. I also ask each of the Visitors to discuss with the members of your council whether your province might be able to make a contribution, small or large. I am enclosing a sheet that will provide you with instructions as to how this can be done.

Those are my appeals both for personnel and for financial assistance for the missions. One of the things that most encourages me as Superior General is the wonderful missionary spirit that I see among the confreres, young and old. I thank the Lord for that and ask him to continue to bless the Congregation and to

deepen this spirit among us.

Your brother in St. Vincent,

Robert P. Maloney, C.M.  
Superior General

**IMF: 2000-2004**  
**Methods for Making a Contribution**

**Provincial Contributions**

1. Checks made payable to: “Congregazione della Missione” and with “Deposit Only” written on the back. These should be sent to:

Elmer Bauer III, C.M.  
Econome General  
Via dei Capasso, 30  
00164 Roma  
Italy

2. For Italy and France, the CCP account can be used following exactly the information in the Catalogue, page 1.
3. Other possibilities for transfers can be discussed with the Econome General.

**Individual Contributions**

1. Checks made payable to: “Congregazione della Missione” and with “Deposit Only” written on the back, sent to the address above.
2. Other arrangements can be made via the Provincial Econome, who will be acquainted with various methods of transfer.

**In every case:**

1. All gifts received will be acknowledged.
2. If your contribution is not acknowledged in a reasonable time, please contact us for clarification.
3. Please inform us if you are making any transfer of money, as described above.

## **Some Information and Criteria for Those Who Write**

1. If you should wish to volunteer, please send your letter in time to arrive in Rome by December 15, 2002.
2. So that I might read the letters all at once and so that they might be carefully organized, would you please address the envelopes as follows:  
  

Robert P. Maloney, C.M.  
MISSIONS  
Congregazione della Missione  
Via dei Capasso, 30  
00164 ROMA  
ITALY
3. It is, of course, helpful to know the language beforehand, but it is not absolutely necessary. A period of cultural and language training will be provided for the missionaries. Details will vary according to the particular place to which a confrere is sent.
4. While we have decided that no automatic age cutoff would be established, it is surely necessary that the missionary have reasonably good health and the flexibility needed for inculturation.
5. Confreres who volunteer, by sending a letter to the Superior General, should inform the Visitor that they have done so. I will always dialogue with the Visitor about the matter.
6. Your letter should give some background about your person, your ministerial experience, your languages, and your training. It should also express any particular interests that you have, such as what mission you would like to take part in.
7. Even if you have already written in the past, please contact me again. Experience has demonstrated that confreres who are available at one moment might not be available at another, and vice-versa.

*To the members of the Congregation of the Mission*

My very dear Confreres,

May the grace of Our Lord be always with you!

Every year at the Advent Mass on December 17, we listen to Matthew's account of the genealogy of Jesus: "A family record of Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham. Abraham was the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob, Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers. Judah was the father of Perez..." (Mt 1:1-17). Few readings seem more boring, as the lector goes on and on reciting 14 generations from Abraham to David, 14 more from David to the Babylonian Exile, and 14 more from the Exile to Christ.

But a careful eye will note that, in many ways, Matthew's symmetrically constructed account of Jesus' genealogy is much more subtle than a casual observer might think. Contrary to the patriarchal mentality of the time, for example, Matthew has inserted four women into the long list of men — a curious, but fascinating innovation. Who are these women? Why are they there? What do they tell us about Advent?

Matthew's readers must certainly have been jolted by finding Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba on the list. They might even have blushed when they saw Tamar's name. You remember that the Book of Genesis (38:15ff) recounts that she pretended to be a harlot and seduced her father-in-law, Judah. The twins born of their illicit union, Perez and Zerah, are precisely the names which appear as Jesus' ancestors.

First-century Christians probably had mixed, but much more favorable reactions to the inclusion of Rahab on the list. She was a prostitute, as the Book of Joshua attests (cf. Jos 2:1ff), but the New Testament praises her for her faith and good works (cf. Heb 11:31 and Jas 2:25). She hid the Israelite spies who had infiltrated Jericho, thus facilitating the capture of the city. When the walls came tumbling down (Jos 6:20), only Rahab and her family were spared. We know nothing about Salmon, who is listed as the father of her child, but one wonders whether he was one of the clients in her prostitution trade.

Of the four women, Ruth comes off by far the best in the scriptures. All of us recall the wonderful fidelity of this foreigner to her Jewish mother-in-law. Rather than abandon Naomi, Ruth declares: "Wherever you go I will go, wherever you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people and your God my God. Wherever you die I will die and there be buried" (Ru 1:16-17). So Ruth

accompanies Naomi from the Plains of Moab to Bethlehem where her mother-in-law introduces her to a relative named Boaz, whom she weds. The child of this mixed marriage, Obed, becomes the grandfather of David the king.

The most shocking, both to Matthew's contemporaries and to us today, is the fourth woman in the genealogy. Matthew discreetly does not mention her name, describing her simply as Uriah's wife. The infamous Bathsheba, as we remember, committed adultery with David, who then, in an attempt to hide her pregnancy, called her husband back from battle and tried to induce him to have sexual relations with her. When the courageous Uriah abstained (for religious reasons!), David had him murdered (cf. 2 Sam 11:11ff). After mourning her husband's death briefly (2 Sam 11:26), Bathsheba quickly took up residence with David and gave birth to their child, who died almost immediately. Their second child was Solomon, renowned for his wisdom. But Solomon, heedless of the Lord's admonition (1 Kgs 11:1ff), chased after countless foreign women (he had 700 wives and 300 concubines, the Book of Kings tells us!), and they turned his heart away from the God of Israel. It is his name, from among David's children, that appears on the list of Jesus' ancestors.

None of these women's names are found in Luke's genealogy of Jesus. Why did Matthew include them? What does their presence on the list say to us this Advent?

Basically, Matthew wants to tell us that God's Spirit guides human history. God uses the unexpected to bring his plans to fulfillment. Human history is not a linear chain of events that lead to a predictable conclusion. It involves sin and conversion, successes and failures, heroes and villains. But God's providence rules over history. It makes crooked ways straight and rough ways smooth. And ultimately, God's love prevails, as revealed in the person of Jesus.

It also seems clear that Matthew has a second motive for inserting these four women into the otherwise all-male genealogy. They are all Gentiles. Tamar and Rahab were Canaanites, Ruth a Moabite, and Bathsheba was probably a Hittite. Their presence on the list foreshadows the role of the Messiah, who opens God's saving plan to the Gentiles. Matthew is stating that Gentiles are part of Jesus' lineage and part of his future.

This Advent let me offer you two Vincentian reflections on this highly unusual reading:

1. More and more, as his life went on, St. Vincent pondered the mystery of God's providence. Trust in providence became one of the keystones in his spirituality. He writes to Jean Barreau in 1648: "We cannot better assure our eternal happiness than by living and dying in the service of the poor,

in the arms of providence, and with genuine renouncement of ourselves in order to follow Jesus Christ” (SV III, 392). Vincent was utterly convinced that for those who love God and seek to do his will, “all things work together for good” (Rom 8:28). He tells Louise de Marillac: “In the name of God, let us not be surprised at anything. God will do everything for the best” (SV III, 213). Vincent believes that God governs history and that nothing eludes his power, that there is a guiding plan, beyond our comprehension, which gives meaning to life’s events. For Vincent, those who trust in providence find meaning in the polarities of human existence: light and darkness, grace and sin, peace and violence, plan and disruption, health and sickness, life and death.

Like Matthew, Vincent stood with reverent trust before the mystery of God, as revealed in Christ, in whom life, death and resurrection are integrated. Matthew was able to see God working through Tamar’s seduction of her father-in-law, through the collusion of Rahab the harlot with Israel’s spies, through Ruth the Moabite’s unexpected union with Boaz the Jew, through David and Bathsheba’s adultery. Vincent too trusted deeply in God’s “hidden plan” (cf. Col 2:2-3), even as he experienced the death of missionaries he sent to Madagascar, the religious wars in Lorraine, the connivings of Cardinal Mazarin, the turbulent masses of neglected poor in Paris.

This Advent I encourage you to ponder the mystery of providence, both in your own life and in the wider history of humanity today. Do we, like St. Vincent, trust deeply that a loving, personal God guides each of us as well as the events of contemporary history, even the tragic ones? That is surely an enormous challenge as we see wars and threats of war, continued terrorist attacks, and forms of poverty and sickness that human resources today really could overcome, but that the will of the world fails to tackle.

2. This Advent I also ask you to lift up your eyes toward the ends of the earth. Embrace the universalism that Matthew subtly introduces into Jesus’ genealogy by inserting two Canaanites, a Moabite, and a Hittite into the line of Jesus ancestors. Matthew continues this theme with the story of the Magi, Gentiles who come from the East to adore the newborn Lord. And he concludes his gospel with the rousing universal missionary mandate: “Full authority has been given to me both in heaven and on earth. Go, therefore, and make disciples of *all nations*. Baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Teach them to carry out everything I have commanded you and know that *I am with you* always, until the end of the world!” (Mt 28:18-20). Interestingly, this farewell command combines both universalism (“all nations”) and providence (“I am with you”).

In recent years our Vincentian Family has grown rapidly, spreading to many countries on all continents. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, our international meetings will show a growing number of Asians, Pacific Islanders, Africans, and Latin Americans, who will stand alongside Europeans and North Americans as the members of a truly global family. Those whose skin is black, brown, yellow, red and white will work next to one another in projects serving the poor. They will sit beside each other doing research into the causes of poverty. They will serve with one another in lay missions sponsored by MISEVI. They will pray with each other and sing with each other in Eucharistic celebrations. I hope that the multiracial character of our Vincentian Family in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be a clear witness to the unity of the human race and that it will be a continual font of richness for us all, rather than a source of prejudice.

As our newly published *Ratio Missionum* points out, the missionary must be alert to the “seeds of the Word” embedded in various cultures throughout the world and must patiently and perseveringly enter into intercultural and interreligious dialogue. Only through trustful dialogue can the wounds of divided Christendom be healed and the violence that has so often erupted among Christians, Muslims and Jews be quelled.

Matthew’s seemingly boring genealogy offers a very relevant challenge today: do we remain insulated, as Matthew feared was the case among many of his readers? Are we so caught up in our own work or in our own province that we rarely raise our eyes to the larger world of the poor on other continents and to our brothers and sisters who are serving them there? Do we sense ourselves as members of a worldwide Family and live in active solidarity with those who are even poorer than we are, sharing with them our affective and effective love, some portion of our material goods, and our prayer?

Those are my thoughts this Advent. With you, in the spirit of Matthew’s gospel, I pray that this Christmas might be a time of peaceful trust in God’s providence for all of us, that as servants of the poor we ourselves might be signs of that same loving providence for others, and that as a missionary Family we might give ourselves generously to the universal mission of the newborn Lord.

Your brother in St. Vincent,

Robert P. Maloney, C.M.  
Superior General

Rome, October 20, 2002

*To the members of the Congregation of the Mission*

My very dear Confreres,

May the grace and peace of God Our Father and the Our Lord Jesus Christ be with you!

For some time now, we have been considering in the General Council the creation of a new office in the Congregation to assist poorer provinces, vice-provinces and missions in seeking assistance from international funding agencies, since sometimes, for a variety of reasons, confreres may not know where to seek funds or how to write successful grant proposals for projects they are undertaking.

After receiving a positive reaction to this idea at the meeting of all the Visitors in Dublin, I decided, on June 15, 2002, with the unanimous consent of the members of the General Council, to establish the Vincentian Solidarity Office (VSO) and appointed Brother Peter A. Campbell, C.M. to be its first administrator. The goal of the VSO is:

*To assist the poorer provinces, vice-provinces and missions of the Congregation of the Mission with writing successful grant proposals to funding organizations for their works and needs.*

The VSO is an optional service that these provinces, vice-provinces and missions can use. It is not my intention, in creating this new office, to centralize all grant proposals through the VSO. On the contrary, provinces, vice-provinces and missions should feel quite free to continue to send proposals directly to funding organizations or to donors.

Brother Peter will be making a presentation about the VSO at the meeting of all the Provincial Treasurers which will be held in Rome on November 4-9, 2002. At that time he will distribute the VSO brochure and the VSO Project Application Form (projects submitted to the office must always be approved and signed by the Visitor or Vice-Visitor). He will also be available to answer questions on how to use the services of the VSO. Immediately after the meeting he will be writing to all the Visitors, offering more detailed information about the VSO and providing them with other copies of these same materials.

The VSO will be located at the following address:

Brother Peter A. Campbell, C.M.  
Vincentian Solidarity Office  
St. Vincent's Seminary  
500 East Chelton Avenue  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19144  
USA

The working language of the office will be English, since grant proposals can now be submitted in English to almost all fund-raising organizations. The VSO will open officially on January 1, 2003. The completed VSO project application forms can be submitted at any time after that date. Beginning on January 1, 2003, you will also find detailed information about the office at the following web site: [famvin.org/vso](http://famvin.org/vso)

With you, I pray that the Lord will bless this undertaking whose aim, as is evident, is to help all of us to serve the poor more effectively.

Your brother in St. Vincent,

Robert P. Maloney, C.M.  
Superior General

## Appointments and Confirmations by the Superior General

BOUCHET Yves	03-07-2002	Visitor – Toulouse
COONEY Gregory	03-07-2002	Visitor – Australia
CUNHA REBOUÇAS José	03-07-2002	Director DC – Recife
HALEY Joseph V.	05-07-2002	Director DC – Los Altos Hills
QUERUBÍN MARÍN Ricardo A.	15-07-2002	Director DC – Cali, Colombia
CASELLA Thomas A.	16-07-2002	Director DC – New York
CORNEJO AMORES Aníbal	17-07-2002	Director DC – Central America
OLIVEIRA Francisco José	17-07-2002	Director DC – Fortaleza
BARBOSA FERREIRA Geraldo	25-07-2002	Director DC – Rio de Janeiro
VALENGA Simão	28-08-2002	Visitor – Curitiba
CHAVES DOS SANTOS Eli	10-09-2002	Visitor – Rio de Janeiro
CAMPBELL Peter	05-06-2002	Administrator VSO
SHELBY Charles	01-07-2002	International Coordinator AMM
ARREOLA MARTÍNEZ Luis	04-10-2002	Visitor – Mexico
HARRITY Patrick V.	11-10-2002	Director DC – USA, Evansville
LIGNÉE Hubert	11-10-2002	Director DC – Cameroon

*SIEV*  
*Via dei Capasso, 30*  
*00164 Roma*

**INFORMATION SHEET**  
**on the work and decisions of SIEV**  
**N° 6**

The confrere members of SIEV, Frs. Jean-Yves Ducorneau, John Prager, Kazimierz Stelmach, Julio Suescun Olcoz, Roberto Lovera, executive secretary, and José María Nieto, delegate from the Curia, held their annual meeting in Paris on 20 and 21 September 2001.

During the month of July 2001, the Vincentian Month for Directors of the Daughters of Charity took place in Paris. Sixty-nine Directors participated (only five were not able to be present) and the evaluation was generally positive. The principal talks given during the month will be published in *Vincentiana*.

The Vincentian Month 2002 for the Assistants and Spiritual Councillors of Vincentian Lay Groups is being prepared. The participation of around 120 people, confreres, Daughters of Charity, and laity, is foreseen. Hospitality will be provided at rue de Sèvres and rue de Bac; the work will take place in the assembly hall of rue du Bac. The session in Paris will last three weeks, from 7-26 July. This Vincentian Month intends to be an experiment which could be repeated, with the necessary adaptations, in various parts of the world in order to promote as great a participation as possible of all the Assistants at formation sessions.

The communication among the various organisms of Vincentian studies in order to collaborate in diverse initiatives still remains difficult. SIEV intends to gather information about the web sites of the various organisms in order to insert them on the web site of the Vincentian Family in such a way that through the links they will be easily accessible to all.

A workshop for the organization and development of the Vincentian Family web site was held in New York in August. Some methods of collaboration between SIEV and the web site were studied in order to communicate news, as well as for the insertion of studies which everyone can readily access.

The study project on the figure of Perboyre on the occasion of the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his birth is reaching its conclusion. The studies prepared by around ten confreres will be published in an issue of *Vincentiana* edited by SIEV.

The collection of the Holy See's Documents regarding the Congregation from 1876 to the present is almost completed. The documents up to that date were already published in the volume *Acta Apotolica in gratiam Congregationis Missionis*. As soon as the research is finished, it will be determined how to put the results at the

disposition of all.

A topic of great importance for SIEV is the care of our historical archives, both in regard to the conservation and saving of documents, as well as for cataloguing them so as to permit easy consultation. It seems important to dedicate time, persons, and financial resources for the conservation of such wealth and for its use. SIEV addressed some suggestions to the Superior General and his council.

Once again, SIEV reflected on its role and significance, even in the light of the poor incisiveness of its initiatives and of the difficulty in realizing the task of animation of Vincentian studies. A greater sharing, meeting and collaboration among Vincentian scholars would be desirable. On the one hand, one has the impression that actually there are few young confreres in the Congregation interested in serious study, specializing in and passionate for Vincentian topics. The presence of dedicated confreres in teaching at the university level has been reduced in many scholastic environments. Faced with this fact, it is to be recommended especially that provinces encourage the interest of the young for theological formation and set aside a young confrere for Vincentian specialization studies. On the other hand, SIEV carries out a humble and valuable work at the service of many confreres and keeps ever alive the stimulus to research and to study of texts and of Vincentian spirituality. The reflections on this topic were handed over to the Superior General and his council for further evaluation.

Finally, it was decided to prepare and publish in *Vincentiana* an article to make known all the wealth of the scholarly magazines which are published in the Congregation.

The next annual meeting of SIEV is scheduled for September 2002 in Kraków.

## Presentation

On the occasion of the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of St. John Gabriel Perboyre (1802), the International Secretariat for Vincentian Studies (SIEV) has promoted and asked some confreres to study in depth the life of our martyr with the intention of investigating, in a special way, aspects of his life that were overlooked in previous studies.

In reality we possess a good numbers of hagiographic writings about Perboyre, but we still lack a critical study about his era, his life's experience and his writings.

The initiative of SIEV was intended to promote further study of the personality of the saint, thus providing a basis for further critical studies that we hope someone will have the courage to undertake.

This invitation was extended in a general way to all the confreres, through the Visitors, but it was also made in a very specific way to several confreres who are known for their expertise in the area of Vincentian studies.

The entire Congregation is indebted to the authors for their effort and their service. SIEV hopes that this initiative will animate other confreres too, especially our younger confreres, to dedicate some of their time and energy to study in greater detail the Vincentian charism and the figures of our confreres who by their life and holiness have enlightened our path.

In this issue of *Vincentiana*, we gather together and publish those works that we hope will enrich the lives of all the confreres. SIEV wishes to thank *Vincentiana*, for its generous collaboration in the translation and publication of the various articles. We also wish to take this opportunity to remind you that, in that past, *Vincentiana* has dedicated several issues to the life of John Gabriel Perboyre, e.g., 40 (1996), 71-127 and 438-463. This was also an initiative that merits our appreciation.

Roberto Lovera, C.M.  
Executive Secretary of SIEV

## **The Influence of His Family and Friends on the Development of St. John Gabriel Perboyre**

*by André Sylvestre, C.M.  
Province of Toulouse*

On 2 June 1996, in St. Peter's Square, the Holy Father proclaimed John Gabriel Perboyre a saint.

But John Gabriel did not become a saint from one day to the next by some magic wand. We had been waiting for a long time, more than 150 years, for this official decision by the Church, and we thought that it was very late in coming. However, that is the customary prudence of Roman decisions.

Nevertheless, we already had clear testimony from people who knew him at different points in his life.

When he was a boy in Montgesty, his pastor put complete confidence in him, and regarded him as a model, so much so that he asked him to teach catechism once when he had to be away.

During his secondary studies in Montauban, he seemed to his classmates and teachers so perfect that people talked about him as "the little saint of Montauban." In Montdidier and later in Saint-Flour, he had an extraordinary influence on his students. When he took over the seminary at the beginning of the school year of 1827, he had a mere 34 pupils, but the next year there were 63, and the year after, more than 100.

His superior, Fr. Grappin, superior of the major seminary, would later say of him: "Fr. Perboyre is the most accomplished person I know; he is a man of God." When he was assigned to Paris as assistant director of the novitiate, he met there a candidate who was already 40 years old, Mr. Girard. He would subsequently become superior of the major seminary in Algiers, and he had always wanted to meet a saint. "When I met Fr. Perboyre, it seemed to me that God had answered my prayer. He was so holy, in fact, that I never saw in him a single fault in word or action during the six months that I spent with him in the closest intimacy."

When it was time to bid farewell to the crew on the ship when he arrived in China after months of travel, they said among themselves about him: "That one is a real saint!"

If the holiness of our martyr was evident in China especially in this period of his missionary work and even more during his long sufferings, it was not the result of some sudden conversion, but the accomplishment of his entire life.

This holiness had been prepared by the intense Christian life in the families of his father and mother, the Perboyres and the Rigals.

Even in the preceding generation, Jacques Perboyre, brother of Pierre, John Gabriel's father, had become a priest and chose the missionary life. He had taught in the major seminary of Albi confided in 1762 to the Congregation of the Mission by Cardinal de Bernis, at the time Archbishop of Albi.

At the outbreak of the Revolution, John Gabriel's uncle Jacques went into hiding. He then led a dangerous and at times heroic life, exercising his ministry while endangering his life. Once religious peace returned, he came back to the Diocese of Cahors, and founded there, with another Vincentian, a preparatory seminary. This took place in Montauban, at the time in the Diocese of Cahors. It was there that his nephews would come for their secondary studies, among whom were John Gabriel and several of his brothers and cousins.

In the Perboyre home, a solid piety was inculcated in everyone. They had evening prayers as a family; they never missed Sunday Mass, and after reaching home they would discuss the pastor's sermon. More than once when Pierre Perboyre was unable to go to Mass, he would ask his son John Gabriel to repeat the pastor's sermon. The young boy did it so well that his father once told him: "Since you speak so well, you should go on to become a priest."

In this pious atmosphere, several vocations were sown and germinated among the brothers and sisters of the martyr. Besides John Gabriel, two of his brothers entered the Congregation of the Mission, and one of his sisters was attracted to the contemplative life of the Carmel but died just before her admission. Two others, wanting to serve the poor, became Daughters of Charity. One of them would go to China like her brother, while the other would remain in Europe. She died at the hospital in Naples in the service of the sick.

John Gabriel had been marked by his childhood in the country, and he would always remain attentive to matters of the earth. He appreciated the quiet that enveloped the central mission house. In the vast territory confided to him, he was sensitive to the misery of the poor peasants who were finding it so hard just to survive. One year, grasshoppers destroyed the entire harvest.

John Gabriel came to their help with the limited resources of the mission. Recalling the methods he learned in his father's vineyard, he taught several Chinese how to trim the vines.

During his novitiate in the seminary of Montauban, John Gabriel became aware, thanks to his director, Fr. Maisonneuve, and his uncle Jacques, of the pious practices in use in the Congregation. Before entering the seminary, he already had an intense interior life, but in the seminary he was initiated into the methods of meditation, silent prayer in the presence of God. He had also begun to pray with the breviary. In his missionary journeys on the roads of China, he would be in dialogue with God continually. In prison, his guards were impressed by the power of his prayer life.

When he reached the place of his execution, but before submitting to the executioners, he knelt and prayed. He knew that in a few minutes he would at last meet him whom he had followed since his childhood and through the different steps of his way of the cross, now to be accomplished at the foot of this rack on which he would consummate his sacrifice.

The region around his mission center was a rural area of poor houses made of bamboo and reeds covered with thatch. The missionaries were lodged, as were their people, in a similar modest place. During his missionary visits, John Gabriel stayed where he could, sometimes in the chapel or the sacristy, if there was one, or sometimes with a Christian family.

Both the Christians and the pagans saw him radiating such an intense interior life that they considered him a man of God and a genuine saint, and they were not mistaken. The holiness appearing before their eyes was not an illusion or simply the expression of an especially strong character, as sometimes happens; the history of evangelization in China presents several examples of this.

If his boyhood friends had been able to see John Gabriel in his prison at Ou Tchang Fou [Wuhan], or at the foot of the rack on which he was to be attached, they would have recognized him as the same person, with the same self-control, the same serene union with God, the same solemn but joyful character. He had not changed; he always had the same radiance.

From the beginning to the end of his life, he had remained faithful to the solid faith that he had received in the bosom of his family, and which had been enriched and developed during his priestly and missionary life.

To express this continuity in a life, an old man from my village once told me: “You know, when you are born a pony, you grow up to be a horse.” This formula may be a little coarse, but it expresses quite well the truth that the virtues and qualities seen in a young person will be strengthened and developed all during his or her life.

(JOHN RYBOLT, C.M., translator)

## 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 20<sup>th</sup>-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 19<sup>th</sup> 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 19<sup>th</sup>-century Parisian French and 20<sup>th</sup>-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 48<sup>th</sup> 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.

## John Gabriel Perboyre in his Letters to his Family

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John Gabriel died in 1840, and in 1940 Brother Joseph Van den Brandt CM edited, printed and published all the letters written by John Gabriel which he could locate, either originals or copies.<sup>1</sup> This book contained 102 letters. In 1996 a new and revised edition of this work was published,<sup>2</sup> but still with the same number of letters; no other letters had been discovered since the first edition.

Sixty-three of the letters were written to members of his family, and most of the others were to confreres, with a very small number to other persons. The family member who received the most letters was his uncle Jacques Perboyre CM (1763-1848), who received 17 totalling more than 50 printed pages. Next comes his younger brother Louis (1807-1831) who received 14, and then his father Pierre (1771-1860) who received 11. His brother Antoine (1813-1860) got seven and his brother Jacques (1810-1896) six. His sister Antoinette (1815-1898) got one. There are no letters to his sisters Jeanne (1805-1854), Mariette (1809-1826?) and Marie-Anne (1817-1896). There are some letters to cousins. There are no letters to his mother; I think that this probably indicates that she was illiterate. There is one letter addressed jointly to his father and mother, written after he had heard of his brother Louis' death. It must be remembered that we are dealing only with letters which have survived. We have no way of knowing whether there were other letters, written by him to family members, which have not survived.

### Letters to his father

In November 1816 John Gabriel, some months before his 15<sup>th</sup> birthday, was sent to a boarding school which his uncle, Jacques Perboyre CM, operated in Montauban, about 70 kilometers from John Gabriel's home. He was being sent there to keep his young brother Louis, aged nine, company for the first few months. The parents' intention was that Louis would get full secondary education, while John Gabriel, the eldest son, would leave school at about 15 and start work on the family farm. About six months after arriving at the school he wrote to his father, on 9 May 1817. It is a short letter and he says it is the first he has ever written, and that he has never even received a letter. It is a typical

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<sup>1</sup> *Lettres du Bienheureux Jean-Gabriel Perboyre, Prêtre de la Mission*, Annotées et publiées par Joseph Van den Brandt, Frère Lazariste, Pékin, Imprimerie des Lazaristes, 1940, 300 pages.

<sup>2</sup> Saint Jean-Gabriel Perboyre, Prêtre de la Mission: *Correspondance*, Annotée et publiée par Joseph Van den Brandt, Frère Lazariste, Pékin 1940; Nouvelle édition revue et corrigée; Congrégation de la Mission, Rome 1996, 324 pp.

schoolboy letter, including “My brother is well, my uncle and my cousins are well... We need socks, jackets and trousers.” At the end of the letter he writes: “I hug you. I also tenderly hug my dear mother, my brothers and sisters” (Letter 1). That hug for his mother is a feature at the end of most of his letters to his father. The style and vocabulary of the letter would suggest that his uncle probably helped him in writing it.

When his father came to Montauban in June to bring John Gabriel home, according to plan, he found an unexpected development. The school authorities suggested that John Gabriel should complete his secondary education and enter a seminary to study for the priesthood. This suggestion did not come from the boy himself but, once he knew of it, he had to think about it. His father returned home, and John Gabriel remained at the school. On 16 June he wrote to his father and said he accepted the suggestion, provided his father had no objection. It is probably reasonable to suppose that his uncle helped him in coming to that decision, and also helped him in composing the letter, as the following two sentences do not seem typical of a 15-year old boy writing his second letter:

*I have consulted God in order to know the state which I should adopt in order to arrive safely in heaven. After many prayers I have believed that the Lord wishes me to enter the priesthood* (Letter 2).

The end of the letter is more typical of his young age; he still needs money for clothes, and Louis is well. Then hugs for everyone, especially his mother.

After that letter there is a gap of almost five years before his next letter home. This was written in January 1822 from Paris, where he was studying at the Vincentian mother-house. It begins with something which will reappear in other letters home, namely making excuses for not writing more frequently, saying that he knows his uncle will give news of him to the family (Letter 3). In the next letter, 30 October 1823, he again makes excuses for not writing: “I admit being somewhat careless,” but he says he thinks of the family all the time. He gives his father some advice about how to deal with his brother Antoine, then aged ten. He is not to be “pushed” towards the priesthood; he is in danger of being corrupted by servants and farm workers, who can be foul-mouthed; these persons are very different when they are out of their employer’s sight (Letter 4).

His father had to reprimand him for not writing more frequently, in June 1826, yet he did not answer that letter till late August, and had to make excuses for the delay. He asks for prayers in view of his up-coming ordination to the priesthood. There is no reference to his mother in this letter (Letter 5).

He was ordained in September 1826 yet did not write home again till 2 November, saying he had celebrated Mass for his parents and all his relations, and thanks them all for their prayers (Letter 6). There was one letter home in 1827 and one in 1829. He gives news of his work as a teacher, mentions his health and his plans for the summer. In the letter of 17 July 1827 he does not mention his mother till a postscript:

*If I finish off this letter without referring to my filial love for my very dear mother, it is not because I forget, but because I know that you will accurately convey my feelings to her (Letter 7).*

In his next letter, 17 July 1829, he tells how busy he is in his work, but that he is availing of the opportunity of sending a letter home with someone who is going in that direction. There is no reference to his mother (Letter 18). On 15 February 1832 he sends a very emotional letter from Saint-Flour, where he was teaching at that time, to his father and mother, after learning of Louis' death at sea:

*My dear Father and my dear Mother,  
Let us mingle our tears, let us join our prayers;  
our dear Louis is no more!  
What sorrowful news for you, for me, for the whole family!*

He then continues with advice on how to look at the sad event from the point of view of Christian hope and confidence in God (Letter 29).

The next letter is a year later, 12 January 1833, from Paris, after taking up his new appointment there; he had no time to write before leaving Saint-Flour, but he had written to his sister as soon as he arrived in Paris and she would have given all his news. His new appointment is better for his health than his previous one. His brother Jacques was a first year seminarist since the previous September, and John Gabriel reports that his health is good. He says that a letter from his sister Antoinette tells him that his father's health is good. All these references to health lead in to some advice to his father:

*[D]on't neglect the care which your age calls for; health is necessary for you to be able to look after the temporal needs of the family and to give serious thought to spiritual matters of conscience, for it is of supreme importance that you be ready to give an account of these to God when he sees fit to call you to himself (Letter 32).*

At the time of that letter his father was 62 years of age. It is not clear why his son thought such advice necessary. In fact his father lived a further 27 years, dying in 1860 at the age of 89; his mother died in 1862, aged 84.

In January 1834 he reports that his sister Antoinette, who had entered the Daughters of Charity some months earlier, had given him a letter to send home, but he inadvertently sent it to his Uncle Jacques! (Letter 42).

His final letter home was written from China on 22 August 1836, a year after his arrival in Macao. It is not a very long letter, less than two printed pages. It gives an outline of the missionary apostolate in China. In the middle of the letter are a couple of sentences, some lines of which were quoted in the decree of his canonization:

*We have to put up with being tired, and other difficulties, but that is so everywhere, and anyway we have to earn heaven by the sweat of our brows. If we have to suffer martyrdom, it would be a great grace offered to us by God; it is something to be wished for, not feared.*

He asks for prayers for himself and for the conversion of the Chinese, and says that on the fourth of each month he will offer Mass for his living relatives and on the fifth for his deceased ones (Letter 83).

### **Letters to his brother Louis**

In his letters to his father John Gabriel never seems to be completely at his ease. Some of the letters give the impression of having been written from a sense of duty, as though he realised that he *should* write home rather than that he really *wanted* to write home. His letters to his brother Louis are completely different. They are clearly letters that he wanted to write, that he enjoyed writing, and which show the deep affection which he had for Louis, reflecting at the same time the affection which Louis obviously had for him.

The earliest surviving letter to Louis is dated 2 September 1827. John Gabriel has just finished his first year as a priest, teaching in the major seminary in Saint-Flour. It is written one week after his arrival in Montauban where he is staying with his uncle. Louis was in the *Maison-mère* in Paris finishing his *seminaire* and due to take his vows three weeks later. The beginning of the letter is a contrast to the start of some of his letters to his father, where he makes excuses for not writing. His letter to Louis starts:

*I have so many opportunities of writing to you these days that it would be inexcusable for me not to do so; today it is a young convert Protestant who is leaving for Saint-Sulpice; tomorrow it is Fr. Gratacap who acts as postman; he is going to Paris and will, no doubt, go to see you (Letter 8).*

He says he arrived in Montauban on 26 August and on the 28<sup>th</sup>, the feast of St. Augustine, he “unloaded” a one-hour panegyric on the saint which the Ursulines “threw on his back.” His letters to his father do not have that sort of flippant vocabulary. The Ursulines and his uncle take such good care of him that Louis need not worry about his health. He gives news of Montauban affairs in which Louis would be interested, such as the prize-giving day, and speculates about possible community appointments. The whole style of the letter is more relaxed and familiar than that in his letters home.

His next letter to Louis was written two months later, dated 31 October 1827. Once again he avails of an opportunity which occurred for sending a letter, because a confrere is leaving Saint-Flour for Paris. He congratulates Louis on his vows, gives news of his visit home during the summer and also what he has heard from there since then. He outlines his summer travels: 12 days at home in Le Puech, three in Cahors, 12 in Montauban, four or five in Carcassonne or Montolieu. The trip was long in distance but short in time, useful, pleasant and not too expensive. He then continues:

*Eventually I got back to Saint-Flour at the height of the row which I have neither the time nor the inclination to describe to you. Neither will I refer to the various phases of my position here which have followed each other so rapidly since then: promoted to authority I was then demoted, and now here I am in authority again. Tragedies could be written about all this, or even an epic poem...*

*The rest can wait till some other day; it is nearly eleven o'clock at night (Letter 9).*

There is a postscript which lets us see something more of John Gabriel's character:

*Fr Trippier carries with him the regrets and the high regard of the diocese, excepting some people, perhaps, whose ill will still honours him. As for myself, I have never before felt parting from a confrere so much.*

Jean-François Trippier was the confrere who was bringing the letter to Paris, and whose position, as superior of a boarding hostel for boys attending the state school, John Gabriel had inherited. Trippier was at the centre of the row referred to in the letter, which involved the bishop, the Vincentian superior of the major seminary and the Superior General. Jean Grappin, the superior of the major seminary, recommended the appointment of John Gabriel as Trippier's successor, a post which he was to hold for five years.

There was not another letter to Louis till five months later, 24 May 1828. Louis had complained that John Gabriel did not write to him often enough. John Gabriel's answer is that Louis has no idea of how busy he is, with

four or five classes or tutoring sessions every day. Because I am director, bursar, etc., etc., I have to be available always, to everybody, for everything, and everywhere at the same time, so how could I take time off to relax with you [by letter] in Paris?

He then explains that Louis is getting this letter only because he himself has been ill for a week and has the opportunity and time to write. He then continues in a way that shows the good relationship the two of them enjoyed, as he pokes gentle fun at Louis:

*You then suggest that we have a philosophical debate. Are you forgetting, then, that nowadays I walk a different path? ... If you had suggested some small questions of grammar, that is something else, and I would have tried to answer you. I would begin by pointing out the mistakes which you overlooked in your letter. I would have said, for example, that the French conjunction quoyque always takes the subjunctive; that there is no diaeresis on ait, the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular of the verb avoir; that there is an acute accent, not a circumflex, on the 2<sup>nd</sup> e in réfléchir; that "somebody's letter" means a letter from somebody, not to somebody; that such and such an expression is not French, etc., etc., etc. But as regards philosophy, what do you want me to say? I no longer think about it.*

He then teases Louis about being ambitious of becoming a professor of philosophy:

*It is no joke being a professor of philosophy at a time when each one has his own personal ideas about this science, where each one has his own system, his opinions, where there are as many schools as masters.*

And he then proposes what would appear to be a weighty reading list, probably not to be taken seriously (Letter 11).

The next letter was seven weeks later, written at ten o'clock at night because John Gabriel has brought into his office two rowdy boys who "after disturbing the other boys' rest prevent my going to take my own" (Letter 12). Their punishment, apparently, was to be kept standing in his office for a period. He

then gives some news about their younger brother Jacou, who was 18 years old in 1828. He was at their uncle's school in Montauban. All reports from the school about him are good, and he is near the top of his class. Then the Perboyre family failing is mentioned once again: "It is a long time since he himself has written to me." The possibility of Jacou's following his two older brothers into the Vincentian community is mentioned, as something which obviously had already arisen and was known to the two older brothers. John Gabriel writes:

*I do not know what line of action I should take. So, until I see my way more clearly I will avoid any initiative with regard to our dear brother. As regards yourself, if you have any special insights on this matter, go ahead and act on them.*

He is disappointed that Louis did not give any news of the confreres and activities of the *Maison-mère*, even though he should realise that he is always interested in getting such news. Perhaps "gossip" is what he really wanted to hear!

The next letter is five weeks later, dated 16 August 1828, again from Saint-Flour. The first two paragraphs refer to financial matters on which a footnote would have been helpful. John Gabriel, apparently following a thinly-veiled suggestion from Louis, agrees to contribute towards the expense of Jacou's education, as he has already done for their sister Antoinette who was 13 in 1828. The letter also seems to imply that the Superior General, Pierre-Joseph de Wailly, had aided the Perboyre family financially. The letter continues:

*You can imagine how pleased I am to see our brother going to finish his education in the college in Montdidier, where study flourishes and such perfect order reigns! ... Here I am on holidays for the last week. Unless some unexpected order arrives I will spend the whole time in this region. It is only right to work a little for oneself after working a lot for others. Pray for a brother who loves you as himself. Adieu (Letter 14).*

Five weeks later there is a short factual letter, written from Cahors where John Gabriel had stayed for a fortnight, including his annual retreat. He had been three or four days at home in Le Puech, where many were asking about Louis and sending him their good wishes. John Gabriel is just about to set out on his return to Saint-Flour.

*Jacou's departure, for Paris, was to have been at the same time as my own, but Fr. Brunet, who is supposed to be his guide, is not ready yet. The two of them will leave Cahors next Monday evening, September 29, and will therefore arrive in the capital*

*Friday evening or Saturday morning. Make sure our brother leaves in good time for Montdidier. It is rumoured that you will be sent to Montdidier this year; congratulations; you will get on well there sub omni respectu. You will take care of Jacou (Letter 16).*

After that letter there is a gap of seven months, and then John Gabriel accuses Louis of sulking and continues:

*I realise why; you have persuaded yourself that I have not repaid all your advances in the matter of correspondence. Oh Lord! Cool down your rage, and please do not bring on my own... But that would be overdoing the complaints. It is better that I grant you a plenary indulgence; all circumstances favour my sending you my brief. I am on holidays because of the Easter fortnight... On re-reading your October letter (because I have to read again the old ones, since I have no new ones) I have noticed several mistakes which I must point out to you. I know it is not very flattering for a writer in the capital to be instructed by a small-time country teacher... So, I am giving you the tutoring you need, am I not?*

He then asks for help in return, the help of Louis' prayers, as he is "constantly and deeply worried" about his responsibility for others, presumably the students in his care (Letter 17).

It was another seven months before he wrote to Louis again, on 28 November 1829. It is an interesting letter because of the way it moves from the sort of brotherly banter which he often uses, to practical advice for Louis who will be going to China, then spiritual advice for him, then a reference to his own possible vocation to the Chinese mission, then some practical financial matters about Jacou's education, then a short reference to their uncle's unspecified problems in Montauban, then some more on paying for Jacou's education, and ending with a paragraph on his own workload:

*In spite of all your threats or all your forecasts, my position as superior still stands.... I can only approve and admire your fine resolution to go to evangelize the Chinese. In spite of the affection I have for you, what a joy it would be for me to see you traverse the huge oceans of the hemisphere for such a noble cause!*

He then suggests that it would be a good idea for Louis to follow courses in "physics, etc" in a state college, but warns that too much reliance should not be placed on that sort of learning, even though it has its place as "a supernatural means, although indirect and remote," in evangelization. This leads on to the pre-eminence of spiritual learning, and he advises Louis "to clothe yourself

solely with J.C.” Then comes a reference to his great fear of “having stifled, by my infidelity to grace, the seeds of a vocation similar to yours.”

The matters concerning paying for Jacou in Montdidier seem to have arisen through lack of clarity in the arrangements between John Gabriel, the Superior General and a Fr. Pierre-Nicolas Vivier, probably the bursar in the *Maison-mère*. As Louis made the arrangements he is told to sort this matter out, but John Gabriel will pay. In the final paragraph of the letter comes this passage:

*Don't make so many demands on me. If you knew the state I'm in you wouldn't treat me so pitilessly. Although we still have only a hundred boys I'm overwhelmed with work. I'm extremely tired, mentally and physically. I don't know what the outcome will be of a general malaise which I've had for a long time, and which is getting progressively worse (Letter 19).*

The next letter is dated 24 February 1830 on the first page, and 11 March at the end. He had received, all on the same day, letters from each of his three brothers, and he rhapsodises a bit about this before getting down to the main points of the letter:

*You charge me with the criminal offence of not having, in my last letter, given you any news of the confreres in the major seminary, and of normally not giving you enough news. The first point is of no value, with those Fathers writing to Paris more frequently than I do. With regard to the second, I judged it better to say nothing, for reasons of sensitivity, so as not to trespass on the rights of others....*

There were two community houses in Saint-Flour. The one referred to above was the major seminary, and later in the letter John Gabriel says he meets the confreres from there only occasionally. In his previous letter he advised Louis to attend lectures in physics, and now he endorses his attending ones in moral theology, and continues:

*Pile up treasure now, equip yourself with all the theological knowledge which you may need in the future, for it will not be easy for you to acquire it if you go on the foreign missions, and you will not have the time for this if you ever happen to get a job like mine.*

Then follows another bit of teasing about Louis' grammatical mistakes, and then:

*... only write to me more often, and forgive me if I am not always able to reply to you.*

And there is a postscript:

*So that you may be able to bring the two dates on this letter into agreement, I should tell you that I had hardly begun it when I was forced to break it off and give it a rest for a fortnight. You see from that how little free time I have for writing to you. Pray for me! (Letter 20).*

The next letter, four weeks later, is short, and echoes something he had said about his workload five months earlier:

*The Easter fortnight, which for most priests is a period of extra work, is one of rest for me. The boys are on holidays. I needed this break. I think that in the past six months I have not had two days without my head splitting, aches in all my limbs and my blood all on fire. Nothing wears me down like the details of administration; nothing saps my strength like worry. Don't be worried, though, about my health; I'm not yet at the end of my tether; I'm going to take advantage of the remaining days of the holidays to build up my strength, mental and physical (Letter 21).*

In July 1830 the French king, Charles X, dissolved the Chamber of Deputies. The people of Paris rose in protest during the "Three Glorious Days," 27-29 July. When news of this reached Saint-Flour John Gabriel became worried about the safety of Louis and even made mention of him at the Memento of the Dead in his Mass. He was also upset at a rumour that St. Vincent's remains were thrown into the Seine. By the time he wrote to his brother on 24 August he had heard that both his fears had been groundless. After dealing with the above in the first paragraph, he continues:

*It is hardly possible for me to go and visit you these holidays. The situation is rather critical. My purse is not loaded. I am needed in Saint-Flour. All the same, I very much want an opportunity to see before you leave for China. Although I am not too far from taking the same road as yourself, I am not really ready nor completely sure of myself to set out this year. In the meantime I will applaud your courage and initiative.*

Then come details about how he will be paying for Jacou's education, including provision of pocket money. He then asks Louis to check whether a certain journal of Christian philosophy is good enough to be worth subscribing to (Letter 22).

His hope of seeing Louis before his departure was not fulfilled, and he wrote on 8 October:

*I am experiencing in a very real way what St. Augustine said, that one never realises how attached one is to somebody until separation occurs. Realising that you are leaving is something I cannot accept unfeelingly, and forgive me if I admit that I am not sufficiently in control to prevent tears... I am afraid that I may not have been faithful to the vocation which the Lord has given you. Pray to Him that He may let me know His holy will and may enable me to follow it... No, my very dear brother, I myself will never forget you. I will remember you at the altar. There we will find each other united in the Divine Heart of Jesus... I am going to write to our parents to console them; they must be in need of that. I will give you news of them as often as possible. Take every opportunity that occurs to write to us. Goodbye, my very dear brother; I hug you in O.L. with all the affection of my heart (Letter 23).*

The next letter was sent three weeks later, on 27 October, to Le Havre to catch Louis before he went on board ship on 2 November. He refers to the general air of pessimism in France, including a rumour that the Arabs will invade and sack Paris. He asks Louis to send “detailed” descriptions of the voyage and of his eventual ministry in China and of “everything which might interest curiosity” or be edifying (Letter 24).

John Gabriel’s final letter to Louis was written eight and a half months after Louis’ departure. At the time of writing, July 1831, the news that Louis had died at sea on 2 May had not yet reached France. John Gabriel sent it to Macao, where Louis would have been expected. Previous letters had begun “My very dear brother,” but this one starts “My very dear Louis.” John Gabriel is availing of an opportunity which had arisen to send the letter to China. After the introductory sentences, he continues:

*Since you left, how many times have I not thought about you? In proportion to the increase of distance my recollection of you has been more deeply impressed in my memory, and my heart dilated more and more under the impulse of brotherly love. On Pentecost Sunday I offered the Holy Sacrifice for you, and that was not the first time; since my first Mass I have never wept so much at the altar.*

He then gives brief family news and says he hopes to get to Le Puech during the summer.

In the letter which he sent to Louis in Le Havre he had asked his brother to include “details” in the letters which he would be sending back from China. He now does that for Louis, giving details about the political and ecclesiastical situation in France. He has something to say about the newspaper *L’Avenir* (The Future):

*As you know, this is run by an army of intrepid ultramontanists, of whom Fr. de Lammenais is captain. The doctrines which are defended in it are nothing more than elaboration of the principles which Fr. de Lamennais had already expounded in his work on Progrès de la Révolution. You have no idea what a stir this journal has created. In general the French bishops do not like it. It is found, though, in more or less all the dioceses. Everywhere there are fervent supporters and numerous opponents. It is doing marvellously in Belgium. In Rome there are some for and some against it.*

In his teaching in Saint-Flour John Gabriel had been influenced by the educational ideas of Lamennais (whose name he always mis-spelt, and not always in the same way), and it would seem that the eventual condemnation of Lamennais by Pope Gregory XVI in August 1832 was responsible for John Gabriel’s transfer from Saint-Flour to the *Maison-mère* in Paris that same month.

The next section of the letter describes what is happening in other European countries, the Papal States, Poland, Belgium, Holland, Ireland and Austria. He says he could give much more news, but has not the time. (In passing, in view of this section of the letter, it would be interesting to know how he dealt with N° 16 of Chapter VIII of the Common Rules, when he later became director of the seminarists and students in Paris!) (Letter 26).

### **Letters to his brother Jean-Jacques<sup>3</sup>**

Six letters to Jean-Jacques, known in the family as Jacou, have survived. They do not have the same spontaneity as those to Louis. Jacou was eight years younger than John Gabriel, but also they possibly had not seen each other from the time John Gabriel left home in 1817 until he paid his first visit home after ordination in 1826. The first letter we have was written from Saint-Flour in August 1828. Jacou was to leave his uncle’s school in Montauban to go to the college in Montdidier and John Gabriel would like to see him if Jacou could

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<sup>3</sup> When I was a first year seminarist in 1946-47, an old Irish confrere, Joseph Sheehy (1865-1948), told me that when he was a seminarist in Paris Jacques Perboyre was still alive in the *Maison-mère*; he did not die till 1896. Fr. Sheehy was told that at the time of John Gabriel’s death there was no authentic picture of him. Jacques was regarded as being very like John Gabriel in appearance, so all the pictures produced for the beatification and afterwards were based on Jacques.

travel via Saint-Flour. He was 18, and John Gabriel tells him that he is pleased with his reports but that standards are high in Montdidier and that it would be prudent to repeat Second Year. (In the French numbering system the lowest class is Sixth, and the pupils advance year by year to First, the final year). He advises him to be “less taciturn, and more open” or he will have problems later in relationships. “As for myself, I well know what effort this takes” (Letter 15).

The next letter is from February 1832, on the death of Louis. It is, understandably, very emotional. He mentions that their parents are coping well with their bereavement. He says Jacou is not writing often enough. It is again interesting to note that John Gabriel accuses others of this failing, while others accuse him of the same. He warns Jacou of the danger of getting too immersed in philosophy and reducing God to a mere idea (Letter 31).

The next letter is from Batavia (now Jakarta) in July 1835, by which time Jacou was in his third year in the *Maison-mère*. John Gabriel reports on his health during the voyage: he slept well, the peculiar food did not cause him too much trouble and the sea air suited him. Half way through the voyage he fell down some brass-bound steps and bruised himself badly, but suffered nothing worse. He admits to having always previously had a fear of the sea, which he no longer has. He says that to alleviate the boredom of the long voyage he used to picture to himself what Jacou would be doing in the *Maison-mère* at various times of the day (Letter 59).

The next letter, from Macao in September 1835, is very short; he has nothing to report since his previous letter from Batavia (Letter 66).

Three months later he writes again from Macao, and the opening sentence is interesting: “I must rush this in order to tell you about myself and not to deprive you of news for too long.” It is a short letter and most of it concerns the journey into China which he is starting that day. He is dressed as a Chinaman, has a shaved head, a long pigtail, has grown a long moustache, stammers in Chinese and eats with chopsticks (Letter 71).

His last letter to Jacou is from inside China in September 1838, a year before his capture. He had received a letter from him, in which Jacou wrote that he had prayed that God would make John Gabriel into another Francis Xavier; John Gabriel pooh-poohs this suggestion (Letter 94).

### **Letters to his brother Antoine**

Antoine was 11 years younger than John Gabriel. In the letters to his brothers, John Gabriel shows closest ties of affection to Louis, less to Jacou and still less to Antoine. Given the difference in age and the fact that Antoine was only four

when John Gabriel first left home, the simple fact would seem to be that John Gabriel did not really know Antoine very well. This is reflected in the different tone of the letters to him. They give the impression of being the sort of letters that an elder brother, who had joined a religious community, thought he should write to a much younger brother at home. They are also short letters. The first one was written from Saint-Flour in July 1828, almost two years after his ordination, to Antoine in the college in Montgesty, aged 15. The opening sentence is about spelling mistakes in Antoine's letter. When Louis used to make such mistakes John Gabriel would tease him about them. With Antoine there is no teasing. It is an older brother showing understanding of such errors on the part of a much younger brother. He also advises Antoine to follow any advice he receives from his parents, but that above all he must try to please God. He sends greetings to both parents. It is quite a short letter (Letter 13).

The next letter is nearly five years later, from Paris to Antoine at home; it is quite short. It starts: "One would think you must be sulking, it is so hard to wrench a letter from you." John Gabriel wants to know whether Antoine has been called up for military service or not. Once again Antoine is advised on how to behave towards his parents, to be attentive to his religious duties, to make a good confession, not to follow the bad example of most young men who abandon their religion. "We have a brother and a sister in heaven; we must go to join them." (Letter 34).

The next letter is ten months later, in reply to one in which Antoine mentioned that their father was ill. John Gabriel's first reaction is that no expense must be spared in treating him. He continues: "We may be sure that the good God afflicts him only for his good. In suffering, he expiates the pains he would have to endure in Purgatory and he merits a greater glory in Heaven." John Gabriel advises his father to make a general confession and to discuss that with his confessor. He tells Antoine that although he is young he could die any day: "Live as if each day were the last day of your life." He sends a dozen Miraculous Medals. In a postscript he sends good wishes for the feast of St. Anthony, three days later (17January) and says he will celebrate Mass for Antoine that day (Letter 43).

The next letter is three months later, once again a short one, and he complains that Antoine has not sent any further news about their father's state of health. He gives news of their sister Antoinette, who had joined the Daughters of Charity a year earlier and was in Paris. He mentions that their part of the city had been spared in recent street violence, because of the presence of St. Vincent's body, which was visited by large crowds during a recent novena (Letter 47).

The next letter is dated 20 January 1835, eight months later. It is very short, and starts with New Year's greetings to all at home. The next sentence is: "Don't

forget, my dear brother, that our life disappears like a shadow, and that at death we will be treated as we will have deserved by our vices or our virtues.” As with his letter at the same time the previous year John Gabriel remembers the feast of St. Anthony and says he celebrated Mass for Antoine that day (Letter 54).

The next letter is from Macao, in September of the same year, 1835. It starts by referring to a letter which he sent to his father from Java; this letter has not survived. He says he has already travelled further than Louis did, and adds: “Do not, therefore, think that to go to China means to go to death. My confreres who have come to this country live there in the way they do elsewhere.” He refers to the fact that Antoine had said that after John Gabriel’s departure for China he (Antoine) would be deprived of the good advice which he used to receive. John Gabriel’s answer is:

*First of all you must remember that God has specially entrusted your salvation to your Parish Priest and confessor. It is to them that you must frequently go in order to receive their instructions and advice. If, then, your spiritual affairs are not going well, this must be attributed to your negligence rather than to the lack of means of salvation and my absence (Letter 65).*

I mentioned earlier that in his letters to his father John Gabriel sometimes made no mention of his mother, or inserted an afterthought in a postscript. In all the letters to Antoine he mentions her. In the letters to his father he always uses the rather formal “Mon père et ma mère,” while in the letters to Antoine he uses, almost always, the more familiar “Papa et Maman.”

### **Letters to his uncle Jacques**

Jacques Perboyre was eight years older than John Gabriel’s father. He joined the Congregation of the Mission in 1783, aged 20; the date of his ordination is not on record, but it would have been around the start of the revolutionary troubles. During that period he exercised an underground ministry, and when things were more settled he started a school in Montauban. He died in 1848.

It seems likely that from his schooldays in Montauban onwards John Gabriel was greatly influenced by his uncle. His letters to his uncle are different from his letters to other family members, because as well as being from nephew to uncle they are also from a junior confrere to a senior one. They are, in fact, more interesting for the insights into community matters than for anything they tell us about the family. There is usually only a passing reference to other family members, such as statements that a brother or sister is getting on well. There are 17 surviving letters to his uncle. The first is from Saint-Flour in 1832, when John Gabriel was 30, and the last is from Honan in 1836.

The first letter, written in February 1832, is about the news of Louis' death. As with the letter to his parents, this is a very emotional one. Towards the end of the letter he says that Louis

*headed off across the sea in search of the death of martyrs. He found only that of an apostle. Why have I not been found worthy to go and take up the place he has left empty! Why can't I go and expiate my sins by the martyrdom which his innocent soul longed for so ardently? Alas! I am already more than thirty years old, years which have slipped away like a dream, and I have not yet learned how to live! When, then, will I have learned how to die! Time disappears like a vague shadow, and without noticing it we arrive at eternity* (Letter 30).

The next letter is from Paris, just over a year later. As with so many other letters, it starts with an apology for the long delay in writing and an admission that there was really no reason for the delay. One paragraph indicates that the Superior General had already suggested to Jacques Perboyre that he come to Paris and resume full community life. John Gabriel points out that this was only a suggestion; the idea apparently was that he would be confessor to the Daughters of Charity in the rue du Bac. John Gabriel assures his uncle that he can stay on in Montauban “without incurring either censure or irregularity” (Letter 33).

The next letter is only three months later. There is a flu epidemic in Paris, and his brother Jacques, a first year seminarist, and many of the priests have it, but it does not prevent them from carrying on with their normal activities. The main purpose of the letter is to ask his uncle to send on to Paris any further copies of the *Méditations* of Pierre Collet CM (1693-1770) which he may find (Letter 37). John Gabriel looked to his uncle for information, books and documents about the Congregation in the period before the Revolution.

Two months later the next letter begins with apologies for not writing. He tells his uncle about the confreres who are going on the foreign missions. A priest, a seminarist and a brother have just left for Syria. Two priests are on the point of leaving for China, bringing a printing press with them. In a month's time a confrere is to go to Constantinople, and more will leave for Syria in the spring. He adds:

*Those who leave are at the peak of happiness. Those who stay behind can console themselves only with the hope that they will follow later.*

Then he says:

*If by any chance you have any old printed material concerning the Congregation, such as coutumiers, regulations, circulars etc., I would be very pleased if you were to make me a present of them (Letter 38).*

*Coutumiers* were notebooks giving guidelines for office holders.

A letter in November 1833 (Letter 39) has nothing of interest, other than an apology for delay in writing. The next one, dated 14 December, is fairly long. It begins with the question of a foundation of the Daughters of Charity in Montauban, with much detail as to what the town must provide for such a foundation. Many of John Gabriel's letters from Paris show that he was very well informed about what the Superior General and his council were thinking and doing. He was obviously very anxious to keep his uncle informed as much as possible about community affairs. Many of the pre-Revolution confreres never resumed community living. He encloses a circular from the Superior General addressed only to French confreres, and will send on the New Year's general circular letter when it is printed. He gives information about the Miraculous Medal, using that name, and the unexpected recovery of a confrere with a "monstrous hernia" because of it. He will send some medals at the first opportunity. He mentions that Jean-Marie Odin, a French confrere working in Texas, is in Paris, on his way to Rome.

*He is asking, with loud cries, for workers to gather in an abundant harvest among the Protestants and savages (Letter 40).*

He writes again about seven weeks later, at the end of January. His uncle had asked John Gabriel to obtain permission from the Superior General for him to eat with the Daughters of Charity when he went to them as their confessor. His nephew has to confess: "I did my best to plead your case, without, however, winning it." The General said he had resolved never to give permission for this to anyone, and has already refused it to many. Uncle Jacques may eat before or after the sisters, or in a separate room, but never with them.

The uncle had also asked about suffrages for deceased confreres. John Gabriel quotes seven lines in Latin from the General Assembly of 1668. He asked about Mass stipends, and is given quotations from a circular of the Superior General in 1788.

Following the wish of the previous General Assembly in 1829, the Superior General has set up a commission to study old decrees. Charles-François Lamboley (1763-1847) is chairman and John Gabriel is secretary; they meet once a week. He mentions several recent appointments of confreres, and says that if his uncle wishes to change his mind and come to Paris the Superior General will

welcome him. He also says that his uncle is the second youngest of surviving pre-Revolution confreres. This is one letter which gives the uncle some family news. John Gabriel's father has severe rheumatism, so two dozen Miraculous Medals intended for his uncle in Montauban have been diverted to his father in Le Puech. Then in the margin he added later that two dozen more were being sent to his uncle (Letter 44).

Letter 46, 15 March 1834, gives news about John Gabriel's sister Antoinette who has finished her seminary as a Daughter of Charity in the rue du Bac and taken up her first appointment in another Paris house. He then asks his uncle some very detailed questions about a young man who has applied to Jacques in Montauban to join the Congregation. Finally he mentions that another young confrere has left for China, and that two of those who left for China a short while previously have arrived and written back to Paris.

The next letter, dated 20 May 1834, is quite short. His brother Jacou is to receive tonsure on the eve of Trinity Sunday. Two confreres are to be ordained priests with more to follow in September. One of those ordained in Lent will be going with others to the Levant during the summer (Letter 48).

The next letter, two months later, is longer. He starts by giving news about the Daughters of Charity, and saying he would like to see their work in Montauban developing. He says that he has heard more than once that the diocese of Montauban misses the Congregation of the Mission, which used to be in charge of the seminary. He makes reference to unspecified previous disagreements and says these will not affect any future request from the diocese for the confreres to return. He says, however, that many similar requests to take charge of seminaries have been turned down, as sending confreres to foreign missions takes priority. The promised two dozen Miraculous Medals for his uncle have now become two hundred, which he promises to send with the sisters the following week. Two confreres who left for China in September have written back from Batavia (Letter 50).

A short letter, accompanying the 1835 New Year's circular of the Superior General, says that his brother and sister join him in sending greetings to their uncle for the New Year (Letter 53).

On 27 January 1835 he tells his uncle that he has brought over to the rue du Bac a package with one hundred ordinary Miraculous Medals and ten silver ones, as well as some engravings about the medal. The third edition of the story of the medal has sold almost the whole 20,000 copies within a month and an enlarged fourth edition is being prepared. He also sends No. 3 of the *Annales de la Mission* (Letter 55).

In an undated letter, but obviously from February 1835, he tells his uncle that he has been appointed to China and will be sailing from Le Havre about 10 March. He has written to tell his parents and he hopes they “will make their sacrifice like good Christians,” and suggests that his uncle should, when the opportunity occurs, help them with his good advice (Letter 56).

The remaining four letters to his uncle are from Le Havre on 18 March 1835, from Surabaya on 27 July, from Macao on 13 September and from Honan on 10 August 1836. They are “community” letters very much more than “family” ones. There are very few nephew-to-uncle family references; most of the space in them is confrere-to-confrere news. He does, though, refer to having sent letters to other family members. In Letter 57 from Le Havre he says that his “parents, after much weeping, are perfectly resigned” to his departure, and that his brother and sister in Paris are “well disposed” towards it. Letter 61 from Surabaya, five pages in the printed version, is almost entirely “travel news.” He says he has written a letter to his father, which has not survived, and one to his brother Jacou by a different ship. The letter to Jacou is No. 59, mentioned above. Letter 64 from Macao is almost entirely community news. He mentions, though, that he has written to his two brothers. The letter to Antoine is No. 65 and that to Jacou No. 66, both of which have been mentioned above. He says that his wish is that all his relations should above all look after their own important affairs and the only attention they should pay to him is to pray for him. There is one very interesting sentence about his uncle’s influence on him: “You know that I owe to it [the Congregation] as well as to yourself more than I can possibly say.”

The last letter, No. 76, written from Honan a year later, on 10 August 1836, takes up 23 printed pages. It describes his journey from the Portuguese colony Macao, where he had spent almost four months, to his final destination in the interior of China. He left Macao 21 December 1835 and arrived in Honan in June 1836. It is quite a detailed description of the long journey, which was a combination of overland travel and river transport. It is largely factual with not many personal reflections on what he was seeing or experiencing. Part of the explanation for that may have been his fatigue. He begins the letter, like all others to his uncle, with “My very dear Uncle,” and once in the course of the letter he uses that expression again. Even more revealing is a sentence in the first paragraph. He is sending the letter as soon as he can because:

*I am obliged, therefore, to reply as soon as possible, because of the affection I have for the best of uncles, and the affection which he himself has for me...*

He ends this letter, unlike all the others, with: “I am for life, my very dear Uncle, your very affectionate and dutiful nephew....”

The other self-revealing thing in this long letter is his interest in François-Régis Clet. When he was near Ou-tchang-fou, where Clet was executed, he was struck by the coincidence that the first office which he prayed in the breviary on arrival there, on 25 April, had included a commemoration of St. Cletus, pope and martyr. The French form of Cletus is Clet. He adds:

I did not need such a striking similarity to remind me that I was in the very area where our dear martyr Fr. Clet had given his life for J.C.

When he describes his arrival at midnight at the community house in Nanyang-fou he says:

*Although it was in this house that Fr. Clet was captured, I am safe in it and in complete security.*

### **Tailpiece**

Towards the end of a letter which he wrote in 1832 to a cousin, who was curé of Jussies, he said:

*I must be boring you with my lengthy gossiping (Letter 28).*

“Boring” is certainly not an adjective which can be applied to his letters. They are all interesting and informative. The ones to family members are self-revelatory in varying degrees. The ones to confreres give interesting information about the Congregation as it was developing in the years after the Revolution. In many letters, to confreres and others, he shows a competence in dealing with practical matters of different kinds. Spiritual matters are introduced only where he judges that the context calls for such reference. His letters cover his life from the age of 15 until just before his death. We do not have that span of correspondence for any other beatified or canonised confrere.

# John Gabriel Perboyre's Pastoral Journeys in France

by Philippe Lamblin, C.M.  
Province of Paris

*Let us take our residence and point of departure to be in the Diocese of Cahors. From there we will do some missions; then we will move on to do others in the Dioceses of Abli, Puy, Autun, Orleans, Versailles and Amiens....*<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Montauban

During the course of the autumn of 1817 a major mission was preached at Montauban.<sup>2</sup> The students of the minor seminary founded by Jacques Perboyre<sup>3</sup> attended. On that day they will have heard a passionate sermon by the Abbé de Chiézes.<sup>4</sup> One of his young listeners, John Gabriel Perboyre, felt deep in his soul the lively flame of the call of God which caused him to say, "I want to be a missionary." Going to share his joy with Jacques Perboyre, his beloved uncle, he met with a somewhat mocking laugh. At the beginning of the school year, John Gabriel was barely in the fifth class, was just coming on 16 and for his uncle the urgent matter was not this, but rather catching up on his schoolwork. However, the call was solidly anchored in the heart of the adolescent.

The efforts that John Gabriel undertook are considerable. At the age of 16, he was already in the second class and had, to some degree, made up for his late start. He confided his secret spiritual preoccupations to St. Francis Xavier, patron of the missions. Little by little, the light became clearer: not only would he be a missionary but, what is more, he would go to China!

Standing firm once more before his uncle, John Gabriel, impetuous, was more persuasive. Uncle Jacques would himself have dearly loved to go to China. At that time, China represented the missionary ideal, as Madagascar had been for his first confreres in the time of Vincent de Paul: giving one's life for God's cause in faraway and "pagan" lands.<sup>5</sup> Jacques saw now in the clear and assured gaze of his nephew, a manifest sign of the action of God. He told his superiors of it and it was thus that, as the most natural thing in the world, the

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Saint Jean-Gabriel Perboyre, Prêtre de la Mission, *Correspondance*, Annotated and published by Joseph Van den Brandt, Vincentian Brother, Peking 1940; New edition, revised and corrected; Congregation of the Mission, Detti, Rome 1996. Cf. Letter 89 (25 September 1837) to Pierre Martin, CM.

<sup>2</sup> Diocese and Prefecture of Tarn and Garonne.

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Perboyre: uncle of John Gabriel, born in Catus, 10 April 1763; received at the seminary in Cahors, 30 August 1783; ordained priest, 22 September 1787; died, 8 March 1848.

<sup>4</sup>Cf. Letter of M. Theys to Jacques Perboyre in *La vie du Vénérable Perboyre* (Paris: Ed. Librairie Adrien Le Clere, 1853) 28-31.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Letter 23 (8 October 1830) to his brother, Louis and letter 56 (February 1835) and 64 (13 September 1835) to his uncle, Jacques.

young man was officially admitted to the Internal Seminary of the C.M. at Montauban on Tuesday, 15 December 1818, in company with a young man from the Sarl, called Rossignol.<sup>6</sup> John Gabriel would continue his incomplete studies at the same time and would also be given responsibility for teaching some children.

By strength of will and with God's help, John Gabriel buckled down to this task without encountering any opposition. His companion in the novitiate already saw in him: "the ideal of perfection in a novice." Supported by the tranquil and effective strength of St. Vincent, like him well grounded in his country clogs, John Gabriel centred his life on that of Christ and forged for himself a solid doctrinal spirituality led on by masters such as St. Bonaventure, St. Bernard and St. Theresa. In this school of life, he learned always to love God for himself and to go forward by love in order to live fully in his saving mercy.

*Pray God to forgive my sins, that he may make me know his will  
and that he may give me the strength to follow him.*<sup>7</sup>

In the full bloom of his 19 years, John Gabriel was called to pronounce his vows in the Congregation of the Mission on Thursday, 28 December 1820, in Montauban.

## **2. Paris**

His superiors called John Gabriel to Paris for a new stage. Before this long journey to the capital, Uncle Jacques allowed his nephew a stopover, for two days only, at the Major Seminary at Cahors,<sup>8</sup> in order to see his parents and greet them warmly.

Then the time came for him to take his place in the stagecoach which was to take him, in five or six days, towards the paved streets of the great city. The provincial boy from Montgesty opened his astonished eyes on this capital, which had, until then, been only a name to be learnt and recited at school.

The long journey reached its end before the gates of the Hôtel de Lorges, 95 Rue de Sèvres, which had become, since 1817, the Motherhouse of the Vincentians. This house, although imposing, rivalled the stable in Bethlehem

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<sup>6</sup> Rossignol: cf. letter of 21 September 1850 of M. Harang, inhabitant of Craon (Mayenne), professor in the minor seminary of Montauban, published in the *Annales of the Congregation of the Mission*, Volume 94, 1929, N° 2.

<sup>7</sup> Letter 19 (28 November 1829) to his brother, Louis.

<sup>8</sup> Cahors: diocese and prefecture in the Lot. The Vincentians were in the seminary from 1643. On the route which took travellers from Perpignan to Paris, the stagecoach passed through Montauban, Cahors, Brive and Limoges.

for poverty, according to the words of the future Superior General M. Etienne.<sup>9</sup> The members of the Congregation who lived there at that time were the venerable old men worn by the sometimes punishing ways of the mission but true stones of refoundation of the “Little Company” as St. Vincent loved to call it.

The instruction imparted at the seminary was, in large part, based on Thomistic thought. St. Thomas proved to be a good master to help one know God better, love and serve him better, as St. Vincent himself had given the example. Humility and prayer were both professed and lived; they became the simple and effective means of getting a better knowledge of God and his will and consequently, of advancing holiness.

It was on Saturday, 3 April 1824, that John Gabriel received the order of sub-diaconate in the chapel of the archbishop’s house at the hands of Msgr. de Quélen.<sup>10</sup>

John Gabriel had now completed his theology programme. He had grown spiritually and his spirit had acquired real maturity. Nevertheless, aged 22, he was still too young to be called to priesthood. He would have to be found a little stopover for the two years to come. The College of St. Vincent in Montdidier,<sup>11</sup> in the Somme, was soon chosen.

### **3. Montdidier**

This sub-prefecture had a college, which had been directed since 1818 by the Vincentians. It was the first Vincentian College opened after the revolution. Fr. Pierre Dewailly<sup>12</sup> was principal with Fr. Pierre Vivier as Superior.<sup>13</sup> On John Gabriel’s arrival, there were almost 200 students. The young man was given charge of one of the sixth classes, with only eight students. The impression John Gabriel made on his arrival was not, in truth, the best. How, they asked, could a man, so small in stature, so reserved as to be almost taciturn, take charge of a large class?

From the first months, the new teacher of the sixth class knew how to make himself respected and appreciated. From the moment of the new year’s retreat, he was chosen by these same students as director of a little association

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<sup>9</sup> Jean-Baptiste Etienne: born, 10 August 1801 at Longeville-lez-Metz; received into the seminary in Paris, 4 October 1820; took vows, 18 October 1822; ordained priest, 24 September 1825; elected Superior General, 4 August 1843; died in Paris, 12 March 1874.

<sup>10</sup> Msgr. Hyacinthe-Louis de Quélen, Archbishop of Paris 1778-1839.

<sup>11</sup> Montdidier, sub-prefecture in the Somme.

<sup>12</sup> Pierre-Joseph Dewailly: born, 25 January 1759; received into the seminary in Paris, 6 December 1778; 11<sup>th</sup> Superior General by a brief of Pope Leo XII, 16 January 1827; died 23 October 1828.

<sup>13</sup> Pierre-Nicolas Vivier: born 12 October 1792; received into the seminary, 1 January 1821; took vows, 17 January 1823; died in Paris, 9 August 1870.

which they had just formed, in the likeness of that of the older students: the Congregation of the Holy Angels.<sup>14</sup>

Great joy flooded the heart of the young sub-deacon when he was called to Paris to receive the diaconate in the month of May 1825. On Saturday, the 28<sup>th</sup>, he received the diaconate from the hands of Msgr. de Quélen, Archbishop of Paris, in the church of St. Sulpice only a few steps from the house of the Vincentians.

At the beginning of the 1825 academic year, M. Vivier, superior of the college in Montdidier, entrusted to the new deacon the philosophy course, newly recognised by the university. Washed by the various currents of thought prevalent in his time he was not removed from the world of his era, nor from its intellectual research. Thus, he writes to his young brother, Louis:

*It is no small thing to be a teacher of philosophy in an era where each one imposes on this science ideas which please himself; where each has his own system and opinions: where there are as many schools as masters!*<sup>15</sup>

And trying to focus the thought of his younger sibling and to promote the solid foundations of Thomistic philosophy with him, he indicated further:

*You will find in the treatise on the existence of God by Fénelon and that on Knowledge of God and self by Bossuet, more metaphysics, and, especially sensible metaphysics, than in all the philosophies of the world.*<sup>16</sup>

The young professor spent his days working to awaken consciousness of Divine Providence; this had some unfortunate consequences on his personal correspondence which, unfortunately, shows tardiness. Thus, he writes to his father:

*For us the days regularly begin at 4 a.m. and do not finish until 9 or 10 p.m. Yet our tasks quite often force us to extend them even to midnight.*<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> Act. In the year one thousand eight (hundred) twenty-five, on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of the month of January, M. Vivier, superior of the college and the professors, following the retreat given by Messieurs Redon and Lacarrère, took advice on the subject of the establishment of the Congregation of the Holy Angels among the children who had been registered to enter the congregation. The following 24 are chosen to be the first members ... (there follows 24 names and surnames) ... M. Perboyre has been designated father of this congregation (signatures) A. Liermont (secretary), Frédéric Forest, prefect, Perboyre. There follows 13 acts of the assemblies which J. G. Perboyre has signed. The 14<sup>th</sup> assembly took place on 15 August 1826. The end of the booklet contains the rules of the Congregation of the Holy Angels, set down certainly by J. G. Perboyre. The register is in the Archives of the Motherhouse.

<sup>15</sup> Letter 11 (24 May 1828), to his brother Louis.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Letter 5 (24 August 1826) to his father.

John Gabriel, now a deacon, knew that the college helped, by good works, those prisoners who were kept at the nearby Palais de Justice and some needy families in the districts of Montdidier around the college. He then put in place, to complement this help, collections and he mobilised the students to give both their time and themselves to the needy. In this regard, one can hear him say: “I have just done what our Holy Founder did.”

The end of the school year came late as he was still in Montdidier on 24 August 1826.<sup>18</sup> During this sojourn at Montdidier, John Gabriel perhaps set off on foot for Folleville as part of a longer journey. Doubtless he went to admire the Cathedral of Notre Dame at Amiens and to visit the Jesuits of the College of Saint Acheul<sup>19</sup> in Amiens, where St. Firmin, the first bishop, has been buried since the third century. Without a doubt the local diocesan clergy benefited from his theological knowledge and intellectual agility during the deanery meetings which took place at St. Vincent’s College.

From the month of August, John Gabriel knew that he was in demand in many quarters, notably from his uncle, Jacques, who was already feeling the fatigue of advancing years and to whom he wished to make a positive response:

*I had some hope of going to Montauban; my uncle has insisted loudly on having me, but I know that at present I will not be sent there. It seems certain, however, that I will be changed, and even, if certain whispers that have reached my ears are to be believed, I am intended for a place close to Quercy<sup>20</sup>*

In high places, it was decided that John Gabriel, after his ordination, would be intended for a teaching post in a major seminary.

As his priesthood approached, he wrote to his father:

*It has been decided on and is not far off, my very dear father, that day on which the Lord will place on my head the yoke of priesthood! This day will be the greatest day of my life. The mercy of God must be great indeed to choose such unworthy ministers! You know how little I have deserved this singular favour!<sup>21</sup>*

Faithful to his vocation as a Vincentian, he makes the witness of St. Vincent his own: “If I had understood, before receiving priesthood, what, in the

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Letter 8 (2 September 1827) to his brother, Louis.

<sup>20</sup> Letter 5 (24 August 1826) to his father.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

eyes of faith, a priest is, I would never have been able to consent to the imposition of hands on me.”

Saturday, 23 September 1826, was a great day. It was the commemoration of the priestly ordination of St. Vincent de Paul. Twelve young men, of whom nine were Irish, were to receive priestly ordination from the hands of Msgr. Louis-Guillaume Dubourg,<sup>22</sup> Bishop of New Orleans but newly named as Bishop of Montauban, in the chapel of the Motherhouse of the Daughters of Charity, 140 Rue du Bac, Paris, within which the remains of the Holy Founder were still kept.

His two friends, Jean-Baptiste Torrette,<sup>23</sup> who would leave for China in 1829, and Pierre-Jean Martin<sup>24</sup> were ordained on the same day as he. The Perboyre family lived too far away to be able to attend. Only young Louis<sup>25</sup> witnessed the laying on of hands.<sup>26</sup>

The following day, Sunday, 24 September, the new priest celebrated his first Mass of thanksgiving, on the feast of our Lady of Mercy on the very altar where the body of Vincent lay. Finally he received his letter of mission from the hands of the Superior General to go to the Major Seminary of Saint-Flour in the Haute Auvergne.<sup>27</sup>

#### **4. Saint-Flour**

Saint-Flour is a little town of almost 5,000 inhabitants. Some distance from the Cathedral stands the major seminary, which was entrusted to the Congregation of the Mission in 1674. The Vincentians were hunted out of it in 1791 and returned there in 1820. The Superior was Fr. Grappin,<sup>28</sup> a 35-year-old Vincentian. He welcomed John Gabriel there in the first days of October 1826.<sup>29</sup> Restricted to a cramped room, he was to see himself put in charge of the

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<sup>22</sup>Louis-Guillaume du Bourg: born in Santo Domingo, 13 February 1766; ordained Bishop in Rome in 1815; Bishop of Louisiana and then Bishop of Montauban.

<sup>23</sup> Jean-Baptiste Torrette: born in Brioude in Haute-Loire, 28 November 1801; received into the Internal Seminary, 9 December 1824; ordained priest, 23 September 1826; took vows, 17 December 1826; Bursar in the Major Seminary in Cahors; arrived in Macao, 18 October 1829 where he died, 12 September 1840.

<sup>24</sup>Pierre-Jean Martin: born in Sainte-Marie, near Saint-Flour, 26 July 1802; received into the seminary in Paris, 9 December 1825; took vows in Carcassonne, 16 April 1827; successor to John Gabriel in the Internal Seminary in Paris; died in Dax 7 August 1853.

<sup>25</sup>Louis Perboyre: born 23 November 1807; received into the Internal Seminary in Paris, 9 September 1825; took vows, 23 September 1827; ordained priest, 3 October 1830; embarked for China, 2 November 1830, died at sea, 2 May 1831.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Letter 6 (2 November 1826) to his father.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Letter 8 (2 September 1827) to Louis.

<sup>28</sup>Jean Grappin: born 8 December 1791; received into the Internal Seminary in Paris, 1 November 1816; took vows, 27 September 1819; Superior of the Major Seminary in Saint-Flour; Assistant General; died in Bordeaux, 4 November 1846.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Letter 6 (2 November 1826) to his father.

teaching of dogmatic theology. The programme for this first year had as its theme the Treatises on Grace and the Incarnation.

In spite of his youth, his students were struck by his biblical knowledge, notably with regard to the texts of St. Paul. One of the seminarists happily recalled:

*“I always remember,” he said, “a magnificent introduction, which he gave us on the subject of the Treatise on the Incarnation, solely by developing the following text from the first letter to Timothy: ‘Certainly, the mystery of piety is great. He was manifested in the flesh, justified by the Spirit, adored on by angels, proclaimed among the pagans, believed in the world, exalted in glory.’”<sup>30</sup>*

Placed at Saint-Flour, John-Gabriel’s desire to see his family became more pressing:

*I have already written to Paris to ask permission to go to see you. I hope it will not be refused me.<sup>31</sup>*

The academic year was a difficult burden: *While I am not ill, I do feel very tired.<sup>32</sup>* Keeping abreast of the worries of the family farm and its business, he tried to sell the wine produced there in town but:

*I do not see much evidence that your wine will sell here; it is certainly good but transport presents too many difficulties.<sup>33</sup>*

His teaching was based on fidelity to ecclesial authority. He was confronted by Gallican ideas, which he considered harmful to the Church. One can hear him say to his students:

*Let us take great care, Messieurs, never to attack the prerogatives of the Holy See. Let us never think that it ever exceeds its power in the decisions it takes, let us recognise all the authority that it claims for itself in all questions, whatever they be.<sup>34</sup>*

Nevertheless, he gives evidence of sympathy for the ideas of Lamennais when the latter defends Christian liberties, notably that of teaching. The paradox, which seemed to arise by his approval of that position, did not pose questions for him and diminished nothing, according to his own words, of his ability as a teacher. When Pope Gregory XVI let it be known, later in 1832, that

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<sup>30</sup> 1 Tim 3:16.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Letter 7 (14 July 1827) to his father.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> cf. Vauris, p. 289.

the ideas of de Lamennais were condemned John Gabriel complied without saying a word:

*Let us pray that God keep us from ever speaking against the words of the Sovereign Pontiff. It was to him that Jesus said: "You are Peter and on this rock I will build my Church and the gates of Hell will not prevail against it."*<sup>35</sup>

The hectic life of a young professor needed some respite. This was finally possible during the summer 1827, at the end of the school year. He hoped to begin his break on 10 August.<sup>36</sup> Permission to go home to Le Puech was doubtless delayed as his holidays began in Saint-Flour about 23 August. From 26 August to 7 September, he stayed with his uncle Jacques in Montauban.<sup>37</sup> On this occasion he attended the end-of-year prize-giving in the minor seminary. From there, with his brothers Jacques and Antoine, he joined up with Jean-Baptiste Torrette, his ordination companion, for three days in the seminary in Cahors. Finally he arrived with his travelling companions to spend ten days at La Puech where he met up again with family and acquaintances after a seven-year absence. After a stay in Toulouse, he found himself at Carcassonne, where he met up with Pierre Martin, another ordination companion and then spent four or five days at Montolieu from whence he returned to the mountains of the Auvergne towards the very last days of September. During his month of vacation, he had covered quite certainly a little more than 1100 km.<sup>38</sup> Returning to Saint-Flour, he arrived into a full dispute. After more than a little equivocation<sup>39</sup> he was chosen from among three candidates to become director<sup>40</sup> of the minor seminary in the town.<sup>41</sup> He announced his nomination to the Rector of the Academy at Clermont in December 1827:

*The Superior General of the Vincentians has just called M. Trippier to Paris ... At the request of Monsignor, the Bishop of Saint-Flour, the same superior has placed me at the head of the boarding school which M. Trippier directed ... I have had five years experience in teaching, having successively taught junior classes, philosophy, mathematics and theology in the minor seminary in Montauban, in the college at Montdidier and at the major seminary in Saint-Flour.*<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* p. 290.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Letter 7 ( 14 July 1827) to his father.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Letter 8 (2 September 1827) to Louis: "You would not believe how quickly I feel refreshed," he wrote to his brother, Louis, then in Paris at the Motherhouse, "my uncle, the Ursuline Sisters for whom I go to say Mass each day take such good care of me!"

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Letter 9 (31 October 1827) to Louis: "My journey has been long, though short in duration, useful, agreeable, not very extravagant."

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Letter 9: "Promoted to power, then removed from it yet and yet now here I am again; one could make a tragedy out it all."

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Letter 11 (24 May 1828): Obligated on account of being director.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Letter 9 (31 October 1827) and Vauris, p. 75.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Letter 10.

At the beginning of the school year in October 1827 there were 34<sup>43</sup> students following their studies in the Royal College of Saint-Flour and staying in the boarding school; the number was to increase in the following years approaching 100 at the beginning of the school year of 1829.<sup>44</sup>

Two diocesan priests were given to him as collaborators. This was not sufficient in the face of the size of the task and the difficulties, which were not slow in presenting themselves: the lack of resources, the opposition of the Royal College, which hoped to see an end to this boarding school, the fears of parents faced with the youth of the new director, the demands of work. In the spring of 1828, he wrote with weary pen to his brother Louis, complaining about the absence of news:

*Obliged to take four or five classes or repetitions per day. Obliged as director, bursar, etc., etc. to always be all things to all people and everywhere at all times, how would I be able to go from time to time to recreate with you in Paris?*<sup>45</sup>

The summer of 1828 arrived. Would he be able to take some days holidays? So few ... on 11 July at 10 p.m. he writes to Louis while keeping watch over two tearaways.<sup>46</sup> We can see he is tired. On 19 July he sends a message to his younger brother, Antoine, his junior by 11 years, called on to succeed his father one day at the head of their work. On 16 August he sent a letter to Louis about the responsibility for the costs of supporting his brother Jacques and his sister and goddaughter Antoinette.<sup>47</sup> On 22 September, on the eve of setting out from Cahors to Saint-Flour, he gave Louis an account of his rest time: 15 days at the Seminary in Cahors, where he made his annual retreat, and four days at Le Puech amongst his family.

On 23 October 1828, M. Pierre Dewailly, Superior General, died. In order to elect the 12<sup>th</sup> Superior General of the Congregation the 17<sup>th</sup> General Assembly was to be held in Paris on 15 May 1829. The Vincentian community of Saint-Flour gathered together on Tuesday, 14 April 1829, for a domestic assembly presided over by M. Grappin,<sup>48</sup> superior of the house of Saint-Flour and made up of the confreres of the major and minor seminaries according to the invitation of M. Cochet, Visitor of the Province of Lyons. John Gabriel,

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<sup>43</sup> Cf. Vauris, p. 90.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Letter 20 (28 November 1829) to his brother Louis.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Letter 11 (24 March 1828) to his brother Louis.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Letter 12 (11 July 1828) to his brother Louis.

<sup>47</sup> Antoinette Perboyre: born in Le Puech, 3 March 1815; Daughter of Charity in 1833; died in Shanghai, 2 October 1898.

<sup>48</sup> Jean Grappin: cf. note 28.

director of the minor seminary, was secretary of this assembly. In his minutes,<sup>49</sup> he notes:

*... that by the first ballot M. Hersent,<sup>50</sup> our dear confrere, had gained the majority of votes which take him to the said deputation, and that faith and law must be accorded to him in the exercise of this important function, although the present act is not set down according to the ancient formula prescribed by the rule, not having been able to find any copy of it.*

In his letter of 21 April 1829 to his brother, Louis, John Gabriel also made allusion to this delegation. At the same time, he also reproached him for the scarcity of letters written to him and for spelling and grammar errors:

*I understand that it is not too flattering for a writer from the capital to receive lessons from a minor pedagogue from the provinces.<sup>51</sup>*

While John Gabriel is concerned with a good education for all he deplors the fact that his young students are obliged to follow courses at the college in the town,

*where everyday they see the most abominable turpitudes, alas! However they are full of piety and guided by a better spirit, which I regard as a true miracle according to the order of grace, being exposed as they are to the most terrible dangers. My God, have pity on us and give us freedom of teaching.<sup>52</sup>*

*I am overcome with need. I am extremely tired in spirit and body. I do not know where this general malaise, which I have endured for a long time and which is progressive, will end.<sup>53</sup>*

Exhausted, John Gabriel no longer knew which way to turn. Indirectly Louis gave him some solace. He felt in himself the call to follow Jesus Christ in China. John Gabriel rejoiced in the missionary choice of his younger brother:

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<sup>49</sup> Cf. Register of the Minutes and Acts concerning the Priests of the Congregation of the Mission directing the house of Saint-Flour, which are found in the archives of the Motherhouse. This register is of great interest for the Congregation because it contains the definitive commitments of several confreres and formularies of convocations and minutes.

<sup>50</sup> Jacques-Philippe Hersent: born in Abbeville, 17 September 1796; received into the Internal Seminary, 17 August 1818; took vows, 24 September 1820 and returned to the Diocese of Amiens in October 1836.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Letter 17 (21 April 1829) to Louis.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Letter 28 (20 January 1832) to his cousin, Caviolle.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Letter 19 (28 November 1829) to Louis.

*I can only approve of and admire your fine resolution to go and evangelise the Chinese... It is in God's virtue that the missionary's power resides.*<sup>54</sup>

he assured him, while continuing:

*Strive, therefore entirely to destroy in you all that remains of the old man, in order to clothe yourself only in Jesus Christ, to penetrate yourself deeply, to fill yourself well with his Spirit.*<sup>55</sup>

And turning to his own path, he looks on it with a melancholy eye:

*I greatly fear, my dear brother, that I have snuffed out, by my lack of fidelity to grace, the seeds of a vocation like your own. Pray God that he will forgive my sins, that he will make me know his holy will and that he will give me the grace to follow him.*<sup>56</sup>

During the summer of 1830, Paris underwent the July Revolution. Fear once again gripped many people in the Church. There was a fear that the remains of St. Vincent might be thrown into the Seine. John Gabriel was in mortal fear until the moment that he learned that his brother was safe:

*May the Lord continue to favour with his protection both you and all the children of St. Vincent!*<sup>57</sup>

John Gabriel praises his brother's courage. He wishes to follow the same missionary path:

*I ardently desire to have the opportunity to see you before you leave for China. Although I am not very far from taking the same route as you, I am not yet ready nor decided enough in myself to set out on it this year.*<sup>58</sup>

The call had been heard. Nevertheless, he writes:

*I fear that I have not been faithful to the vocation that the Lord has given to you. Pray to him that he may make me know his holy will and make me respond to it. Obtain for me from his merciful goodness pardon for my miseries and the spirit of our holy state so that I may become a good Christian, a good priest and a good missionary.*<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> Cf. Letter 22 (24 August 1830) to Louis.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Letter 23 (8 October 1830) to Louis.

Louis set off from Le Havre on 3 December, 1830, in company with six Chinese seminarians and four priests from the Paris Society for the Foreign Missions. He carried with him his last letter from his brother, who was conscious of the consequences of this departure that would be without return:

*I can send new farewells to this tender brother who is going to go so far from us, doubtless for a long time, who is going to sacrifice his life for the salvation of souls that Jesus Christ has redeemed by his blood ... In God alone is our hope, our only resource. He is our all; may he be so eternally.*<sup>60</sup>

Among the uncertainties that John Gabriel expresses, there is, equally, the worry which governed French society, always subject to the jolting of a possible new revolution.

Louis was not destined to see the shores of this mysterious and fascinating China. In March 1831, the boat had to stop at Saint-Denis on the Island of Bourbon (now Réunion) in heat to which the Westerners were unaccustomed. They changed boats in order to head for the Island of Java. A glacial wind came from the South and Louis caught a fever. He died at sea on 2 May 1831. The news did not reach France until the beginning of 1832. John Gabriel then wrote to his father and mother as soon as the news of the death arrived. His letter, mingling sadness and hope, is a call to renew confidence in God, which can falter at such moments:

*What dolorous news for you, for me, for all the family! A short life held, for him, all the worth of a long career and, in the flower of his youth, he was judged ripe for heaven ... God's providence is very gentle, truly admirable towards his servants and infinitely more merciful than we can conceive ... let us cling only to God and to his service.*<sup>61</sup>

On perhaps the same day, he took up his pen in order to confide to his uncle, Jacques, his sadness and his desire to take Louis' place:

*I do not doubt that Louis is already enjoying the heavenly glory ... May I be found worthy to go and fill the place that he has left vacant! Alas, I am already more than 30 years old, years that have passed like a dream, and I still have not learned how to live! How and when, then, will I learn how to die?*<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Cf. Letter 24 (27 October 1830) to Louis at Le Havre.

<sup>61</sup> Cf. Letter 29 (15 February 1832) to his father and mother.

<sup>62</sup> Cf. Letter 30 (February 1832) to his uncle Jacques.

Louis' death, so difficult to accept, brought him closer to his other brother, Jacques<sup>63</sup> a student in Montdidier, and also became like a light, bringing new certitude to John Gabriel: he would go to China, whatever the dangers and persecutions might be. During the summer of 1832, he stayed for a time at Le Puech. This time was sadder than those before but, finally, his decision had been made. This was the last time that he would see his relatives and friends in Montgesty.

He went to visit his uncle, at Montauban, acknowledging to him his desire, which had now come to maturity. Jacques objected on the grounds of his (John Gabriel's) health, which was rapidly giving signs of decline, not to mention the climate which would be difficult to endure and, finally, the no-less-considerable risk of death by persecution:

*This is all I desire (he would have said) since God desired to die for us, we must not fear dying for him.*<sup>64</sup>

On his return to Saint-Flour, he found a note from his superiors in Paris. Because of his state of health, but also on account of his intellectual and teaching abilities, John Gabriel was to be given responsibility as subdirector of the Internal Seminary of the Congregation in Paris. It was there, they esteemed in high places, his rightful place. The Bishop of Saint-Flour, who greatly valued the director of his boarding school, used all possible means of persuasion to keep him in his diocese but all in vain. John Gabriel had been almost six years in Saint-Flour and had marked forever the history and land of this diocese of the Haute-Auvergne.

## 5. Paris

*My new posting is better than my former for my health, which is quite good now.*<sup>65</sup>

John Gabriel was delighted with his nomination as subdirector of the Internal Seminary with several courses in Holy Scripture for the novices and students. He excelled in the commentary on the Gospel of John and the Letter to the Romans. This was a key post that had been entrusted to him. In effect, since the titular director of the novitiate was an old and infirm priest, the weight of responsibility fell on the shoulders of his coadjutor, already well prepared for it by his experience in Saint-Flour. His primary mission was to prepare new generations of missionaries. Among the candidates, still not very numerous at that time, coming into the Congregation of the Mission, there were some young

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<sup>63</sup> Jean-Jacques Perboyre: born 21 May 1810; received into the Internal Seminary in Paris, 25 September 1825 as a brother; ordained priest, October 1843; died in Paris, 16 August 1896. Cf. Letter 31 (23 February 1832) to his brother, Jacques.

<sup>64</sup> Cf. Vauris, p. 106.

<sup>65</sup> Cf. Letter 32 (12 January 1833) to his father.

men coming from the diocesan major seminaries, but also priests of all ages who desired to join the Company. That meant that it was a very different population to that which had filled the ecclesiastical boarding school at Saint-Flour and, as a consequence, it required a very different form of pedagogy. He continued to write regularly to his uncle, Jacques, asking him to do some favours for him, such as providing some of the older texts of the Congregation, which had escaped the Revolution:

*If, by any chance, you have any older texts which relate to the Congregation, such as books of customs, rules, circulars etc., I ask you please to make me a present of them. In my position, where I have so much need of grace, I need your good advice.*<sup>66</sup>

Scarcely 30 years old, he needed to use all his charisma and energy to assert himself. One priest, a candidate for admission, met him in the rooms of the Procurator General of the Congregation, Jean-Baptiste Etienne, and thought that he was a coadjutor brother. John Gabriel, simply dressed, said not a word and seemed self-effacing and retiring. What must have been this man's surprise on learning that he was in the presence of his future subdirector! This priest, 13 years John Gabriel's senior, soon came to know him, and it was said, to appreciate in seeing in him... a saint. Beneath the man's frail exterior there was hidden, in fact, a will that could withstand any test and a character of steel. In the corridors of St. Lazare, they said of John Gabriel that he had respect for all but that it was difficult, almost impossible, to get him to bend, when he judged that he had to be firm and unshakeable in his decisions. He could be incisive in his replies and other responses since he had a lively spirit. Without doubt introverted, he felt opposition and reproach as a piercing sadness. Nevertheless, knowing how to overcome his disposition, John Gabriel was aware of the heavy responsibility entrusted to him and did all in his power to gain a high level of mastery over his character.

When Adolphe Dubois, a seminarist who was received in Paris on 4 October 1833, experienced difficulty in advancing in the Vincentian way and had some health problems, to the point of leaving the Internal Seminary and returning home to Breteuil, John Gabriel helped him unfailingly, as if such support mattered in high degree to him also:

*Courage... Do not fear neither illness nor death, say only: "I know that this will work out to my benefit... according to my expectation and the hope that I am not mistaken. I believe that Jesus Christ will be glorified in my body, either by my life or by my death, as always; for Jesus Christ is my life and death to me is gain" (Phil 1:19-21)*

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<sup>66</sup> Cf. Letter 38 (23 August 1833) to his uncle, Jacques Perboyre.

... He concludes his letter:

*The more pure your soul, the more it will seek to leave this world and be reunited with its God; and the more it experiences this desire, the more it will seek to purify itself.*<sup>67</sup>

Young Adolphe would be readmitted to the Congregation some years later, making his vows in 1846 and dying at Château-l'Evêque on 7 October 1884.

Towards his novices, John Gabriel showed himself to be a true servant of the Lord of the Harvest and of the young labourers who carried the call within. Thus, he has some words of encouragement for one of his former pupils, M. Martin:

*You always persevere according to your first plan and you are, therefore, always full of ardour for the foreign missions ... In order not to lack such a vocation as that to which you aspire, it is necessary to work at becoming saints. Si Deus pro nobis quis contra nos! (If God is for us, who can be against us!)*<sup>68</sup>

John Gabriel had been brought from Saint-Flour to be subdirector, becoming director of the Internal Seminary of the Congregation of the Mission from the autumn of 1832 to spring 1835. During this short period, the candidates for the missions “ad gentes” were admirably accompanied by their director. He knew how to make the very fibre of this vocation echo through the events which occurred at the Motherhouse. On 23 August 1833, he announces to his uncle that some confreres were leaving to join M. Poussou in Tripoli<sup>69</sup> and that two were leaving for the missions in China:<sup>70</sup> a compatriot from Figeac, Joseph Mouly,<sup>71</sup> a future bishop, who would spend more than 30 years in the Far East, and a former pupil from the college in Montdidier, François-Xavier Danicourt,<sup>72</sup> also a future bishop, who was to return on 6 January 1860 with the remains of John Gabriel. In March of the following year, it was Fr. Jean-Henri Baldus<sup>73</sup> who set off in his turn. John Gabriel availed of this occasion to write

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<sup>67</sup> Cf. Letter 49 (30 June 1830) to Adolphe Dubois and Vauris, p.113.

<sup>68</sup> Cf. Letter 52 (2 January 1835) to M. Martin.

<sup>69</sup> Marc-Antoine Poussou: born at Ste Victoire nears Cahors, 2 June 1794; received into the Internal Seminary, 26 March 1818; took vows, 21 November 1822; died in Paris, 19 October 1860.

<sup>70</sup> Cf. Letter 38 (23 August 1833) to his uncle, Jacques.

<sup>71</sup> Joseph-Martial Mouly: born in Figeac, 2 August 1807; received into the Internal Seminary, 18 October 1825; took vows, 19 October 1827; ordained priest in Amiens, 2 April 1831; missionary in China in 1834; died in Peking, 4 December 1868.

<sup>72</sup> François-Xavier Danicourt: born in Authies, 18 March 1806; received into the Internal Seminary 8 September 1828; took vows in Montdidier, 27 September 1830; ordained priest in Amiens, 24 September 1831; missionary in China in 1834; ordained bishop, 7 September 1851; given the responsibility of bringing the body of John Gabriel back to France in 1859; arrived in Paris 6 January 1860; died in Paris, 2 February 1860.

<sup>73</sup> Jean-Henri Baldus: born in Ally, 26 January 1811; received into the Internal Seminary, 11 June 1829; took vows, 12 June 1831; ordained priest in March 1834; missionary in China in 1834; ordained bishop, 19 October 1845; died at Kiou-kiang, 29 September 1869.

to his ordination confrere, Jean-Baptiste Torrette, posted at Macao (an obligatory stopping-off point for the missionaries). He sent some words of regret:

*I flatter myself that I might be able to go and join you later but the uncertainty of my health and, especially, my unworthiness, seem to prohibit me forever from this beautiful destiny ... I will support to my utmost those vocations for China which manifest themselves ... St. Vincent draws many blessings on his family. They reach as far as China since, from time to time, you see worthy missionaries arrive.*<sup>74</sup>

China made the heart of the missionary beat faster. Its distant shores attracted men of God. This land seemed the prototype of the lands to be evangelised. One had to cross the seas to bring Christ to the “infidels.” It meant living to the utmost the gift of oneself given to God. To participate in such a fruitful mystery was the secret desire of John Gabriel who never ceased to invoke the saints that he might take this route.

He who attempts nothing achieves nothing. John Gabriel sought to request a posting to China for himself. He could no longer bear seeing confreres leaving without him. The novices had had some wind of this desire when their director spoke to them of a Vincentian martyr in China, presented to them as a really emblematic figure: Fr Francis Regis Clet, martyred on 18 February 1820, the year in which John Gabriel was himself a novice. When he himself was in China, John Gabriel wrote to Fr Jean-Baptiste Nozo, recalling:

*Some years ago, M. Clet, after a career that was both long and full of merit, had the joy of dying a martyr: none of the Christians who knew him can desist from talking about his good deeds and his virtues. We lack neither motives nor examples to encourage and support us. However, weak as I am, all would seem insufficient to me were I not able to count on the powerful aid of your prayers and those of all our confreres and of our Sisters of Charity.*<sup>75</sup>

John Gabriel’s disappointment was great since refusal of permission to go to the mission in China was made known to him from the mouth of his spiritual director: six months of unrelenting requests, only to get a clearly expressed refusal. Until, one day, wearied by this uncustomary stubbornness, he finally gives in: John Gabriel may apply to the Superior General, Dominique Salhorgne. The advice of the General Council is, however, negative — with the exception of that of the Procurator General, M. Etienne. John Gabriel is a good director of novices, he is needed and, in any case, his health, according to the

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<sup>74</sup> Cf. Letter 45 (10 March 1834) to Jean-Baptiste Torrette.

<sup>75</sup> Cf. Letter 70 (19 December 1835) to Fr J.-B. Nozo.

doctor, is fragile and uncertain. Such a mission involves considerable risks: the voyage is long and perilous; the climate difficult to endure. Let us be mindful of the death of his brother, Louis. But, after a sleepless night, the doctor changes his mind. He no longer has any objection to the departure for China of Fr. John Gabriel Perboyre.

The business did not remain secret. The Motherhouse was suddenly buzzing. His heart burning with a new joy, the future missionary of China, hastens to announce the news to his uncle:

*The Good Lord has just favoured me with a precious grace of which I am truly unworthy. When he deigned to give me a vocation to the ecclesiastical state, the principal motive which decided me on responding to his voice was the hope of being able to preach the Good News of salvation to the infidels. Since then, I have never totally lost sight of this perspective and the idea of the Chinese missions especially had always made my heart beat faster. And then! dear uncle, today my prayers are answered. It was on the Feast of the Purification that I was granted the mission for China, which makes me believe that, in this matter, I owe a great deal to the Holy Virgin.<sup>76</sup>*

And, following this assurance, he writes again:

*I am going to leave with two of our young confreres<sup>77</sup> and several priests from the Missions Étrangères.<sup>78</sup>*

Mindful of the pain that awaited his parents, he asks his uncle:

*I have just written to my parents; I hope that they will know how to make this sacrifice like good Christians. Would you please, when the occasion arises, console them and help them with your good advice.<sup>79</sup>*

Preparations for the departure went quickly. It was impossible to return to Le Puech one last time in order to embrace his relations there. He did, however, have the chance to see, with great joy, his young brother, Jacques, at that time a brother in the Congregation, and his sister and goddaughter, Antoinette, a Daughter of Charity in Paris. John Gabriel was prepared for his farewells to his confreres and novices. One of them, M. Peschaud,<sup>80</sup> later recounted:

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<sup>76</sup> Cf. Letter 56 (February 1835) to Jacques Perboyre.

<sup>77</sup> Joseph Gabet and Joseph Perry.

<sup>78</sup> Louis Delamare, Jean Gauthier, Dominique Lefèbvre, Joseph Callery and Joseph Renier.

<sup>79</sup> Cf. letter 56 (February 1835) to Jacques Perboyre.

<sup>80</sup> Pierre Peschaud: arrived in China, 29 August 1837.

*John Gabriel wished to make his farewells to the seminarists but, overcome with emotion, he could hardly say a few words to them, then he went on his knees to ask pardon of them for his bad example and the pain he might have caused us, but all fell to their knees too and asked his blessing.*

The final farewells took place in the entry-court of the Motherhouse. In the presence of M. Salhorgne,<sup>81</sup> Superior General, the blessing of God was asked for John Gabriel and his confreres and they were left, finally, to go and join the *Edmond*, the ship which would carry them from Le Havre to the shores of China.

(EUGENE CURRAN, C.M., translator)

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<sup>81</sup> Dominique Salhorgne: born in Toul, 3 September 1757; received into the Internal Seminary, 27 October 1772; 12<sup>th</sup> Superior General; resigned, 15 August 1835; died, 25 May 1836.

## The Elements of a Discourse: The Correspondence of John Gabriel Perboyre

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### Introduction

In *La vie du bienheureux Jean-Gabriel Perboyre*, the author writes:

*In our Blessed, the soul itself reigned above all. His whole body served it with an edifying fidelity; all his senses obeyed it or, what is more, it kept them under a hard and severe slavery. This was a soul which, one might say, did not touch earth and which lived amidst the weaknesses of humanity as an angel which borrows its forms, when it comes here below to accomplish a celestial mission.*<sup>1</sup>

In the same way, we could also cite as typical of this type of hagiography, this other relevant passage:

*“He studied deeply Jesus crucified; at his feet he sought light and strength, wept for his sins and those of others, forgot everything, forgot even himself and found himself, one might say, in another world.”*<sup>2</sup>

How can we, as historians, reckon the profound motivations of a man who, situated in a particular context, gave his entire life in following Christ, while we still avoid the traps of this teleological history, so well characterised by these quotations? In trying to circumvent these human conditionings, and thereby reducing a man’s life to a laconic “he was a man of his times” we risk casting aside the very thing that constitutes the originality of a meeting. Can we avoid reducing the things that might irk us, seeking to integrate them into our familiar categories, so that we can agree to enter into dialogue with this representative of a past epoch who, however, recalls for us the actuality of the Christian message?

For this reason, we propose, within the limits of this article, to take account, in a precise and concise manner, of the *weltanschauung* (metaphysical view of the world, underlying an understanding of life<sup>3</sup>) of John Gabriel Perboyre and, to that end, to start with what he himself explicitly stated. The correspondence of the saint is a precious source for this discourse since, in the variety of recipients, it allows us access to this representation. In touching on

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<sup>1</sup> *La vie du bienheureux Jean-Gabriel Perboyre*, Paris, Gaume et compagnie, 1889, p. 53.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p.79.

<sup>3</sup> Translation of the definition in the *Petit Larousse*, 2001.

this, we refuse to separate heavenly from earthly realities, in order that we may dialogue with this presupposed unity of thought and action.

### **The grandeur of God; the unworthiness of man**

In the letters of John-Gabriel Perboyre one finds, first and massively, a vital consciousness of the grandeur of God. It is concerned with a “severe religion”<sup>4</sup> which takes account of the unity of God, such as was the case in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. God is the one who is at the centre of this *weltanschauung*, and all things converge on God. It is characterised firstly by a providentialist reading of the history of the world,<sup>5</sup> of the mission in China,<sup>6</sup> of the Congregation<sup>7</sup> and even of individual and personal history.<sup>8</sup>

The justice and mercy of God characterise this providence which ordains everything in the world. In order to illustrate this fundamental conception, we can cite this passage from a letter of 27 October 1830 to his brother, Louis, who, at Le Havre, is on the verge of embarking for China. Referring to “a prophesy which is current in our country” and which foretold the conquest of Paris by the Arabs, John Gabriel sets out what can be understood as the basic presupposition of his view of his history:

*While there may be all these predictions, true or false, we remain content, in the midst of vicissitudes and temporal calamities, having as Father a God who only chastises us that we might become wise, who allows evil only to draw good from it. May he who has brought disorder into the world upturn and reverse it all, God knows how to bring all to its end and how to procure from it, by his adorable providence, his greater glory and the sanctification*

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Cholvy G. and Hilaire Y-M., *Histoire de la France contemporaine 1800-1880*, Toulouse, Privat, 1985, pp. 58-65.

<sup>5</sup> By way of example, we can take what Perboyre wrote on 8 November 1838 to the procurator of Macao; “One must abandon oneself to the care of this providence, which governs all in this world with or without or even contrary to human industry” (Saint Jean-Gabriel Perboyre, *Correspondance*, Rome, Congregation of the Mission, 1996 (new edition, revised and corrected) p. 192).

<sup>6</sup> In his letter of 16 August 1836: “When will this little heaven have penetrated this great mass? That is the secret of the One who holds all time in his power” (*ibid.* p. 203).

<sup>7</sup> At the end of 1837 he writes; “It is not without particular design that she [Providence] has allowed them to go in first [Laribe and Rameaux whom Perboyre suggests as Vicars General] in our mission in China, that she has used them to renew them and put them in a state that one can now call prosperous despite the sad dilapidation in which they found them” (*ibid.* pp. 262-263).

<sup>8</sup> During his voyage to China, the boat went through a storm and Perboyre suggests this reading of it in a letter of 29 June 1835: “However, we kept our souls at peace, delighting in abandoning ourselves to the good pleasure of the One who leads to the gates of the tomb and draws us back from them. He happily desired to lead us out of this crisis completely safe and sound” (*ibid.* p. 104, cf. p. 122. He further states to his uncle on 10 August 1836: “We always placed so much more of our confidence in the Providence of God that we counted less on our own and that of our guides.”

*of his elect. In him alone is our hope, our sole resource. He is our all; may he eternally be so.*<sup>9</sup>

Here is the essential key for understanding the thought and action of the saint and, equally certainly, of the Church in France emerging from the Revolution which had overthrown the order of the “Ancien Regime.”

If God is at the centre, consequently time is understood as orientated to permitting the realisation of the divine plan. Man is invited to enter this dynamic, all the more so when he is a missionary. John Gabriel, in a letter of 25 September 1837, expresses this dynamism to Fr. Martin, director of the Internal Seminaire:

*I cannot refrain from expressing often before God the great desire that I have that he may cause the day to come when this vast empire may become his heritage, sharing in the graces which are reserved for it in the treasures of his mercies....*<sup>10</sup>

Opposed to God, there is the world. One is struck today by this essentially pessimistic perspective, but to the degree that the ultimate end of man is to turn towards God and to work for his glory, the world represents the opposite track or, at least, the option of turning against the One God. The desolation of our world stands in the way of the mercy of God. John Gabriel Perboyre writes as follows to one of the Assistants of the Congregation, Jean Grappin, on 18 August 1836:

*The more one travels the world, the more is one struck by the truth of these words: “misericordia Domini plena est terra”; but one also sees the truth of: “desolatione desolata est terra.” Yes, whichever way one turns, one finds it to be infested with vice and soiled with iniquity. There are saints who have died in sorrow to see God so offended by men.*<sup>11</sup>

Man, therefore, must choose: God or the world. Salvation is “this great undertaking”<sup>12</sup> and one prepares for it here below. The devaluing of ethical values is a consequence of this choice. This is what he expresses to his youngest brother, Antoine, in direct fashion:

*Do not forget, my dear brother, that our life passes like a shadow, and that, at death, we will be treated as we have merited by our vices or our virtues. Have a horror of the pleasures of the world. Seek always above the eternal rewards; all the rest is only vanity.*<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* p. 44.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* p. 251.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* pp.222-223.

<sup>12</sup> Cholvy and Hilaire, *op.cit.* pp. 59-60.

<sup>13</sup> Perboyre, *Correspondance, op. cit.*, 20 January 1835, p. 97.

This is expressed again in even more direct fashion when he announces, in the letter of 15 February 1832, to his parents the death of his brother, Louis:

*Let us shun the world, detach ourselves from all things of the earth, and attach ourselves only to God and to his service; we will receive at death only what we have sown during life.*<sup>14</sup>

In the same way, when he learns that his father is sick, he writes, in a letter to his brother, Antoine, on 14 January 1834:

*The Good God only afflicts him for his own good, he must be assured of that. In his suffering, he expiates the pains which he would have to undergo in Purgatory and he merits a greater glory for heaven. Thus, I pray him to profit from the graces of the illness by holy resignation and perfect patience. I strongly advise him during his convalescence to make a general confession of his whole life.*

And John Gabriel avails of the opportunity to develop this traditional spirituality of the Christian way of the ‘art of dying’:

*At whatever moment the Celestial Father judges it right to call us to him, we must find ourselves completely ready. It is too late to wait until old age, violent illness or sudden death. Each illness must be a continual preparation for a holy death; it has been allotted to us only to obtain a precious eternity. As for you, my dear brother, even though you are still young, reflect that you may die any day. Live as if each day was to be the last of your life. Moreover, one cannot amass treasures in heaven too soon or too carefully. Instead of imitating those who waste the time of their youth in vain pleasures, apply yourself all the more to observing the Law of God.*<sup>15</sup>

Suffering is integral to this spirituality and John Gabriel takes this up again with his cousin in Montgesty in 1833:

*The Good Lord chastises those he loves; see suffering as gifts from heaven and as an excellent means to sanctification and salvation.*<sup>16</sup>

This impossibility of man’s saving himself in the world is also what he experiences himself at the level of his own journey. Before entering the seminary

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* p. 56.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 78-80.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* p.3.

at Montauban, in a letter to his father on 16 June 1817 — the first letter we have — he writes:

*I have consulted God in order to know the state that I must embrace in order to move more surely towards heaven. After many prayers, I believe that the Lord wished me to enter the ecclesiastical state.*<sup>17</sup>

When he was less than two years a priest, he shared with his brother, Louis, on 11 July 1828:

*Here I see myself in my 27<sup>th</sup> year; alas! in my past life, what a terrible emptiness for eternity.*<sup>18</sup>

Finally, in his last letter to Jean-Baptiste Torette, procurator in Macao, dated 16 August 1839, he bore witness to the same sentiment with regard to the expenses incurred in getting hernia supports for him:

*As to the suggestion that the expenses paid out for me in this matter might be useless, this I acknowledge and avow, with far less difficulty than I acknowledge more and more the uselessness of all those costs which I have incurred for the Congregation in the 20 years that I have been in its care, and I assure you that this is one of my greatest sorrows, which will remain with me no doubt as long as the Good Lord endures me in this world.*<sup>19</sup>

This consciousness of the emptiness of human life — the sentiment of the creature in face of its creator, since it owes all things to him — is increased by pastoral duty. In order to announce the date of his priestly ordination, he writes to his father on 24 August 1826:

*It is, therefore, decided, my most dear father, and the day is not far off when the Lord will place on my head forever the yoke of priesthood; this will be the greatest day of my life. What happiness for me, if I can receive priesthood with all the necessary dispositions! What a source of grace for me and others! The mercy of God must be great since it chooses such unworthy ministers; you know how little I have merited this great favour. Beseech Our Lord, I pray you, that he may not allow me to abuse the graces that he deigns to accord me.*<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* from St Flour, p. 22.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* p. 303.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* p.7.

The majesty of God is the measure of the insignificance of man to the degree that it recalls also the grandeur and beauty of God's plan for man.

## History

One finds the same pessimistic perspective with regard to the present times. To his brother, Louis, who had told him that he was going to teach philosophy, John Gabriel answers in his letter of 24 May 1828:

*It is no small thing to be a professor of philosophy in a time when each person is imposing on this science the ideas that please him, where each has his system, his opinions, where there are more schools than masters.*<sup>21</sup>

The rupture was introduced by the French Revolution and the saint repeats the same alarmist diagnosis as the opponents of the Revolution and the defenders of Ultramontane Catholicism. To his brother, Louis, in Macao, he writes in July 1831:

*His Lordship the Count de Maistre<sup>22</sup> said in 1820 that Europe, like him, was heading for the tomb; you, who in order not to be sucked in with her, have hastened to distance yourself from her, you must be curious to know if there is still left in her any breath of life. Here is her report: you will see that the patient is still in a state of suffering; and, in the crises that she has had to undergo, you will see that there is still some life left in her ailing limbs.*<sup>23</sup>

The world is as though held by this rule of decline which leads it inexorably towards disorder. This letter of July 1831 to his brother, Louis,<sup>24</sup> is certainly the most important for us in order to grasp the political understanding of this missionary. In effect, he develops in it a defence of legitimacy and legality:

*Since the Revolution of July, ministers have succeeded one another with the rapidity of lightening. The government has often had to struggle with the anarchists for the streets of the capital and keep*

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* p.20. Philosophy, too worldly, risked losing from sight "the idea of this adorable Majesty" (*Ibid.* p. 59).

<sup>22</sup> Joseph de Maistre (1753-1821) played an essential role in the evolution of Catholicism after the tragic period of the French Revolution. Only the Church could permit a true restoration since what was in question was the very foundation of society.

<sup>23</sup> Perboyre, *Correspondance, op. cit.*, p. 47.

<sup>24</sup> Louis had died a little while after his departure from France, on 2 May 1831. John Gabriel learnt this only in February 1832, as he indicates in a letter to his uncle: *ibid.* p. 57, and also that to his parents, 15 February 1832, *ibid.* p. 56.

*watch on the machinations, both true and suspected, of the partisans of the Ancien Régime.*<sup>25</sup>

In the same movement he rejects the “populace of Paris” and the “schismatic Grégoire.”<sup>26</sup> On this subject, he reported to his brother:

*On the occasion of the funeral service which was held, imprudently, on the anniversary of the death of the Duc de Berry, the populace of Paris horribly sacked the church of Saint Germain l’Auxerrois and the palace and country-house of the Archbishop. The Abbey Church at Bois has been unworthily and legally profaned. The minister of police brought in, by means of force, the body of the schismatic Grégoire, former constitutional bishop, who persisted in his error even unto death.*<sup>27</sup>

What is primary for him is respect for order and tranquillity. In fact, all forms of disorder are contrary to holy endeavours. What is essential is found only at this level. In a significant way, he draws out the moral lessons of this political situation for his brother, Antoine, in the letter of 14 April 1834:

*There have been some troubles in Paris these past days; it is now over. There have been men killed and others wounded ... Our district remains very calm; moreover, we are under the protection of St. Vincent de Paul, our good father, whose body is exposed for public veneration in our church. A great crowd of people come here each day this week because of the novena being offered in his honour. This proves to you that, while some work to their own perdition, others focus on their salvation. Strive, my dear brother, seriously to imitate these latter.*<sup>28</sup>

Revolution, which seemed a loss of time and a waste of energy, is feared. In the letter to his brother, Louis, on 24 August 1830 — just after the July Revolution which overthrew the Bourbons in order to put in a constitutional monarchy under Philip of Orleans — he writes, not without some exaggeration:

*I have been in mortal fear since the first news of the Revolution, right up to the moment when we learned that you were safe!*

He continues, passing on a rumour:

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* p. 48.

<sup>26</sup> Henri Grégoire (1750-1831) deputy of the Constitutional Assembly, fought for the unity of the Three Orders (Nobility, Clergy and People). He voted for the declaration of the Rights of Man and also the Civil Constitution of the Clergy. He was consecrated as Constitutional Bishop of the Diocese of Blois. Unbending, he refused, even on his deathbed, to recant his constitutional allegiance.

<sup>27</sup> Perboyre, *Correspondance, op. cit.*, p. 48.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* p. 88.

*I wept torrents of tears, when I was told that the body of St. Vincent had been thrown into the Seine, and I could only be consoled when I learned that I was completely misled. May the Lord continue to favour with his divine protection both you and all the children of St. Vincent!*<sup>29</sup>

If there is never any question, in the correspondence of John Gabriel Perboyre, of what was fundamentally at stake in the French Revolution, it had still been the cause of a “grievous lacuna,”<sup>30</sup> prejudicial to the plan of God himself. Happily, in the end

*God, having reestablished in France the family of St. Vincent, and having put it in the position of fulfilling all its commitments, it has hastened anew to the aid of the Chinese.*<sup>31</sup>

Politics holds no interest for him; the only thing that matters is the supernatural and for man actively to strive for his salvation.

### ***L’Avenir*, the “system” of M. de Lamennais**

In this context, the sole favourable attitude in which basic issues may be touched on is found in relation to the paper *L’Avenir* (*The Future*) of Félicité Lamennais<sup>32</sup> whose motto was “God and Liberty,” which came out after the revolution of July, from 16 October 1830 to 15 November 1831. It was characteristic of the attitude of the French Clergy who showed great interest in the paper. It is in the letter to Louis at Macao, written towards July 1831, that John Gabriel Perboyre is most explicit on this question<sup>33</sup>:

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* p.39.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* p. 200.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Lamennais (1782-1854), along with Montalembert, is one of the principal representatives of liberal Catholicism. The paper attempts to get closer to the revolutionary principles, the first of which was certainly liberty: the paper reclaimed liberty of conscience with, as a corollary, the separation of Church and State, freedom of education, of the press and of association.... From December 1831 to July 1832, the “pilgrims of liberty” were in Rome in order to win the support of the Pope. After an interview, in which no reference was made to the paper, on their return from Rome, they learned of the publication of the Bull *Mirari Vos* on 15 August 1832. Gregory XVI, without ever directly referring to the paper, condemned the doctrines of *L’Avenir* and, in particular, that of liberalism: “this false and absurd maxim, or rather this delirium, according to which one can procure and guarantee liberty of conscience for all.”

<sup>33</sup> The attitude of the biographers of John Gabriel Perboyre is noteworthy: for example, *La vie du bienheureux Jean-Gabriel Perboyre*, *op.cit.*, remains entirely silent on this question about the influence of Lamennais and the paper *L’Avenir*, whereas, taking up the commentary of François Vauris, *Le disciple de Jésus, ou vie du Vénérable Perboyre*, Paris, 1853, the note on page 53 of the *Correspondance*, *op. cit.*, comments: “While superior of Saint-Flour, the saint had adopted the system of Fr. de Lamennais because he thought it a suitable contribution to the good of the Church,” then cites the first biography setting forth in evidence the fidelity of John Gabriel Perboyre to the decision of the Pope.

*Just a word on the paper L'Avenir. As your know, it is edited by an intrepid army of ultramontanists with M. de Lamennais as their captain. The doctrines which are defended therein are only those best developed principles which M. de Lamennais has already unveiled in his work on the progress of the Revolution. You cannot imagine how much this paper has stirred up reactions. In general, the bishops of France do not like it. However, it is more or less in every diocese. Everywhere there are hot partisans and numerous opponents. It has succeeded very well in Belgium. In Rome, there are those for and those against. The editors have addressed a declaration to the Holy See in which they set out their philosophical, theological and political principles, begging the Holy Father to decide on the delicate issues which they submit to him. But Rome has said nothing these past four or five months since the declaration was sent there.<sup>34</sup>*

Since 1828, in his letter of 24 May, “the system of M. de Lamennais” was a topic of discussion with his brother Louis and John Gabriel, being up-to-date with current writings, sums up:

*As for the doctrine of the latter [...] there are a good number of works which can perfectly well satisfy you on the above.<sup>35</sup>*

Finally, in a letter to his cousin, parish priest of Jussies in the canton of Catus, we find another important reference that allows us to appreciate his attitude:

*Our uncle in Montauban has just written to me that a huge storm has arisen against our Gentlemen (of the Mission) in Cahors, because of “Lamennaisian” opinions. I find it difficult to believe, partly because his huge distaste for M. de Lamennais may have caused him to fall into exaggeration, partly because our confreres are very circumspect in this regard. And how could one pursue men who only wish to have the opinions of the Holy See and who keep it in their heart until the Holy See has pronounced that they are mistaken. You are well-placed to find out the truth, since you go often to Cahors. Could you please pass it on to me?*

*I have read the first two issues of the Gazette du Clergé. It is often close in tone to L'Avenir in its basic doctrines, but it is more moderate and gentle in its format, and is inferior to the other in terms of editing talent. I can inform you that the famous pilgrims*

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<sup>34</sup> Perboyre, *Correspondance*, op. cit., pp. 48-49.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* p. 21.

*have arrived in Rome. They will spend a month there before being presented to the Pope, in order to see, while they are waiting, what the atmosphere of the office is like. M. de Lamennais was very tired after the voyage. As soon as the Legate from Florence knew that he had arrived in town, he hurried to invite him to dinner, and received him in most brilliant fashion in most distinguished company. You will learn with great pleasure that the author of the Essay on Indifference<sup>36</sup> has written an essay on Catholic philosophy which, they say, eclipses all his other works. But before releasing it, he wishes to resolve the issue about L'Avenir.<sup>37</sup>*

It is only in this context that John Gabriel Perboyre shows and expresses an interest in socio-political questions but, like the young clergy, to soften them after the condemnation from Rome.

### **Missioner**

This attitude of breaking with the world shows itself concretely in the departure of the missioner for another country. In order to understand this missionary spirituality well, we have to refer to two significant passages in the letters of John Gabriel. There is, firstly, the letter to his brother, Louis, of 8 October 1830, where he responds to the news of the latter's departure for China:

*Nature is grieved but faith comes to console. In order to endure my weakness and ease my pain, I see before me the glory which you will offer to God and the salvation of the souls that you will have the happiness of wresting away from the slavery of the demon. The hope of seeing you again, if not here below at least in the heavenly fatherland, eases the bitterness of my sorrow. Go, therefore, my beloved brother, go where the voice of God calls you. You take my sorrow with you but my best wishes will follow you everywhere.*

*[...] May the guardian angels of the pagan countries which you are destined to evangelise greet you on your arrival, aid you in all your undertakings and obtain for you immense success in establishing the reign of God! May we both live the life of the saints and die the death of the elect!*

*I fear that I have not been faithful to the vocation that the Lord has given you. Pray God to make me know his holy will and to conform me to it. Obtain for me, of his merciful goodness, forgiveness for*

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<sup>36</sup> This consists of two volumes, published in 1817 and 1820, in which Lamennais attacks the philosophy developed by the encyclopedists.

<sup>37</sup> Perboyre, *Correspondance, op. cit.*, pp. 53-54.

*my sinfulness and the spirit of our holy state in order that I may become a good Christian, a good priest and a good missionary.*<sup>38</sup>

Later, there is the announcement to his uncle of his own departure for this same mission, in a letter dated February 1835:

*I have great news to tell you. The good God has favoured me with a very special grace of which I am wholly unworthy. When he deigned to bestow on me a vocation for the ecclesiastical state, the principal motive which decided me to respond to his voice was the hope of being able to preach to the infidels the good news of salvation. Since then, I have never altogether lost sight of this view and the idea of the missions in China especially made my heart beat faster. And now! my dear uncle, my desires have today finally been heard. It was on the feast of the Purification that I was named to the mission in China, which makes me think that, in this, I owe a great deal to the Blessed Virgin. Help me, please, to thank her and to beseech her to thank Our Lord for me. I am to leave with two of our young priests and several priests from the "Missions Etrangères."*

*[...] May God grant me the graces I need for a good crossing, to live and die as a true missionary.*<sup>39</sup>

God is the beginning and end of all involvement. Into this space the missionary's task is inserted, which consists of establishing the reign of God. There is no autonomy at all since, in all human initiative, one must recognise the action of God.

With his departure for China on 21 March 1835, the division (between spirit and world) which he had never ceased to live, became concrete. He writes to his uncle some days before embarking (18 March):

*I hasten to send you my farewells once again before I leave this fatherland which will now cease to be mine.*<sup>40</sup>

He is making solid this separation which suffuses all the spiritual life in a radical way.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.* p.41.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* p.100.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 100-101.

<sup>41</sup> Even at the time of Louis' departure, he had written to his uncle, on 23 August 1833: "Those who leave are filled with joy. Those who remain can only console themselves with the hope of following on later." *Ibid.* p. 69.

Life, for John Gabriel, is envisaged as a combat for Christ. The absolutely military obedience of the missionary is understood in this way. To M. Torrette, he writes on 15 July 1835:

*Happy to fight under your flag, I give myself to you without reservation. I will work under whichever confrere you wish, I will go where you wish, even into Tartary and beyond. It will be enough that you may be able to get some use of me.*<sup>42</sup>

To the Superior General, Jean-Baptiste Nozo, in a letter of 19 December 1835, he declares:

*A soldier in whom temerity takes the place of courage, I have felt my heart tremble at the approach of battle. I have never been happier than in this situation. I do not know what is in store for me in the employment which opens before me; doubtless many crosses, for that is the daily bread of the missionary. And what better could one wish for, than to go and preach Christ crucified? May he allow me to taste the sweetness of his bitter chalice! May he make me worthy of the scouts who have gone before me! May he permit none of us to belittle the fine examples which our Congregation offers us in these far-off countries.*<sup>43</sup>

Learning the subtleties of the Chinese language, the missionary adds, in a letter to his sister, Antoinette, in November 1835:

*When we know it fairly fluently, we can use it to wage war on Satan in the vast empire of China, where there are still millions of pagans.*<sup>44</sup>

The missionary who risks his life “in enemy territory”<sup>45</sup> must persevere:

*It would not be useless to recall that suffering is the lot of the missionary.*<sup>46</sup>

Taking up the image of St. Paul, and making the link with his long and painful journeys, he writes to his uncle on 10 October 1836:

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<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* p. 110.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.* p.148.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.* p.145.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.* p. 176.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* p.103. Suffering possesses curative properties with regard to health: *ibid.* p. 79. Cf. the letter to his cousin in Montgesty, *ibid.* p. 65. Cf. above.

*If I have come so far it is doubtless in order to run still further in this arena. God grant that I may run in such a way as to gain my everlasting crown.*<sup>47</sup>

The missionary, familiar with suffering, thus cooperates with the plan of God. If, for himself, John Gabriel Perboyre, takes care not to inflate his “little efforts” — he is nothing of himself: “a little runt,”<sup>48</sup> it was enough for him “to be a good little mouse”<sup>49</sup> — he delighted in recording the qualities and virtues he found in his confreres (especially Frs. Laribe and Rameaux<sup>50</sup>) and sets out a demanding image for the missionary. To M. Martin, director of the Internal Seminary, he describes the demands of formation in a letter of 4 November 1835:

*You see what devotion you must inspire in those whom you are forming for us. They must be filled with sanctity and prudence. Show me a saint and I will show you a man who possesses all the virtues to a high degree of perfection. Prudence presupposes great rectitude and a certain breath of judgement, it embraces the spirit of discernment and of good conduct and, that good may be achieved, it demands strength of soul and unconquerable constancy. This prudence cannot be simply a natural quality, but is, still more, a supernatural gift, and must be a truly heavenly wisdom. After all, if the mission gives authority to the apostles, it is only the communication of the Spirit of God that gives them the power to convert the world.*<sup>51</sup>

In all things, he is concerned with recognising the initiative and work of God.

Two things are inseparable for the missionary: to work for his own sanctification and to strive for the salvation of his neighbour. To his parents, he writes on 22 August 1836:

*My very dear parents, have no other concern for me except to pray that I may save myself and that I may contribute to saving others.*<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.* p. 197.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.* Letter to his uncle, 24 July 1835, p. 112.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.* To his brother, Jacques, 18 September 1838, p. 274.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.* Letter to his uncle, 10 August 1836, p. 182. “Rameaux, who really is the father of the Christians” (*Ibid.* p. 195). To the Superior General, letter of 18 August 1836, *ibid.* p. 217. Describing the apostolic work of his confreres, John Gabriel adds: “I would especially like to glean some ears in order to be able to place them beside the great sheaves of my confreres in the fields of the Great Father, in order that I might have some share in their reward.” *Ibid.* p. 223.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.* p. 138.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.* p. 225.

Asking a priest to continue to pray that he might obtain the protection of the Lord, John Gabriel adds, in a letter of 22 August 1837:

*In order that I may have the happiness of contributing a little to his glory, by working for my salvation and cooperating in the salvation of my neighbour.*<sup>53</sup>

From this point of view, prayer is every whit as important as action, for he is utterly concerned with living out this availability to God. In the letter to his uncle, referring to the work of The Society for the Propagation of the Faith,<sup>54</sup> he insisted on this double dimension of prayer: on the one hand supplication for the conversion of China:

*If you see prayers rise up to heaven from all parts, ever more increased, ever more fervent, you could judge from afar better than we who are so near if the Kingdom is close to this great nation*<sup>55</sup>;

yet, on the other hand, as a struggle against Satan, he formulates this vow:

*May all their brothers in Jesus Christ be enflamed with the same zeal for the cause of our Heavenly King, be part of the same spiritual army and take up the arms of prayer in order that they may bring about the fall of the Empire of Satan!*<sup>56</sup>

## **Mission**

The tendency which consists in idealising the past seems characteristic of the post-revolutionary period. The present was all degradation and the entire focus was on reaching the heights of this prestigious past. With regard to mission, John Gabriel Perboyre misses the situation at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century: to the Vicar General in Saint-Flour, he writes on 16 August 1836:

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<sup>53</sup> Not without some humour, he renews, in a very beautiful passage, this same invitation to his sister, Antoinette, which we cannot fail to quote, at least in this footnote: "Do not think that the Chinese are always hot on my heels and that they dream of nothing but being rid of me. These are people whom I love more than I fear. I assure you, I do not fear even the Emperor, the Mandarins or their flunkies. I have, however, one particular enemy in this country, whose challenges I must meet. This one is to be feared: he is the most wicked that I have known; and he is not Chinese, he is a European. He was baptised at birth; and has since been ordained priest. He came from France to China with us and on the same ship. I have no doubt that he will pursue me everywhere and will, most certainly, cause my ruin if I have the misfortune to fall alone into his hands. I will not give you his name for you already know him; if you can obtain his conversion, you will do him great service and your brother will owe you his happiness." *Ibid.* November 1835, pp. 145-146.

<sup>54</sup> The Society for the Propagation of the Faith was founded in Lyons in 1819 and in 1822 the *Annales* were published in order to make this missionary undertaking known. It was a means of stirring up both prayers and donations from Catholics for the missions.

<sup>55</sup> Perboyre, *Correspondance, op. cit.*, Letter to his uncle, 16 August 1836, pp. 203-204.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

*The missionaries are now, in the mission in Peking, in a position that is very different from that which they knew previously. Then, even though they had only been admitted to Peking as European experts, called there to set up an academy of science and arts, they were able, under this guise, to exercise, right in the heart of the capital, all the functions of a missionary: to direct a seminary, preach religion continually in their church, receive more than two hundred retreatants in their house each year, form catechists, explain cases of conscience each day to the Chinese priests during two months of holiday which they took amongst them on returning from mission, take care of the Christians in the various areas of the town, from which they knew how to escape secretly, in spite of the Emperor's restrictions, in order to go on mission in the countryside, etc.<sup>57</sup>*

With regard to missions, John Gabriel emphasised, on one hand, the misery of the Christians in China: from Macao, he writes, without actually seeing it himself: "Our Christians are generally in great misery."<sup>58</sup> To his uncle, from Honan, on 10 August 1836, he writes: "Those who do not die live on practically nothing."<sup>59</sup> He recalls "the extreme misery"<sup>60</sup> for his cousin Caviolo, parish priest of Catus, in a letter of 12 September 1838. On the other hand, linked with this material misery, is the small number of Christians:

*Scattered over the surface of the empire they [the Christians] are among the hoard of pagans as small fish are in the sea; calculating the total number of Chinese at 300 million: in 13 or 14 hundred one will scarcely find one Christian.<sup>61</sup>*

Describing the Chinese mission, he writes in a letter of 22 August 1837 to a priest in the parish of St. Eustache:

*There are in China some 40 European priests and about 80 Chinese priests. The number of workers is not yet sufficient to care for the lone Christians who, however, amid the vast population of Chinese who serve the demon, seem merely as the scattered ears that escape the scythe of the harvester. In the various provinces, occasionally pagans will convert but, in such a vast mass, it is hardly significant. One must hope that God, whose judgements are impenetrable, will one day cause this great nation to enter into the heart of the Church. The life of the missionaries in China is*

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<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.* p.201.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.* Letter of 6 November 1835, p. 143.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.* p. 195.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 269-270.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.* Letter of 16 August 1856, p. 203.

*completely apostolic; it is spent amid tiredness and dangers; three-quarters of the year, they must cover great distances in order to direct the Christian communities, preach, administer the sacraments etc., living frugally in a country where the rich, as everywhere, live well but where the poor do not always have even a little rice to feed themselves....*<sup>62</sup>

A year later, in a letter to his cousin Caviolo, parish priest of Catus, he writes, on 12 September 1838:

*It is, as you know, a great field covered with a huge harvest; but its gospel workers are, in proportion, very few in number. Although belonging to different bodies and different countries, they all work together, with a unity of views and doctrines, united by links of the same spirit, equally zealous and indefatigable in taking up the same works and bearing the same cross, equally convinced that, if the hand of God is not in it, the hand of man can do nothing. These attitudes, supported by the continual and fervent prayers which are offered in the whole Church for the conversion of China, may be the best intimation one can have today, that the days of mercy are being prepared for this immense population which has, until now, been estranged from the life of God. If it is not given to us to see the dawn of these happy days, let us, at least, never cease to invoke them with all the ardour of our desires.*<sup>63</sup>

In these descriptions, which emphasise the small number, one finds an ideally apostolic description of the missionary work. With the entire Church, it is reaching out toward the realization of God's design.

### **By way of conclusion**

The mission which the missionaries lived in China in the 19<sup>th</sup> century existed in a very precise context, as much at the interior level — Catholicism in France must find its feet again after the turmoil of the Revolution — as at the exterior level: the call to convert this vast empire where “Satan reigns.” In either case, “Almighty God” is the principal actor. In the West, the signs of the times seem always to lead to death, even as, on the other side, they announce “happy days.” The missionary finds himself involved in this struggle against the dimensions of the world.

One must take account also the unity of the *weltanschauung* of John Gabriel Perboyre, which we may characterise as a spirituality of suffering and of rupture, of battle and glory. In fact, the determining factor is salvation; that is to

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<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.* p. 235.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.* p. 266.

say, the definitive choice of God. The world then holds no further interest save as a place of passage, the arena where one prepares for eternity. It holds no interest in itself and poses the considerable risk of encouraging one to forget the ultimate goal of man.

To use the words of Paul Ricoeur:

*What we must honour from the past is not that it no longer is but that it once was. Therefore, the message of history to memory, of history to the man who remembers, is to add to the task of remembering not solely a mourning for that which no longer is but a debt to that which once was.*<sup>64</sup>

We may, finally, recognise the importance of this study with regard to the correspondence of John Gabriel Perboyre. This work of history allows us to take account of the gap between a witness to the faith — John Gabriel Perboyre — and our contemporary era. And, at the same time, it makes us recognise the debt which we owe. To undertake this task, is to hear another invitation and to let it resonate in us — in our daily life, in what is closest to us — in other words which are no longer familiar to our culture, a Good News.

(EUGENE CURRAN, C.M., translator)

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<sup>64</sup> Paul Ricoeur, “Définition de la mémoire d’un point de vue philosophique” in *Pourquoi se souvenir?*, Académie Universelle des Cultures, Paris, Grasset, 1999, p. 32.

## St. John Gabriel Perboyre

### A mis en scene

*by Joseph Loftus, C.M.  
Province of Ireland*

### Introduction

*... Perboyre was a special sort. The threat of persecution and the other difficulties of missionary life deep inside China seemingly purified and ennobled him.<sup>1</sup>*

St. John Gabriel Perboyre, has often been, in this reader's case at least, a "plaster saint"; one who stared down from his cross at the moment of his death and inspired, perhaps, by his heroism, but only in a very conventional way and not so as to actually invite imitation. The letters reveal a more complex individual. What proved most interesting was not the martyrdom, which could be seen as an unfortunate accident albeit borne with extraordinary faith, but the way in which this man responds so buoyantly to the difficulties of his particular missionary life. Therefore I have chosen in this paper to focus on the situation of the mission in China at the time of the Saint's arrival and explore some of the issues of the day.

Initially I hoped to research the catechetical methods adopted by Perboyre in his work in China. However, I had too little material to hand and the letters themselves were too limited a source on which to base a study. This is an important area of research and I hope, if time affords, to look into the matter further. I chose instead to examine the mission in 1835 when Perboyre arrived in China and found there was a great deal to explore. The letters reveal a man wrestling with the challenges of a mission that was in many ways very different from what he expected. For now I have chosen to try and unravel the various strands that made up Perboyre's missionary situation. I have chosen to do this as I have found, from reading both the letters and secondary sources, that the situation in 1835 was much different from my own imagining. Also the letters are very confusing when read through the prism of ecclesial forms, which, although, part of our mental picture of the Congregation's mission in China, actually postdate the Saint's death.

One aspect of this short article may confuse the reader unfamiliar with Chinese phonetics. Studies of the Saint tend to adopt an archaic convention with

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Ward Fay, *The Opium War*, p. 102.

regard to the transliteration of both Chinese personal and place names. They either use the idiosyncratic transliterations of Perboyre himself or 19<sup>th</sup> French models. The Chinese government adopted its own transliteration standard in the 1950s (usually called Pinyin), which is now widely accepted for transliteration of Chinese terms. Thus Pékin (French) or Pe'king (Wade Jiles) becomes Beijing. For this paper I have chosen, quotes aside, to use Pinyin throughout.<sup>2</sup> Such a convention may initially be confusing for a Vincentian readership, but I believe will be more useful in the long run and will allow our researches to enter more easily the mainstream of reflections on the history of the Church in China.

A final remark would be to say this article is based on too narrow a range of research as I do not have access to the materials that would have most enhanced this study, namely the letters of the Saint's contemporaries. Also my secondary sources are quite limited. I hope however that this small attempt to insert the Saint's mission in China into its social and historical context will add to our appreciation of his holiness.

I would most like to have given more accurate details of the places where Perboyre worked, but they were impossible to reconstruct from the letters and I suspect that the information is available in secondary sources not to hand.

### ***China, the Dream and the Reality.***

*This China is so different from other countries that were one not on the spot one would never be well acquainted with its concerns.<sup>3</sup>*

Until the moment when he stepped off the "Royal George" at Macao, the Chinese Empire existed for him only as a place of heroes and devils, of blood soaked clothing and the cords which had strangled his confrere Francis Regis Clet, C.M., 15 years earlier. China was also the country his brother had died trying to reach and, increasingly, the land to which a renewed French Church looked towards as the object of its missionary zeal. A romantic notion of martyrdom, rather than a real understanding of the country that was to be his home had nurtured his missionary vocation. For the next five years he was to become acquainted with the real concerns of China while at the same time always retaining a sense of having been "sent from France." Paradoxically, it was the letting go of the rather romantic vision of martyrdom that prepared him for the martyrdom he was to endure. It could be said that his heroism was not the way in which he accepted the sentence of death on 11 September 1840 but rather in the slow reshaping of his missionary vision that took place in the preceding

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<sup>2</sup> There are a few place names such as Macao and Canton, which, because of their familiarity, do not follow this convention.

<sup>3</sup> *Correspondance*, 87, to Jean Baptiste Torrette, C.M., in Macao, p. 241.

five years. He had learned that China was different and yet in coming to terms with those differences, he was prepared when the couriers arrived from Emperor DaoGuang with dispatches confirming his fate. Generations of missionaries to China, inspired in turn by his heroism have had to make the same transition, though not all managed to do so with such inner peace.<sup>4</sup>

When Perboyre set foot on Chinese soil he arrived in a country in the last phase of less than blissful isolation from the currents that were shaping the 19<sup>th</sup>-century world order. The industrial revolution and peace in Europe was stimulating the global economy; China, were she open to it, was a natural partner in the development of commerce. The Chinese Empire's economic self sufficiency and assumptions about its place at the centre of the global political landscape bore little relationship to immersing patterns of world trade or the growing importance of European and, later, America power.

In 1835, China was ruled by the "indolent and narrow-minded"<sup>5</sup> emperor, Dao Guang. He was the sixth ruler of the foreign and unpopular Qing Dynasty. He had not only to attend to the still-insignificant incursions of the foreigners, but also to deal with peasant revolts, historically a sign of dynastic upheavals.<sup>6</sup> Despite these pressures, the imperial worldview allowed him to think that he alone was the only serious player on the world stage and that he needed nothing from abroad. As a result, he accepted only tribute from foreign emissaries, rather as a parent might accept graciously a handmade gift from a child returning from kindergarten class. It mattered little whether the tribute came from a minor principedom in Indonesia or the powerful United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. As his position was incomparable with the leaders of any barbarian state, he could not even conceive of a trading "partnership" and thus resisted all attempts at a dialogue of equals. The pent-up pressures on international trade, with demand for China's goods in the West having no equivalent demand in China for Western-manufactured items, eventually led to the illegal trade in a product which the Chinese did want, opium. The results of this unregulated situation was to end China's isolation and force her, after 1840, to open her doors to the traders and missionaries who arrived at her borders. However in 1835 the Chinese Empire still preserved the semblance of its former greatness and western traders and missioners alike, lacking the military support of their governments, had to kowtow before the celestial throne or risk punishment. The arrangements the foreigners could make to their advantage were often illegal and subject to the somewhat capricious application of the law by central or local officials. So the

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<sup>4</sup> Peter Ward Fay, *op. cit.* Peter Fay notes that other missionaries were just upset by the difficulties that ennobled Perboyre. One would love to compare Perboyre's letters with those of his companions Rameaux or Baldus.

<sup>5</sup> Kenneth Scott LaTourette, *A History of the Christian Mission in China*, 1929, p. 286.

<sup>6</sup> These revolts culminated, in the 1850s, with the disastrous Taiping Rebellion during which 20,000,000 lost their lives.

trade in illegal opium<sup>7</sup> could continue quite openly for a time and then be suddenly stopped at huge cost to the merchants,<sup>8</sup> while missionaries could carry on their work quite publicly one day and then find themselves facing summary execution the next.<sup>9</sup> This was the China to which Perboyre came, and his death coincided with its demise.

### France and Portugal, two contrasting situations

*...while the family of St. Vincent is so seriously tested in Portugal, in France it is recovering more and more and fortifies itself in the spirit of the Lord.*<sup>10</sup>

Perboyre's missionary vocation had taken shape at a special time for French Catholicism. After the Napoleonic Wars the Church in France began to recover some of its strength. What emerged was a confident if rather self-conscious Church aware of having overcome enormous difficulties. A significant expression of the Church's resurgence was its missionary impetus. New missionary structures emerged, sometimes adapted from pre-revolutionary institutions, sometimes created *ex nihilo* in response to the changed circumstances. For example, in 1816, the newly reconstituted Missions Etrangères de Paris sent their first new missionaries to China since 1807 and, in the same period, a new association; the Society for the Propagation of the Faith was founded in 1822.<sup>11</sup> The Congregation of the Mission, reestablished in France in 1820, shared in this new, self-confident attitude. The Congregation very deliberately tried to emphasise its continuity with the pre-revolutionary community<sup>12</sup> but it too was being "adapted" to suit the new missionary mood of the times. Thus, the Congregation, among all the apostolic possibilities open to it, looked to the French Mission in China, which had been only reluctantly accepted by the French Vincentians in 1784.<sup>13</sup> By 1835 there were already six French confreres on the mission, two more arrived with Perboyre and before his death seven more had joined the enterprise.

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<sup>7</sup> Perboyre has only one passing reference to the trade that was to have an influence his death; he does not seem to have been aware of the issues its importation was raising for China.

<sup>8</sup> It was the destruction of 20,000 chests of opium (trade in which was illegal in China) in June 1839 that precipitated the first Opium War and may have influenced the decision to execute Perboyre.

<sup>9</sup> Perboyre is quite surprised at the flourishing and very open life of the Church in Fujian Province that he describes in letter 73. However the missionary, whose so public ministry impresses him, Roch-Joseph Carpena-Díaz O.P., the Vicar Apostolic of Fujian, was forced to flee in 1837 and the thriving mission was destroyed.

<sup>10</sup> *Correspondance*, 72, to Jean Castro, C.M. in the Diocese of Pékin, p. 154.

<sup>11</sup> Kenneth Scott LaTourette, *op. cit.*, p. 203.

<sup>12</sup> *Correspondance*, 67, to Pierre Martin, C.M. in Paris, p. 137.

<sup>13</sup> Although technically the "French Mission" staffed by the Congregation ended with the revolution, I will use the term to describe the mission of the Congregation *founded from France* as the **Missions** of the Congregation included an entirely separate mission *founded from Portugal*. The latter will be referred to as the Portuguese Mission.

There was another Vincentian Mission in China in 1835. The Portuguese had arrived at the same time as the French as successors to the Portuguese Jesuit Missions in Macao and later Beijing. Their position, especially in Macao was more assured than that of their French confreres, as they were part of the government sponsored Portuguese Mission funded by the Portuguese Queen. Such favour did not confer as much dignity as in previous centuries, but locally it was still important. The Portuguese Empire was almost a spent force by 1835, retaining a few colonies in Asia of which Macao was of crucial importance to both trader and missionary. Although Portugal had little influence internationally, it still could interfere successfully in Church affairs and did so regularly, demanding rights, collectively called the *Padroado*<sup>14</sup> seceded to it at a more expansive time in the country's history. In 1783, two Portuguese Vincentians from Goa arrived in Macao to set up a seminary there and later, in 1801, two others moved to Beijing to take charge of the Portuguese Mission based there. The Congregation was itself suppressed in Portugal in 1833 and although two more Portuguese Vincentians did come to China after Perboyre arrived, the Portuguese Mission, in the government-sponsored form in which it had existed, was in serious decline by 1835, at which time there were eleven Portuguese Vincentians on the Chinese Mission, seven of whom worked in Macao.<sup>15</sup>

Thus the French missionary who arrived in Macao in 1835 was supported by the burgeoning missionary enthusiasm at home but could not yet depend on the protection of his government. At that point, the government-supported scramble for influence in China had not yet begun. Europe in general was in an expansionist mood, but its traditional players in Asia, Portugal and Spain, no longer held centre stage; their roles were soon to be taken by Britain and France. When Perboyre arrived in China, his French confreres were the "arrivistes" when compared with the established Portuguese, and although the relations were friendly between the two groups and they did support each other in the field, the next five years would see a constant jockeying for position between the two missions. As well as that, the first danger Perboyre had to contend with was not

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<sup>14</sup> The *Padroado* was a series of privileges and responsibilities regarding the administration of the Church in the Portuguese Empire seceded to the Portuguese King in the 15<sup>th</sup> century by the Holy See. A similar arrangement existed in the Spanish Empire known as the *Patronato*. Its responsibility included the funding and protecting of Catholic Missions in Portuguese Territories and the right of appointment of bishops. When the Portuguese Empire was in its ascendancy, the system had some usefulness, but by the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Portugal were no longer able to perform the duties associated with the *Padroado* effectively, yet still insisted on its privileges. China was considered part of the Portuguese sphere of influence and China-bound missionaries were all expected to travel via Lisbon. Macao was, from the beginning, the transit point for entry into China. Therefore, even in its decline as a world force, Portugal was able to exercise a degree of control over the Chinese mission disproportionate to its real political power.

<sup>15</sup> Perboyre says there were five confreres on the staff of the seminary in Macao. I cannot explain the discrepancy.

the hostility of the “pagan” Mandarins but the possible antagonism of the Catholic Macanese authorities, demanding their outmoded privileges.<sup>16</sup>

### **The Chinese Church in 1835**

In 1835 the situation of the Church in China was bleak, with the proviso that the increased number of missionaries coming to China were beginning to make a difference and were stemming the decline in the numbers of Catholics. All estimates for the period must be taken as indicators rather than absolutes but it was clear that the golden age was over. The mission founded by Ricci in Beijing, with its outreach to the cultured classes, had been arrested as a result of the Rites controversy<sup>17</sup> and, while there was technically a presence at court in 1835, that mission was defunct. In the provinces the situation was complicated and uneven. The Church that formerly had as many as 300,000 members spread throughout the empire now had 200,000. The local clergy, in general, were from the same, very simple, backgrounds as their flocks and received only limited training. They had not been able to exercise sustained, effective leadership of the Church when the flow of missionaries stopped. Around the same time Protestant missionaries had begun to appear on the scene and, while their efforts were no threat to the long established Catholic missions,<sup>18</sup> they provided an alternative missionary strategy for China that was to prove very successful later on. Sporadic, but often localized, persecutions weakened the communities further. Perboyre was amazed to find a thriving public Church life in Fujian, which clearly did not fit into his romantic vision of the persecuted Church, but in other places mature communities had disappeared completely. As well as these issues, internal divisions within the Church made it less able to respond to the situation of the time.

There were, under the Padroado system, from 1690 until their suppression in 1842, three dioceses in China: Beijing, Nanjing and Macao. In theory they covered nine (present-day) provinces. In practice their effective jurisdiction was curtailed by the political situation in China, rivalries between national missions, the inability of Portugal to staff or fund the dioceses properly and Rome’s desire to change to a form of Church administration more in conformity to actual needs.

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<sup>16</sup> In fact, judging from his letters, Perboyre did not experience any disturbances in Macao, but Torrette had been expelled in 1832 for one year and the issue of the Padroado was by no means settled. He talks in some letters of the possibility of travelling via Manila. This was possibly an alternative transit point to China were Macao closed to missionaries who had not embarked for China at Lisbon as Portugal insisted.

<sup>17</sup> In the 17<sup>th</sup> century a dispute emerged among the missionaries about the use of certain rites to reverence Confucius and the ancestors. The rites themselves had ambiguous religious associations and the issue turned on their understanding in the eyes of the people. The literati were clear on their secular status, the less educated interpreted them as having religious significance. Rome, after much, often acrimonious, debate, banned Catholics from performing these ceremonies. As the rites were an integral part of public life, the ban meant that the elite, who were generally speaking all public servants, could not enter the Church. Christianity was thus confined solely to those on the margins of society. The ban was lifted only in 1939.

<sup>18</sup> Perboyre makes no mention of them, yet they also lived in Macao.

European politics made it impossible to simply annul the Padroado and Rome's solution was to give the administration of whole provinces to Apostolic Vicars. The Apostolic Vicars were subject to the immediate jurisdiction of the Pope, and thus did not come under the Padroado. This instrument allowed Rome to wrest control of some of the Chinese Mission from Portugal's ineffective control without challenging directly the Portuguese authorities.

By the time of Perboyre's arrival in China, the See of Macao had been vacant since 1828 and was, effectively, to remain so until the appointment of Jerome de Matta, C.M., a member of the St. Joseph's Seminary staff, in 1845. Beijing had been vacant for 17 years and an administrator, Cajetan Pires Pereira, C.M., who was himself the Bishop of Nanjing, was running the diocese. Pires had been unable to get permission to leave his post at the Emperor's Bureau of Astronomy. Thus the Diocese of Nanjing was also without a resident bishop, being administered by a Vicar General, Domingos-Jose de Santo Estevam Henriques, C.M. who was often ill and eventually returned to Portugal.<sup>19</sup>

As well as the dioceses, there were Vicariates scattered throughout central and eastern China in the charge of various religious congregations (which did not include the CM). These more contemporary administrative structures had the potential to facilitate the ordered development of the mission but, in fact, they often existed on paper only as there were not the personnel to staff them. Also, the new pattern of vicariates was superimposed on a confusing patchwork of districts administered by the mission society that had founded it. These districts were not fully under the jurisdiction of the Apostolic Vicar of the province in which they were situated, on the principle that the founding organization's established "rights" to leadership of the mission they founded were not abrogated by the new arrangement. The result was a system of administration that was impossibly complex and the arrival of a new generation of missionaries from Europe after the Napoleonic wars put the issue of administrative reform into sharp relief.

### **Lazaristes, successors to the Jesuit Mission**

The French Vincentians who arrived in Beijing in 1784 took possession of only *part* of the great Jesuit apostolate in China, namely the French Mission. The French Jesuit Mission had separated from the Jesuit Mission (mainly Portuguese) in 1685<sup>20</sup> and was supported by the French crown. Its centre of operations was the Church of the Holy Saviour, the BeiTang in Beijing and included a large number of mission districts scattered over a huge area of central and eastern China. The French Vincentians never had enough staff to administer this dispersed collection of mission districts. In 1820 the head of mission, Louis

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<sup>19</sup> Van DenBrant, Joseph *Les Lazaristes en Chine*, p. 35.

<sup>20</sup> *The Catholic Encyclopaedia*, Volume III, Online Edition, "The Church in China."

Francois Marie Lamiot, C.M. was expelled from Beijing and he moved to Macao. For the next 15 years the superior of the Beijing mission was a Chinese confrere, Mathew Xue, C.M. who, fearing persecution, in 1826 moved the mission headquarters from Beijing to Xiwangze in Mongolia. He in turn gave over the responsibility for the mission to Joseph Martial Mouly, C.M. in 1835. In 1829, Jean Baptist Torrette, C.M. arrived in Macao. He was the first Vincentian sent from France after the reestablishment of the Congregation in France and on Lamiot's death became the Procure and effective head of the mission.<sup>21</sup>

Portuguese Vincentians had, in 1784, established St. Joseph's Seminary in Macao at the former Jesuit college of the same name. It was natural, therefore, for their fellow countryman, Msgr. Gouvea, the bishop of Beijing, to invite them to take over the Portuguese Mission (Jesuit) in his diocese. Their base of operations in Beijing was St. Joseph's Church, the DongTang in Beijing. The two national missions were quite distinct, maintaining independent financial and formation programmes and the latter mission was, in 1835, only nominally under the authority of the newly reestablished Superior General.<sup>22</sup> However, Clet had worked in what was, strictly speaking, territory of the Portuguese Mission and later Perboyre did also. The contrast between the two was that the French Mission was entering a period of vigorous growth while that of the Portuguese was facing serious decline.

Perboyre was the hundredth Vincentian to work in China, the majority of his predecessors were Chinese, 25 were Portuguese, and 17 were French.<sup>23</sup> However, the Vincentian missions of the period are either styled French or Portuguese. Even Perboyre balked at being part of a "Chinese" mission.<sup>24</sup> This reluctance had more to do with wanting to establish a *having been sent from France* identity for the China Mission over the Portuguese, rather than a strong anti-Chinese sentiment. The localization of the Chinese Church was to be an issue of a later age; but in 1835 the question was different. The new missionary enthusiasm in Europe made reorganization of the Chinese mission territories urgent and possible. The question for Perboyre and his companions, though he never puts it quite so starkly, was which of the two groups of European Vincentians would define the new style mission in China, the established Portuguese or the reinvigorated French?

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<sup>21</sup> The "chain of command" in the mission is hard to reconstruct from Perboyre's letters, but it seems that Torrette had originally been Procure and Head of the French Mission; he was appointed Visitor of the French Mission in 1835. How this related to the Portuguese Mission is not clear.

<sup>22</sup> The newly arrived Perboyre was clearly anxious to restore the international authority of the Superior General; see *Correspondance*, 79, to Jean Baptiste Torrette, C.M., in Macao, p. 212.

<sup>23</sup> There was one Irish confrere Robert Hanna (1762-1797), who joined the community in France and arrived in Beijing with Lamiot in 1794.

<sup>24</sup> *Correspondance*, 96, to Jean Baptiste Torrette, C.M., in Macao, p. 283.

## The Mission to which Perboyre was attached<sup>25</sup>

The French Mission served 40,000 faithful<sup>26</sup> belonging to communities scattered over seven provinces: Mongolia, Zhili,<sup>27</sup> Shandong, Henan, Hubei, Jiangxi and Zhejiang. Although these districts were scattered through many provinces and vicariates, by virtue of their being part of the French Mission they were under the jurisdiction of the Beijing Diocese. Very correctly and with great sensitivity, Perboyre wrote a cordial letter of introduction to his Portuguese confrere João de Franca Castro e Moura C.M., who, though living in Shandong province was then the Vicar General of the vacant diocese of Beijing.<sup>28</sup> The head of the mission lived in Macao beside, but independent of, St. Joseph's Seminary. From his base there, he conducted a lively correspondence with his confreres throughout China and seemed to be able to give some real administrative and financial oversight to the mission, to judge from Perboyre's letters. He also directed a seminary, the continuation of the French Mission's seminary in Beijing that Lamiot transferred to Macao in 1820. He had three Vincentians confreres, two Chinese<sup>29</sup> one French<sup>30</sup> to assist him. Perboyre worked with a group of confreres responsible for districts in four provinces: Henan, Hubei, Jiangxi and Zhejiang. In one letter clearly designed to arouse missionary feeling at home, Perboyre describes the transformation wrought by the presence of his French confreres,<sup>31</sup> and, by default, gives the impression that little was being done prior to their arrival. This was not the case. Chinese confreres had been working in the districts throughout the period when French Missionaries were absent. However they were few, the area was vast and persecutions were severe. As a result, huge swaths of territory were, in effect, abandoned. The arrival of more priests from abroad and the appointment of the new superior allowed for a major restructuring of the mission (which amounted to a reestablishment), but it would have been impossible for the four foreigners to achieve anything of substance without the Chinese confreres and catechists who did most of the work.

## Personnel

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<sup>25</sup> Perboyre's letters are a poor source of information on the mission. He was not the superior, and his letters to Torrette or the Superior General are not the official reports. Thus, in his correspondence, he makes either general observations which are tantalisingly vague, or conversely, specific references which do not give an impression of the whole mission.

<sup>26</sup> Alphonse Hubrect C.M., *La Mission de Peking et les Lazaristes*, p. 258.

<sup>27</sup> Modern Hebei with Beijing and Tianjin.

<sup>28</sup> On his way to Henan, Perboyre wrote Castro a very warm letter of introduction. *Correspondance*, 72, to Jean Castro, C.M., in the Diocese of Pékin, p. 152.

<sup>29</sup> Joseph Li, C.M. (b 1803), sometimes called Chen, and Mathew Zhao, C.M. (b 1810), at that time a cleric. Both had lived in France for at least a year.

<sup>30</sup> François-Xavier Timothée Danicourt, C.M. (b 1806), who later brought the first Daughters of Charity to China in 1848.

<sup>31</sup> *Correspondance*, 77, to A. M. Candeze, Vicar General de Saint Flour, pp. 200-205.

The Vincentians in China in 1835 consisted of Chinese, Portuguese, and French Nationals. The nine French were all relatively young (average age 30) and were recent arrivals, the earliest, Torrette, (b 1801) having set foot in Macao only in 1829. The 11 Portuguese were, by and large, more senior (average age 50) and with a great deal of experience. One of Perboyre's Chinese teachers, Joachim Gonsalves, C.M., was a significant scholar and his Latin-Chinese dictionary went through many editions.<sup>32</sup> The largest group, the 18 Chinese (average age 40) might have been expected to provide leaders for the mission, but the level of training they received and the expectations of the foreign missionaries (and their European superiors) did not easily allow for such a possibility. The classic example of this failure of vision was the transfer of leadership of the French Mission in Mongolia from the experienced administrator, 54-year old Xue to the recently arrived, 28-year old, Mouly.

### **Perboyre's Mission**

*In the time of the Emperor Kanghi (sic) the Christians had churches in many towns; now they are in the hands of the pagans, and the Christians are dispersed in the rural areas, especially in Honan (Henan), where we count among town dwellers barely 20 people from Peking involved in trade and watch-making in the capital of the province. Which means that here, as in France, we have the joy of being the missionaries to the poor people of the countryside.*<sup>33</sup>

The French Mission's districts<sup>34</sup> in Henan, and later Hubei were Perboyre's field of mission. The superior of the mission was François Alexis Rameaux, C.M. and, with the arrival of Perboyre, he had at his disposal five co-workers to cater for Catholic communities scattered over an area about the size of France. These communities included not only those directly under the French Mission but also, in response to the appeals of Pires, those communities in Henan that were administered by Nanjing. The Bishop of Nanjing administered Henan but according to Perboyre himself, that province was not part of the Diocese of Nanjing,<sup>35</sup> its eastern neighbour. Hubei was part of the Vicariate of HuGuang, (modern day Hubei and Hunan) but in 1835 the Vicariate was vacant and was

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<sup>32</sup> This scholarship is all the more remarkable when one remembers that there was a strict ban on the teaching of Chinese to foreigners. This restriction was, in the same period, hampering the development of international trade in nearby Canton.

<sup>33</sup> *Correspondance*, 89, to Pierre Martin, C.M., in Paris, p. 250. Perboyre is here rather making a virtue of necessity, see note 16.

<sup>34</sup> An interesting task would be to publish a map of these mission districts. This author was not able to reconstruct the locations from the letters alone.

<sup>35</sup> *Correspondance*, 77, to A. M. Candeze, Vicar General de Saint Flour, pp. 200-205.

being administered by the Apostolic Vicar of Shanxi/Shaanxi.<sup>36</sup> Although Perboyre's letters are usually positive in tone, the need for reorganization was obvious. There was a will for change and, by January 1838, Perboyre was already imagining what would in fact become the shape of the Congregation's missions in southern China.<sup>37</sup>

Perboyre had, even if there had been no other issue involved, a difficult mission. The Church in Henan and later Hubei had been neglected since the suppression of the Jesuits and all that followed. The districts were widely separated and the missionary journeys he made were physically very demanding. The individual missions themselves,<sup>38</sup> while described in very uplifting terms in his letters, cannot have been easy, given the previous neglect. His own health was not good. On arrival at his base in Henan, he was ill for three months,<sup>39</sup> making the Paris doctor's reversal of his decision to allow Perboyre to go to China seem misplaced. Later he suffered from a hernia, which was no trivial matter, given his workload. His command of the language is a matter of dispute but, given the simple introduction he received in Macao and his age, his own humble assessments of his fluency must have been reasonably accurate. His description of his Chinese co-worker as the bearer of the main preaching load was probably born of necessity and not just Perboyre's modesty. From a note in the published *Correspondance*,<sup>40</sup> the defence of his linguistic abilities seems to have turned on the need to show that his silences during interrogation were the result of Christ-like forbearance not simple incomprehension. Such a defence is unnecessary, as the heroic quality of Perboyre's life and death does not turn on a rather forced comparison with the Passion of Christ.

What is lacking in Perboyre's letters is any real evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the methods they were using. Nor are there any references to any doubt as to his own sense of self-worth. Perhaps that is too contemporary a perspective to apply to the type of letters that survive or are even imaginable for the time. Also this age delights, and even draws some consolations, from knowing its heroes' feet of clay. Perboyre's negative thoughts on his own work or on himself are not found in his letters. A record of them would help us understand his struggle all the more easily. The absence of his more private reflections on his experience of mission mean that his inner dispositions must be reconstructed from his stated opinions on ancillary subjects and not direct statements of his own.

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<sup>36</sup> The detail may seem unnecessary to the western reader, but from 1837 onwards many of Perboyre's letters, especially those to the head of Mission, Torrette, are reflections on which division of territories could best serve the interests of the Congregation.

<sup>37</sup> *Correspondance*, 90, to Jean Baptiste Torrette, C.M., in Macao, p. 253.

<sup>38</sup> For a summary of the typical mission, see Robert Maloney, C.M., *Seasons in Spirituality*, p. 176.

<sup>39</sup> *Correspondance*, 89, to Pierre Martin, C.M., in Paris, p. 244.

<sup>40</sup> See Footnote 2, *ibid.*, 86, to l'Abbe Lacarière du clergé de Saint-Eustache de Paris, p. 234.

### Perboyre's Personal Companions<sup>41</sup>

*Rameaux, François-Alexis (b 1802) Superior of the Mission,*

*Baldus, Jean-Henri (b 1811)*

*Bai, John, C.M. (b 1774)*

*Wang, Andrew (b 1798)*

*Song, Paul, C.M. (b 1774)*

*From 1838*

*Ceng, Paul, C.M. (b 1813)*

*Yang, Andrew, C.M. (b 1803)*

*A list of Perboyre's companions in Henan and Hubei, reconstructed from his letters*

Perboyre's companions in the community were, once he left Macao exclusively Chinese or French. While in Macao learned Chinese with the accomplished Gonsalves, and even taught French in the Portuguese seminary. However once on the mission, his relationship with his Portuguese confreres, to judge from his letters, seem to have been professional rather than personal. His one surviving letter to a Portuguese confrere, Costa, displays respect and great tact, but not the warm quality one sees in his other letters. We have no letters written to Chinese confreres, if, indeed, there were ever any, making any real assessment of his relationship with them from his correspondence difficult. Perboyre's letters are full of references to these men and what is refreshing is the naturalness of the descriptions. We do not find a modern political correctness in his references to his confreres, but neither do we find any want of regard for his Chinese companions. His remarks show an honest assessment of their individual virtues and faults. In one example, his advice to Torrette concerning a confrere involved in unspecified scandals is both wise and respectful, without any tendency to make sweeping statements about the Chinese confreres in general.<sup>42</sup> In another instance he does remark on the unwillingness of the Chinese priests to seek out the lost sheep,<sup>43</sup> but his remarks lack the disdainful tone that would make the remark an embarrassment. From the start of his mission in Henan, he had, as companion, John Bai, C.M., who later transferred with him to Hubei. Bai (ordained in 1832) had been working in Hubei but some public scandal made a transfer necessary. Perboyre was given some responsibility over the rehabilitation of this penitent priest. The references to Bai, (who was only two years his junior) seem a little patronising to modern readers, but Perboyre had been the director of the Internal Seminary in Paris and, perhaps, saw himself in

<sup>41</sup> It would be interesting to produce a "Catalogus" style list of the confreres in China in 1835. Most of the lists divide people into their national groups, which tend to make it difficult to get a picture of the compositions of the local communities of the day.

<sup>42</sup> *Correspondance*, 78, to Jean Baptiste Torrette, C.M., in Macao, pp. 207-208.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 90, to Jean Baptiste Torrette, C.M., in Macao, p. 259.

something of a director/seminarist relationship with his charge.<sup>44</sup> Perboyre's letters suggest that he took advice from others (including his Chinese confrere Song) on how best to help the troubled priest, that the two of them were able to work well together, and that Bai did benefit from the relationship. Otherwise Perboyre seems to have had a very open relationship with his Chinese companions.<sup>45</sup> Rather surprisingly, given his attachment to Clet's memory, Perboyre does not draw attention to the fact that Paul Song, C.M. (b 1774) had been Clet's co-worker for many years. Later, in his imprisonment, he received a great deal of support from another Chinese confrere, Andrew Yang C.M., who had been trained in Macao and only joined the mission shortly before Perboyre's arrest.

His relationships with his French confreres were more complex, as might be expected. He was the most senior in vocation of the entire group and had been director of the internal seminary, traditionally a significant post. Shortly after arriving in Macao, he makes an unusually strong remark concerning a travelling companion from France in a letter to his sister Antoinette.<sup>46</sup> The robust language is untypical and may simply be the result of the months of enforced intimacy aboard ship. However the vigour of the remarks invites reflection as to the identity of the unnamed priest. Two Vincentians travelled with him from France, Joseph Gabet (b 1808) and Joseph Perry, (b 1808) both of whom ultimately left the Congregation. Unfortunately, as he never actually says that the objectionable companion was a Vincentian and there were other priests on board, it is impossible to comment further. His other remarks about his companions are warm and display a genuine regard for, and an attractive humility before, his (mostly) younger fellow countrymen. Rameaux, who was the same age but somewhat his junior in vocation and experience of the priesthood, wished to defer to him as the superior but Perboyre firmly sets aside the possibility<sup>47</sup> and seems genuinely to have been happy not to have the responsibility. The letters give little impression of his companion Baldus and it is with the letters to Torrette that we see signs of a more frank relationship. They were about the same age and were ordained around the same time, although Perboyre was his senior in vocation. Apart from the communications regarding spending, there is a series of letters in which Perboyre reflects on permutations and combinations of new territories that might be given to the community. Torrette clearly has a different view on the matter and there are signs of tension between them. In one instance

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<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 80, to Jean Baptiste Nozo, Superior General, in Paris, p. 218.

<sup>45</sup> Perboyre's letters are, generally speaking, a poor source of information regarding his attitudes. He was often writing to men who did not know the Chinese confreres personally and therefore he does not give intimate news of their doings.

<sup>46</sup> *I have in this country a particular enemy, concerning whom I must be careful; he is the worst individual I know; he is not Chinese, he is a European. He was baptised in his infancy and later he was ordained a priest. From France, he has come to China with us on the same ship. I don't doubt that he follows me everywhere, and he will certainly cause my ruin if I fall into his hands. Correspondance*, 69, to his sister Antoinette, in Paris, p. 144.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 80-To Jean Baptiste Nozo, Superior General, a Paris, Page 218

Perboyre was irritated when Torrette forwarded some of Perboyre's more general letters to Paris for publication in the *Annales de la propagation de la foi* without permission.<sup>48</sup> In another instance he wrote, rather tactlessly it must be said, about a previous procurator who was considered by his contemporaries as useless because he had never been to China.<sup>49</sup> Since the procurator, Torrette, had gotten no further than Canton, the remark was bound to cause offence. It was unlike Perboyre to write in this way and in a later letter, a contrite Perboyre writes to thank Torrette for having corrected his fault. The last letter of Perboyre to his Visitor, happily, was in a more cordial vein, as Perboyre was arrested not long afterwards and, by coincidence, Torrette died the day after Perboyre, though the former died of natural causes.

## Conclusion

*The life of the missionaries in China is always apostolic; it is spent amid fatigues and dangers; for three quarters of the year they traverse vast areas to direct the communities, preaching, administering the sacraments etc., living frugally in a country where the rich, as usual, live well but where the poor don't always have a bit of rice with which to feed themselves.*<sup>50</sup>

Perboyre's five years in China belong to a period of transition in the Church's mission there. That transition ultimately went in a very different direction soon after his death. He arrived from a Church of martyrs with rather a romantic desire to be a martyr himself. He wished to imitate Clet and to give his life for the exotic mission that his brother had died trying to reach. The reality he found on arrival in China was much more complex than he imagined. Hostile Portuguese authorities in Macao, districts in Fujian which seemed more thoroughly "Catholic" than the Europe he had left, and communities in Henan which had simply collapsed through neglect rather than been fortified by the blood of the martyrs. He found national rivalries among his European companions and an administrative structure that was incapable of coping with the evangelical possibilities presented by the new influx of French Missionaries. He also found human weakness among his co-workers, both French and Chinese. He found a China as sophisticated as the France he had left and yet with extraordinary disparities between rich and poor. He suffered from his own physical infirmities and a workload that involved travelling long distances to minister to small communities. A different person might have become disillusioned with the disparity between his Paris-conceived vision of mission in mysterious China and the less than romantic reality that was his apostolate in

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 96, to Jean Baptiste Torrette, C.M., in Macao, p. 282.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 87, to Jean Baptiste Torrette, C.M., in Macao, p. 242.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 86 to A. M. l'Abbe Lacarière du clergé de Saint-Eustache de Paris, p. 235.

Henan and Hubei from 1835-1836. That he was “ennobled” rather than embittered by his experiences, suggests that he was indeed “a special sort” deserving of our attention and, dare one say it, imitation.

The person who emerges from the letters is not a plaster saint or one whose experience is of relevance only to China. His story has more universal application. He is, in a sense, every Vincentian, and with that realization comes the hope that we can all aspire to his kind of holiness honed in the mystery of daily life. This is not a particularly novel idea perhaps, but original and inspirational in every particular example of its successful application. The Perboyre one finds in the letters is a man applying that simple principle in the difficult circumstances of China circa 1835 and who, in so doing, became a model for us all. Through his experiences he became the man we know today as St. John Gabriel Perboyre, C.M.

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## The Martyrdom of St. John Gabriel Perboyre

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### **The harvest gathered in**

On 15 September 1839, the feast of the Birth of Mary, all the clergy gathered after Mass for a friendly meal. John Gabriel was there, along with Fr. Jean-Henri Baldus, and Fr. Rizzolati, a Franciscan sent as pro-vicar to visit the Christian communities of Ho-nan (Hunan). Their happiness was short-lived. A platoon sent by the mandarins to arrest the missionaries, as ordered by the viceroy, arrived quickly. Rizzolati and Baldus fled, while John Gabriel lost some time by closing the door of the church. Then he too left to hide in the nearby woods, and the Catholic people fled in panic. Silence descended on the mission. When the soldiers arrived, they went wild and stole everything they could find. Religious objects were taken as evidence. Some laity were seized and mistreated, and a few were killed. The others were led away to prison once the mission was set afire.

John Gabriel found safety in the home of a catechist, but he thought that it was too risky. The two then hid in a cousin's home. John Gabriel shaved off his beard to look a little less European. The next day, a catechist was arrested, named Kouan-Lao-San (Guan Lao-san). Amid blows and threats, he was forced to lead the soldiers to the hiding place of the fugitives. John Gabriel had fled the house, but in vain, and he was stopped at the base of a cliff. His fellow fugitive who tried to help was arrested in turn. The woods then resounded with the happy but cruel and sordid shouts of the soldiers, and these naturally terrified the other faithful within earshot.

John Gabriel, loaded down with chains, was forced to run, although he was exhausted.

The next day, some of the faithful who had managed to escape the soldiers notified Fr. Baldus, who had not been arrested. John Gabriel appeared before a first mandarin, the one from Kou-Tcheng (Gucheng), who was in the village of Kouanintang (Kuan Yin Tang), where the missionary had spent his first night as a prisoner. The priest, when brought before the mandarin, acknowledged his Chinese name, Toung-Wen-Siao (Dong Wen Xue), and the character of his mission. The mandarin then informed him of the basis for his indictment: that Europeans were forbidden to enter the Empire to spread their religion, regarded as a sect.

The following day, the prisoners were then brought to the sub-prefecture of Kou-Tcheng-Hsien (Gucheng), a journey of more than 12 hours of forced march.

On 19 September, John Gabriel appeared before two courts, one military and the other civil, since he was both a prisoner of the soldiers and of the mandarins. He was ordered, unsuccessfully, to deny his faith. He was then pronounced guilty, and clothed with a long red robe, red being the color of guilt. He was chained hand and foot, and a thick chain put around his neck; further, he was forbidden to cut his hair or his beard.

The viceroy, informed of his capture, proclaimed the standard penalty: death for any European arrested in the Empire; death for any Chinese or European preacher of this “impious sect,” as Christianity was called, and exile for any Christian, even if it applied to an entire village. This is why he called for John Gabriel’s transfer for judgment to the prefecture of Siang-Yang-Fou (Xiangyang), since this was a major crime; it was a walk of two-days distance.

When they arrived, the prisoners were thrown into a notorious prison, with their feet locked into a wooden plank. John Gabriel would remain imprisoned there for a month, during which he appeared four times before various courts.

### **The millstone of martyrdom**

His first appearance took place before the city court. John Gabriel declared there: “Our religion should be taught to all the nations and spread even among the Chinese.” Later: “My only concern is for my soul, not for my body. I do not fear at all the punishments that you threaten me with.”

The next day, John Gabriel appeared before a higher court. The aggressive mandarin ordered the missionary to trample on the crucifix. Of course, he refused. Then he ordered that the legs of the poor prisoner be exposed, and he was forced to kneel on chains laid on the ground, not standing up for four long hours.

Two weeks later, John Gabriel was summoned before the Supreme Financial Court. The judge asked him if he knew other European priests. “I came here alone,” he retorted. The mandarin, having caught wind of the presence of foreigners, accused John Gabriel of lying. He was pulled by the hair and made to kneel on chains once again. The judge accused Christian women and priests of immorality. John Gabriel energetically denied it. Then he was presented with items used for worship, and was told that, by using these things, priests made the Chinese worship them. To this, John Gabriel responded: “I have no other purpose

than to offer to God, along with his people, the worship that is his due.” Then he declared: “You can rest assured that I will never renounce my faith.”

A last confrontation between John Gabriel and this mandarin took place at Sang-Yang-Fou (Xiangyang). There, he was hung by his thumbs, which had been tied together, as well as by his hair from a beam erected above his head. This punishment turned the prisoner into a helpless toy for the soldiers. The mandarin then declared to the other prisoners: “The hell and the heaven that he preaches to you do not exist.... Look at his lovely body. Can you still believe in his tricky speeches? ... Is there a heaven for him? Is there not rather a hell for you, kneeling down and mistreated as you are? ... Heaven is being seated on a throne like I am ... Hell? That is being on earth and suffering as you are.” Then he ordered John Gabriel to be whipped. Blood flowed from his mouth under the violent blows. He then ordered all the Christian prisoners to be tortured to make them renounce their Christian faith, and some of them succumbed. John Gabriel remained hanging from the beam until nightfall. He would later say: “What I suffered at Siang-Yang-Fou (Xiangyang) was directly because of religion.”

At the end of November 1839, these poor Christian prisoners were brought to the provincial capital, Ou-Tchang-Fou (Wuchang).

### **The chaff and the good grain**

Having decided to uproot the Christian religion from the Empire, the viceroy ordered a general persecution with exile for Chinese converts and with the death penalty for foreigners. When the faithful warned them, the priests were able to flee. But John Gabriel and the others who had been arrested the viceroy sent by boat to Ou-Tchang-Fou (Wuchang), as had been already decided. The prisoners were huddled together, except for the French missionary on another boat, and they all kept their heavy chains. John Gabriel stood among the soldiers, his eyes lowered but his face peaceful and smiling, as if lost in deep meditation. The cortege arrived in the provincial capital at the beginning of December. The prisoners were disembarked without much care, and were at first kept in an inn. They were held tied together with an iron bar and their chains kept them from making much movement. Together again, they listened to John Gabriel as he strengthened their faith. One of those who had denied his faith under torture received the priest’s blessing.

Following a first appearance before a mandarin, just the time needed to register the names of the “guilty,” John Gabriel was brought to the prison of the Supreme Criminal Court, reserved for major criminals. He was thrown in among the filth. Bugs and even scorpions were running around the stinking ground. The prisoners held there were bound by chains in such a way that they could not move without making their neighbor suffer. Infections were therefore quite

common, and John Gabriel could only watch while one of his toes putrefied and finally fell off.

The arrest of the young priest was no longer unknown to the Congregation of the Mission. Fr. Rameaux wrote to Fr. Etienne, the Superior General: “You have doubtless already the first details of the persecution ravaging Houpé (Hubei) and which has put Fr. Perboyre into irons. I have not yet had the happiness of finding myself exposed to the same fate. At the time, I was in our missions in Ho-Nan (Hunan). Fr. Perboyre was supposed to have gone there, but out of compassion for his poor legs, I took his place in this campaign. The service that I wanted to render him will certainly amount to martyrdom.” Fr. Rameaux was named bishop in Kiang-Si (Jiangxi) and Tchékiang (Zhejiang) while John Gabriel was moving toward his martyrdom. During his imprisonment at Ou-Tchan-Fou (Wuchang), he was summoned before the courts on four occasions.

The first was the Supreme Court of Justice, the Ganzafou (Xianfu). John Gabriel there professed that he was in China to “make God known, and not to make a fortune or to look for human honors.” The mandarin retorted: “But have you seen this God whom you worship?” “Our holy books,” John Gabriel assured him, “reveal the truth more than our eyes do.” A missal was brought in and the mandarin concluded: “Your word is worthless, and you would deserve our pity were you not imbued with this false teaching, and had you not deceived our Chinese people with it.” Then he made the missionary kneel down and forced him to hold a heavy piece of wood in his raised hands, beating him when he lowered his arms.

A few days later, he made a second appearance in company with other Christian prisoners. Fr. Yang, a Chinese Vincentian, later wrote about them: “Among the Christian prisoners, the majority denied their religion ... there were more than 60, of whom only ten kept professing their faith in Jesus Christ.” Some refused, but others gave in through fear. John Gabriel said nothing. He was sent back to his cell for a month.

At the beginning of January 1840, John Gabriel was summoned a third time. Here, before the mandarin of the Criminal Court, who had received the viceroy’s order to inform the condemned that he had entered China illegally to spread a foreign religion that he should have rejected, and was being accused of misconduct. In this way, Christianity would be discredited. And so the mandarin questioned John Gabriel, but he did not answer. The poor man, on his knees, then received 15 blows with a leather strap. The mandarin then tried to find out if any drug had been administered to the Christians to keep them from denying their faith. “None at all,” responded the priest, who then received ten more lashes for his trouble. He was then shown the holy oils. “Tell me, is this not a drug?” “It is

not,” countered the prisoner, who then was suddenly knocked to the ground to receive 20 vicious blows with a bamboo cane on his bare thighs. Then they showed John Gabriel a crucifix and ordered him to trample on it. In a quick motion, the priest broke free of his jailers, and despite his heavy chains, knelt before the crucifix laid on the ground. He then took the cross, brought it to his swollen lips and lovingly kissed it. In punishment, John Gabriel was then suspended by his thumbs from a column, while the soldiers made such obscene gestures with the crucifix that the missionary cried out. They also beat him about the head. Then the mandarin accused John Gabriel of gouging out the eyes of the dying. When he vainly denied this, he received 30 lashes on his legs. Half unconscious, the soldiers held open his eyelids for him to look at the mandarin asking: “Now, do you confess?” His refusal brought ten more lashes. The mandarin then accused him of misconduct with nuns. For keeping silence, John Gabriel suffered another 15 lashes.

The onlookers were amazed at the resistance of their prisoner. When the mandarin came close, he saw that John Gabriel was wearing a truss to protect him from a hernia. “So, there is the source of his magical art,” he exclaimed. The priest was then treated as a magician. For this reason, they made him drink dog’s blood and they sprinkled water on his head to remove the evil. The unfortunate prisoner could no longer resist and allowed himself to be branded with a red-hot iron burning into his legs the mandarin’s seal.

Shortly after, John Gabriel received a visit from his catechist Fong, who reported this confidence: “My physical sufferings are not much, but the terrible insult which the mandarin gave to the crucifix is what caused me unbearable pain.”

Once again, John Gabriel appeared before this terrifying court. In view of his refusal to acknowledge the crimes he was accused of, he received ten blows with a stout rattan cane. The mandarin then wanted to be convinced of the immoral conduct of the priests. Various tests performed by specialists proved his chastity without doubt. Nevertheless, the mandarin tied John Gabriel’s hair to a rope, which he pulled with a pulley. The refinement of his cruelty consisted in raising his body and then letting it fall violently to the ground. John Gabriel, covered in blood, then lost consciousness. “How are you feeling now?” the mandarin sneered. His only answer was dead silence. He then left the courtroom and had the soldiers return the prisoner to his cell in a rattan basket.

Some days later, Fr. Perboyre was once again in the presence of his horrible questioner. He began to ask about priestly vestments. “What are these things for? “They are mine, and I use them on festivals for the sacrifices in honor of the true God.” “This is a joke,” the mandarin retorted, “a way to have the Christians worship you.” Seeing the richness of the embroidery, he continued:

“So, this is the way that you want to take over China.” John Gabriel denied it, but he knew that the mandarin was right to make a mistake, confusing Christians with the White Lotus sect, which was seeking to overthrow the Emperor. Then he forced the priest to put on his priestly vestments, and this amazed some of the onlookers, who cried: “This is the living god Fo!” They thought they were seeing in John Gabriel, in his vestments, a new incarnation of the Buddha. Two Christian prisoners then rushed toward him and, kneeling, asked absolution. The tribunal let him go ahead. Later, Fr. Rizzolati would say of this strange scene: “How beautiful it is to see this priest, a witness to Christ amid tortures, administering the divine sacraments ... Having knelt on chains and been judged by men, he was now freeing souls from their spiritual chains, and exercising the power of the Sovereign Judge.”

When the mandarin could do no more, he closed the trial. The viceroy, who had a certain bias against Europeans and their religion, personally took the matter in hand.

### **The bleeding grain**

Tchow-Thien-Tsio did not like Christians. As viceroy of the emperor Tao Kouang (Dao Guang), and despite some tolerance toward the religion of John Gabriel, he was now using all his effort to eradicate it. That is why he had organized the persecution of foreign priests and the deportation of their Chinese converts. People said he took pleasure in inventing instruments of torture, as for example a chair studded with sharp nails on which he made the accused sit.

Before this cruel man whom he would meet two dozen times in two months, John Gabriel was obliged to kneel down. The first interview began with a question about a painting of Mary. “Is this not painted with eyes gouged out from Chinese?” For each answer that displeased the viceroy, the priest was attached to a post and beaten with bamboo poles. Then this mandarin, in his turn, wanted him to trample on the crucifix. “How could I insult my God, my Creator, and my Savior?” the prisoner replied. “Kill me, since I do not wish, and never will, to lower myself to such an act.” John Gabriel was then thrown to his knees on chains and pieces of broken pottery. To make the punishment worse, a heavy board was laid across his calves. Then they carved into his forehead with an iron point the characters “Kiao-Fei” (Jiao fei), meaning “abominable sect.”

His other appearances were similarly cynical and cruel. Sometimes they hung the prisoner up with a rope and then let him fall. Other times, they would have him sit on a raised stool, with his feet weighed down with heavy stones. The viceroy then finished with John Gabriel: “It is worthless for you to want to die quickly. I will make you endure the most atrocious sufferings for a long time. Every single day you can expect to undergo new punishments, and you will

never taste this death that you so desire until you have exhausted all the worst tortures.” Then he stepped down from his place and set to whipping the prisoner himself.

He was half dead when brought back to prison, one enormous gaping, bleeding wound. Even the jailers were moved at seeing so much suffering, and they sought to comfort the poor man. He remained unconscious for three days. At last, the time for the verdict arrived, and John Gabriel and other prisoners were once again brought before the viceroy. In a firm tone of voice, he declared: “You, Toung-Wen-Siao (Dong Wuen Xue), are to be strangled. You others who have never stopped resisting the orders of your superiors and have not wished to renounce your faith, you are going to be exiled. Nevertheless, I am going to attempt once again to save you. Renounce your faith and you will immediately be freed. If not, you will receive your just punishment. John Gabriel then exclaimed: “I would rather die than renounce my faith!” The others followed his example. As a result, each of the prisoners was shown the document with their verdicts. “Sign your own death warrant by marking a cross on this sheet with your own hand.”

On 15 July 1840, the file reached the imperial authority, which alone had the power to make the punishment effective. On 27 August, the sentence signed by the emperor was made public. “The European Toung-Wen-Siao (Dong Wen Xue), branded with the sign of infamy, must suffer strangulation for having entered China and, as head of religious brotherhoods, has preached the doctrine of the “Lord of Heaven,” thereby seducing and deceiving a great many. The sentence will be executed immediately, without the least delay. The ten other guilty parties, among them the virgin Anna Kao, will be sent into slavery. The 34 others who renounced their error will be exempt from punishment, provided they offer proof.” The document reached the hands of the viceroy on 11 September 1840.

In his prison, while awaiting his inevitable punishment, John Gabriel spent his time in meditation. He received the visit of his confrere, Fr. Yang, who brought him a bit of bread, some wine, some clothing and blankets. The catechist Fong was also allowed to see him. John Gabriel who had recovered a little from his wounds wanted to do penance and did not wish to be favored above the other prisoners. Nonetheless, he had the occasion to write one last letter, in which he described his various interrogations, and lamented the apostasy of certain Christians. He also said to another catechist who had come to see him, Ou-Kiang-Te, (Wu Jiang-de) these few words: “When you return, give my regards to all the Christians of Tchayuenkow (Cha Yuan Gou). Tell them not to fear this persecution. May they have confidence in God. I will never see them again; nor will they see me again since I will certainly be condemned to death. But I am happy to die for Christ.”

## **The hour of the harvest**

That same 11 September 1840, the viceroy accomplished his goal. The French priest would be executed, as the emperor had decided. A messenger was sent to the prison to bring out of their foul cells the five condemned to beheading, and Fr. John Gabriel Perboyre, condemned to strangulation.

Each prisoner was clothed with the red robe of the condemned. Their hands were tied behind their backs. On each was placed a notice giving the reason for their condemnation. John Gabriel's read "Kiao-Fei" (Jiao fei). The prisoners then had to run toward the place of their final punishment, their heads down. A crowd of onlookers joined them.

The group arrived outside the city of Ou-Tchang-Fou (Wuchang). The "Golgotha" of John Gabriel is called "Tcha-Hou," (Shan Hong) "Red Mountain." Four mandarins were already there. Without waiting, they ordered the beheading of the five first prisoners. During this time, John Gabriel knelt down to utter one last prayer to the God of Love. The hour was coming; it was already there. The brutal guards stripped him of his red garment leaving him only some shorts. His hands were tied behind his back while his arms were fixed to the short crosspiece of the gallows that had already been prepared. The sufferer's legs were bent backwards and tied together. John Gabriel was nearly on his knees on the cross. Hoisted scarcely a few centimeters above the ground, he was now ready to be sacrificed.

It was about noon when the executioner arrived. He stood behind the cross, passed a cord around the neck of the condemned man, and he fixed it to the wood. Three times he twisted it using a short bamboo stick, closing off his throat. Then he relaxed the pressure to allow him to breath. A second time he did the same thing. The third time he nervously held the cord until death arrived. John Gabriel gave up his spirit to God. To make sure he was dead, a guard gave him a violent kick in the stomach. The onlookers present noted that the face of the priest remained peaceful despite his suffering and death.

## **Seed for eternity**

The next year his punishment was remembered and certain ones recounted what has come down to us today. "When he was martyred, a large luminous cross, well drawn, appeared in the sky. A great number of the faithful saw it ... and many pagans also witnessed this prodigy ... (some) even embracing Christianity. Bishop Rizzolati baptized them ... In addition, the bishop questioned the Christians who had known Fr. Perboyre, and they all declared that

they had always held him as a great saint.” Some others saw this same cross shining down on the cemetery where John Gabriel had been laid.

After the final punishment, the Christians were able to secure the body of him whom they were already calling a “martyr for the faith.” They washed his body and clothed it with new garments. As custom demanded, they placed a fine veil over the face of the departed, and then they celebrated his funeral.

Early in the morning, André Fong and four Christian companions bore the coffin to the cemetery on Red Mountain. They laid John Gabriel not far from Francis Regis Clet, another martyr of the Congregation of the Mission, whom the young priest from Quercy had venerated. They buried his body with the usual rites, a sprinkling with holy water and a simple prayer, so as not to arouse suspicions.

It was not long before the Christian community began to honor the memory of its new martyr. This honor continues today. God completed it by the canonization of Blessed John Gabriel Perboyre.

Taken from *Une semence d'éternité*, by Jean-Yves Ducourneau  
Mediaspaul, 1996.

(JOHN RYBOLT, C.M., translator)

# Jesus Christ in the Life of John Gabriel Perboyre<sup>1</sup>

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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*

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<sup>1</sup> 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 Sylvestre<sup>2</sup> 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.

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<sup>2</sup> 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)

## Western Missionaries in China

*by Bernadette Li  
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During the Age of Discovery, Europe was driven by ambition for empire as well as the evangelical zeal to convert the non-Western world to Christianity. In that prevailing spirit, Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) went to China and had an impact on both Western and Chinese history. Though not the first, he certainly was the most important and most admired Western missionary in China. No discussion of missionary activities in China would be complete without a description of Ricci.

Born in Macerata, in central Italy, Ricci joined the Society of Jesus at the age of 19. Later, he studied mathematics, astronomy, geography, and other sciences at the Roman College. In 1582, sent by the Jesuit Society, Ricci went to China. He first arrived in Macao, and then proceeded to Zhaoqing and Shaozhou (now Shaoguan). Unable to enter Beijing, he settled in Nanjing. In 1601, he was given permission to stay in Beijing.

Ricci's success rested upon a number of factors. First, he was genuinely interested in Chinese civilization, and he pleased the Chinese authorities and scholars by saying constantly that he had come to China in order to study the teachings of the wise men of China and to share the blessings of Chinese civilization. He dressed himself in Chinese scholars' attire, enjoyed being with Chinese friends, and even proclaimed that he wanted to become Chinese. According to him, Confucian teachings were compatible with Christianity, although he opposed Buddhism and Taoism. He upheld that Chinese ancestor worship and many other rites were not incompatible with Christianity, a conception which many other missionaries were unwilling to accept.

Ricci fascinated the Chinese with his production of a "Great Map of Ten Thousand Countries," which showed China as the center of the world. He also brought the first globe, and determined the longitudes and latitudes of some of China's eastern cities, thus initiating a new stage in China's cartography.

A prolific writer, Ricci wrote several books in classical Chinese, with the assistance of some of his Chinese friends, for the purpose of spreading his knowledge and ideas; and his books found a wide circulation among the Chinese literati. Consequently, before the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Ricci was better known in China than in Europe.

In his prolific letters, reports, and journals to his superiors and colleagues in Europe, Ricci described in glowing terms Chinese intellectual accomplishments. While Marco Polo was the pioneer in relating China's material splendors to Europeans, Ricci was his counterpart in the intellectual realm and hence he has been regarded by many as the originator of Western Sinology.

The Jesuit mission continued after Ricci's death. Their knowledge of mathematics, astronomy, especially the manufacture of cannons, made them indispensable to the declining Ming court, which was threatened by the invading Manchus from the north.

After the establishment of the Qing dynasty by the Manchus in 1644, the Catholic mission became even more influential, with direct access to two emperors, Shunzhi (1644-1661) and Kangxi (1662-1722), achieving what Matteo Ricci had striven for but failed to obtain, that is, a direct personal link with the Emperor. In 1645, the Jesuit Johann Adam Schall von Bell, known in Chinese as Tang Ruowang, became the Director of the Bureau of Astronomy, which was an office of the fifth grade, placing the man of God in the middle echelons of the nine-grade Chinese imperial bureaucracy.

Encouraged by his Jesuit superiors, Schall accepted the appointment as a means to convert the Chinese people to the Catholic faith, although the Chinese government's perception of him was as a useful technician in the fixing of the calendar and the manufacture of cannons. As long as Schall enjoyed the favor and respect of the Emperor, the Catholic mission continued. The Kangxi Emperor, who had extensive scientific interests, not only appointed the Belgian Jesuit Ferdinand Verbist as Schall's successor as the Director of the Bureau of Astronomy, but also held frequent discussions with other learned Jesuit Fathers. Some of the Fathers were entrusted with important tasks, for example, as interpreters and advisers on diplomatic occasions. Thus, under the Kangxi Emperor, the Catholic mission flourished.

The Jesuits were followed by Franciscan, Augustinian and Dominican missionaries, and also by secular priests of the Société des Missions Etrangères de Paris, founded in 1658. More than 100 foreign missionaries were active and located in every province of China. In 1663, Beijing alone had about 13,000 Catholics. At the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, there were over 200,000 converts, about 0.1% of the total population. The Catholic population was increasingly drawn from the lower classes.

Ricci and other Jesuit missionaries achieved their successes partly due to their strategy of being discreet and adaptable to the circumstances of China. They showed respect for veneration of the Emperor as the Son of Heaven, ancestor worship, and other Confucian rites. Other missionary societies, out of jealousy,

used this tolerance against the Jesuits, and their cumulative accusations eventually caused the dissolution of the Jesuit order in China; the Papal Bull *Ex illa die* of 1715 forbade the toleration and insisted on the practice of Catholicism in China in its European tradition. This meant that Chinese Catholics were forbidden to practice ancestor worship; even the broad-minded Kangxi Emperor could not allow this. Consequently, Christian teaching was banned in China. In 1773, with the dissolution of the Society of Jesus, Catholicism in China lost its leadership and China also lost its bridge to Western learning. In the following decades, while the West was making great progress in science, technology, and democracy, China relapsed into complacency, decay, and degeneration, making room for imperialist penetration and invasion in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century.

### **China's Defeats in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century**

The Qing government's policies to ban foreign missionaries continued until 1844. Before then, a few missionaries had attempted to enter China secretly; when they were discovered and caught, they were either executed or expelled. After China's defeat by the British in the Opium War, through the opening of the five ports provided by the Nanking Treaty, foreigners could enter the entire Eastern coast of China. By the Treaty of Wangsia in 1844, Americans gained the right to build and maintain churches in the five ports. By the Treaty of Whampoa of the same year, the French gained free propagation of Catholicism. The Treaty stipulated that if any Chinese damaged any French church or cemetery, he should be punished by the local Chinese government. In 1846, the Emperor Daoguang issued a decree, which not only lifted the ban on the propagation of Catholicism but also returned the Catholic Church's properties, which had been confiscated previously. This was a very important change in China's policy toward missionaries. By this, the propagation of Christianity, which had been officially banned for 120 years, became legal and open. However, at that time, missionaries' activities were restricted to the five ports, and they were not permitted to go to interior China.

In 1858, again defeated, China was forced to sign the Treaty of Tientsin with Russia, America, England, and France, permitting missionaries of these four countries to conduct religious propagation in the interior of China. In 1860, China had to sign the Treaty of Peking with England, France, and Russia, adding the new concession that foreign missionaries could purchase land and build anything at their liberty in all provinces of China. Through these treaties, foreign missionaries were authorized to propagate faith anywhere in China, and moreover they were not subject to Chinese jurisdiction but under extraterritoriality. Foreign missionaries did not realize these conditions would cause anti-Christian sentiments among the Chinese people. Almost every treaty clause involving missionaries attracted numerous complicated problems and disputes. Between 1860 and 1899, there were more than 200 documented cases

of missionary disputes. These disputes were not so much caused by doctrinal differences, such as whether Christianity was compatible with Confucianism, but rather concerned property ownership. For example, Church properties confiscated earlier had mostly been transformed for other purposes, and it was very difficult, if not impossible, to return them to the Catholic Church in their original form.

Secondly, in disputes between Chinese converts and local people, foreign missionaries frequently became involved and forced the local government to pass verdicts in favor of Chinese converts, and in some cases even unfairly accused their opponents. With strong governments and superior military forces in their home countries, some missionaries displayed airs of superiority and even arrogance in their attitudes and behavior. Some unruly Chinese elements took advantage of the situation by affiliating themselves with the missionaries and Christianity for their material benefits. Consequently, many Chinese officials and ordinary people feared and were angry at missionaries. At the same time, due to misunderstandings and superstitions, some charitable works conducted by missionaries were misinterpreted by the Chinese. Unfortunately, missionaries were identified in some cases with the imperialists and Chinese Christians were regarded as extensions of foreign powers.

In sum, in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, “religious cases” (*jiaoan*) cannot be understood as religious issues per se; rather, they were intricately related and interwoven with China’s foreign relations, political decline, economic deterioration, and social unrest. To Matteo Ricci and Adam Schall, and to the world before the 19<sup>th</sup> century, China was a giant empire with a refined civilization; whereas after the Opium War, China was a battered country and everything it had was subject to question and derogation.

When humiliated and confronted with a bleak reality, people tended to be irritable and irrational, so were many Chinese in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. China then was a volcano, any catalyst could cause a disastrous outburst.

## Histoire de la cause de béatification et de canonisation de Saint Jean-Gabriel Perboyre

*par Giuseppe Guerra, C.M.  
Visiteur de Naples*

Quand nous parlons des Causes de béatification et de canonisation des saints de la Congrégation de la Mission et aussi des Filles de la Charité, c'est désormais un *leitmotiv* de rappeler que dans le passé les Vincentiens ont toujours évité de mettre en route des Causes pour obtenir la canonisation de leurs membres ; ceci en raison d'une conception de l'humilité qui a permis seulement une exception pour le Fondateur, saint Vincent de Paul, béatifié en 1729 et canonisé en 1737.

Le P. Chierotti, dans le *Summarium historicum* (1974) de la *Positio* sur le Serviteur de Dieu le P. Marcantonio Durando, a exposé la raison pour laquelle, dans la Congrégation, on n'a jamais voulu commencer aucun Procès de béatification (p. XIV ss). A la 18<sup>ème</sup> Assemblée générale de 1835 « *unanimes voce reiecta est propositio* (l'éventuelle présentation de la cause de béatification du P. Francesco Folchi, de la province de Rome)... *quia humilitati instituti nostri minus consentanea videtur...* » (session 8).

Ce fut justement la Cause de Perboyre, commencée en même temps que celle de Clet, en 1842, qui mit fin à cette mentalité et qui inaugura une autre façon de penser à laquelle se réfère le P. Verdier, Supérieur général, dans sa circulaire du 1<sup>er</sup> janvier 1931 : *Avec le temps, les points de vue se modifient et aujourd'hui, tout en regardant l'humilité comme une des vertus les plus nécessaires à notre Congrégation, nous ne croyons pas y manquer en poursuivant, en cour de Rome, les causes de plusieurs des nôtres.*

Deux années à peine s'étaient passées après la mort de Perboyre : sa renommée se répandit rapidement. Le 11 septembre 1842, en Erythrée, S. Justin de Jacobis (*Diario* II, 125) rappelait déjà avec grande dévotion le deuxième anniversaire de la mort glorieuse de son confrère. Le Cardinal Fransoni, Préfet de la Congrégation pour la Propagation de la Foi, qui avait envoyé Justin en Afrique, conseilla au Procureur Vito Guarini d'ouvrir la Cause de Clet et de Perboyre<sup>1</sup>.

La cause de Perboyre fut unie à celle d'un groupe de martyrs de 1798-1840 par un décret du Pape Grégoire XVI, le 9 juillet 1843. Perboyre parut dans

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<sup>1</sup> P. R. D'Amico, *Histoire de la cause de canonisation de François-Régis Clet*, in *Vincentiana* 45 (2001) p. 55.

un premier *Summarium* en 1842 à la dernière place d'un groupe de 41, de même que Clet parut dans un deuxième *Summarium* à la treizième place d'un autre groupe de 14.

Au numéro XXXVI des Relations du premier groupe, est rapportée la Relation de l'Evêque Joseph Rizzolati OFM, Vicaire apostolique des provinces Hu-quang (28 octobre 1840), sur le martyr de Perboyre. Et au numéro XLIV la guérison miraculeuse d'une Fille de la Charité Antoine Vincent à Constantinople en 1842.

Ces relations et d'autres documents – avec la dispense du Pape du 10 avril 1842 – remplacent le véritable Procès Ordinaire, celui qui généralement est fait dans le diocèse. C'est l'une des facilités concédées, compte tenu des difficultés particulières qui empêchaient de suivre *ad litteram* la procédure prévue pour les Causes de béatification. Comme on le sait, depuis le Bref d'Urbain VIII du 5 juillet 1634 (*Caelestis Hierusalem Cives*) jusqu'à la réforme opérée par la Constitution *Divinus Perfectionis Magister* du Pape Jean Paul II (25 janvier 1983), le parcours des Causes est hérissé de difficultés et de procédures très compliquées (on a calculé une centaine d'étapes à franchir). Malgré les facilités mentionnées, donc, la Cause de Perboyre depuis le début jusqu'à la béatification (10 novembre 1889) a duré 45 ans. Vu la moyenne de cette époque, c'est assez rapide.

En 1855 il fut demandé de séparer et d'accélérer la Cause de Perboyre, à cause de l'abondance de la documentation, des dépositions des témoins et des grâces reçues<sup>2</sup>.

Dans les *Animadversiones* sur l'introduction de la Cause, à la page 15, le Promoteur de la foi, Mgr Frattini, était resté admiratif devant la force des documents et des témoignages sur ce champion de la foi, et il ne put faire que de petites observations, sous-estimées par lui-même, sur l'orthographe parfois erronée du nom.

On demanda la dispense du Procès apostolique, c'est à dire de la deuxième enquête à faire sous le mandat du Pape, comme prévoyait la procédure normale. Il fut accordé de faire un Procès apostolique en Chine, sur le modèle du procès ordinaire dont on a parlé ci-dessus ; et surtout de valoriser les témoignages qu'on aurait pu recueillir à Rome, à l'occasion de la venue de quelques personnages de Chine ; ceux-ci furent recueillis, en 1857, mais le Procès en Chine tarda, ce pourquoi la Commission antépréparatoire du 22 juillet 1862 put seulement examiner la documentation dont on a parlé.

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Davitt CM, *La cause de Canonisation de Jean-Gabriel Perboyre*, in *Vincentiana* 40 (1996) p. 108.

En attendant, on avait obtenu le Décret sur la validité des actes précédents, le 20 décembre 1860, celui sur le non culte le 21 février 1861 et celui sur les écrits le 12 septembre 1861. Le 28 février 1861 on obtint aussi la dispense de la norme qui exigeait 50 ans de la mort du Vénérable pour pouvoir conclure sur l'héroïcité des vertus ou sur le martyre.

Cependant, la nécessité de compléter le tout par le Procès apostolique en Chine impliqua pratiquement une interruption du chemin. Mais la renommée a continué à se répandre : après le transfert des reliques à la Maison-Mère à Paris (1860), une installation solennelle dans une chapelle latérale fut faite en 1879. A l'occasion de la Reconnaissance des Reliques, le 2 mars 1889, la revue *Annales de la Mission* (44) 1889, pp. 319-333, a fait une récapitulation de ces événements.

Les grâces se répandaient ; un véritable procès canonique a été fait pour un miracle à Versailles en 1866.

Finalement, en 1870 à Hu-nam et à Hu-pen (les deux Vicariats qui désormais divisaient le vicariat de Hu-quang) les deux Procès exigés furent clos ; mais le document arrivé à Rome fut perdu ; avant qu'il fut retrouvé en 1880, le postulateur en avait obtenu une autre copie, remise à Rome en 1879.

Une fois obtenue la validité le 2 juin 1881, le Décret final sur le martyre fut proclamé en présence du Pape le 25 novembre 1888. Le Père A. Fiat, Supérieur général, assista à la cérémonie<sup>3</sup>.

Une fois signé du Cardinal Laurenzi (30 mai 1889) le Décret dit *de tuto* (« on peut procéder en toute sûreté »), le Pape promulgua le Décret de Béatification le 9 novembre 1889.

Le rite de la messe fut concédé comme *double majeur* et la notice au Martyrologe en fait la mémoire le 11 septembre, date de la mort : *En Chine, le bienheureux Jean Gabriel Perboyre, prêtre de la Congrégation de la Mission, né à Puech en France, lequel ayant supporté avec force et constance des tourments très cruels et prolongés pour la défense de la foi au Christ, se rendit semblable au divin Rédempteur de façon singulière ; finalement, étranglé avec des cordes, suspendu à une poutre de bois, il consuma par le martyre l'admirable innocence de sa vie. Sa fête, cependant, se célèbre le 7 novembre* (in *Annali della Missione* (54) 1948, Supplemento al n. 4-5). Comme on le sait, avec l'Office propre mis à jour en 1975, sur la base de la réforme du calendrier liturgique de 1969, la célébration tombe exactement le 11 septembre.

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<sup>3</sup> *Annales de la Mission* (44) 1889, pp. 5-6 ; *Osservatore romano* du 26 novembre 1888.

Une requête pour obtenir le titre de *Patron secondaire* pour les 6 vicariats chinois, bien qu'il fut seulement bienheureux, fut présentée par le postulateur Natale Barbagli en 1891, mais elle n'eut pas de suite.

### **La béatification**

La cérémonie de la Béatification du 10 novembre 1889 est relatée dans les *Annali della Missione*, 45 (1890) pp. 27-32 qui se réfèrent au *Monitore romano* 12-13 novembre 1890.

Dans la salle *della Loggia* étaient présents le frère du Bienheureux, Jacques CM (il avait alors 79 ans), et sa sœur Gabrielle (Sœur Marie, Fille de la Charité, qui avait alors 72 ans) ; son autre sœur Fille de la Charité Antoinette était en Chine.

La Revue *Annales de la Mission* avait suivi les diverses étapes au cours des années précédentes ; dans le tome 45 se trouvent mentionnés tous les triduums célébrés en l'honneur du nouveau Bienheureux ; rappelons en particulier celui de Naples (4-5-6 février 1890) à la Maison provinciale des Filles de la Charité, auquel assista sa sœur Gabrielle (sœur Marie), qui ensuite mourût à Naples en 1864<sup>4</sup>, où elle est enterrée dans la chapelle des Filles de la Charité.

### **Le miracle pour une Fille de la Charité en 1889**

Le miracle qui a conduit à la canonisation du bienheureux martyr Jean-Gabriel Perboyre (1802-1840) fut obtenu le jour même de la béatification, le 10 novembre 1889 : une Fille de la Charité de Heverlé, Diocèse de Malines (Belgique), Sœur Gabrielle Isoré fdlc (1851-1906) guérie d'une espèce de paralysie, diagnostiquée d'abord comme mielite, puis comme lepto-méningite spinale ascendante aiguë, à 38 ans.

La sœur, parvenue à une situation désespérée, invoqua le bienheureux par une neuvaine que sur le conseil de sa supérieure, sœur Joséphine Hauff, elle avait organisée en s'adressant à toutes les maisons de la Communauté de Belgique. La neuvaine serait terminée le jour même de la fête de la béatification, qui eut lieu à Rome le dimanche 10 novembre 1889.

La sœur était arrivée désormais à l'immobilisation totale avec un pronostic funeste qui prévoyait désormais la mort : le 9 novembre – dit le médecin –

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<sup>4</sup> *Presenza Vincenziana* 19 (1996) pp. 23-26.

« ...j'avais perdu tout espoir de voir l'état de la sœur s'améliorer. La mort me semblait proche ». Au contraire, le dimanche matin, sœur Isoré se leva guérie<sup>5</sup>.

« ...je suis alors allée à la chapelle, j'en ouvris la porte et je m'exclamai : je suis folle, ou bien je suis guérie ! » Comme elle et les sœurs l'avaient promis, il y eut des prières d'action de grâce et la diffusion du culte du bienheureux. La sœur jouit toujours par la suite d'une bonne santé et retourna à son travail jusqu'à sa mort, survenue en 1906. Le médecin dut reconnaître : « Pour une malade parvenue au point où était réduite sœur Gabrielle Isoré, il faudrait des mois entiers d'un traitement actif pour obtenir une guérison qui peut-être serait encore incomplète ».

Le Procès eut lieu à Malines, Bruxelles, en 1892 : le docteur Boine, médecin traitant, la Supérieure, la sœur concernée et d'autres y déposèrent comme témoins.

En 1901 eut lieu la Commission antépréparatoire à Rome. La Commission préparatoire se déroula en 1903, avec une *Nova Positio super miraculis, 1903*.

Tout faisait penser à un jugement favorable : ainsi le Père Veneziani, postulateur, écrivait au Père général : « Comme vous le verrez dans le catalogue des Causes de béatification et de canonisation traitées à la Congrégation des Rites que je vous ai expédié il y a quelques semaines, la cause du bienheureux Perboyre est celle qui se trouve la plus avantagée par la Congrégation comme également la cause du bienheureux Chanel. Si par la suite il n'arrive rien de contraire pour le prochain jubilé papal, ou au maximum pour le cinquantième anniversaire de la définition du dogme de l'Immaculée Conception notre Bienheureux martyr sera avec le bienheureux Chanel inscrit solennellement au registre des saints. Pour le moment les choses avancent très bien, déjà un médecin nommé ex officio étudie la position pour faire le vote sur les miracles. Le Promoteur m'a promis de me donner rapidement les animadversiones » (De la lettre du P. A. Veneziani au Supérieur général, Rome, 11/6/1901).»

« Comme je vous l'ai écrit d'autres fois le docteur Lapponi médecin pontifical est convaincu que les miracles proposés sont excellents. L'avocat Morani qui est très expert en pareille matière, dit que la cause triomphera » (de la lettre du P. A. Veneziani au Supérieur général, Rome 23/12/1902)<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> Puisque la norme exigeait un miracle survenu « après » la béatification et que la sœur fut miraculée le matin même de la béatification, on demanda et obtint *ad cautelam* le Rescrit et l'indult du Pape, le 15 décembre 1994.

<sup>6</sup> Le P. T. Davitt a noté avec justesse la prudence du P. A. Fiat, Supérieur général. Dans les Circulaires de ces années il n'y a aucune allusion à l'imminence de la canonisation, et aucune déception ensuite pour l'évanouissement des espérances, voir in *Vincentiana* 40 (1996) p. 108.

On parle de miracles approuvés, parce que en effet deux miracles avaient été soumis ; l'autre était celui de la guérison de sœur Joseph Destailleur, survenue à Reims.

Mais par la suite il y eut quelques objections, ou mieux des doutes avancés par deux médecins qui se demandèrent si la « mielite » diagnostiquée n'était pas plutôt due à une maladie hystérique, et ensuite fonctionnelle. Au niveau de la Commission préparatoire qui eut lieu en 1903, on décida de procéder à des examens ultérieurs. Le Pape accorda un nouvel approfondissement de la part de deux médecins très experts.

Comme le note le P. Bisoglio, postulateur, dans une lettre à la Congrégation des Rites (3 juin 1957) « *des investigations faites il ne ressort pas qu'à partir de ce jugement quelque acte ait été réalisé par la suite* ». Par conséquent il demande que soit exécuté l'approfondissement demandé.

En fait nous avons une *Relation du professeur Vincenzo LO BIANCO*, sur le miracle de sœur Gabrielle Isoré (10.05.1959), dans laquelle le professeur dit en substance qu'il ne saurait ajouter rien de plus à ce que déjà les médecins ont dit pour et contre.

En 1991 notre postulation générale s'est concentrée sur le cas de sœur Gabrielle Isoré FdIC, pour voir si, à la lumière des acquis scientifiques modernes, on pourrait mieux trancher ce doute qui avait bloqué en son temps la discussion : s'agissait-il de maladie organique ou fonctionnelle ? La guérison ainsi documentée pouvait-elle s'expliquer naturellement ?

Dans une relation détaillée deux actuels médecins experts ont interprété avant tout les documents à la lumière des connaissances scientifiques les plus avancées, grâce auxquelles ils ont pu exclure avec certitude la maladie fonctionnelle (hystérie) ; précisant que le diagnostic convenant au cas est à dénommer *poliradicolonévrite ascendante*. L'avis de la *Consulta medica* du 17 novembre 1994 fut que la guérison est à considérer instantanée, complète et durable, inexplicable selon nos connaissances scientifiques.

Les fiches des *Archives des Filles de la Charité* (Maison-Mère à Paris, rue du Bac), de 1887 à 1906, sont importantes. On peut y voir comment la santé de la sœur, d'abord grave, en l'année du présumé miracle, 1889, a été bonne jusqu'à sa mort, en 1906.

Le Congrès des théologiens eut lieu le 21 février 1995, la réunion des Cardinaux le 4 avril 1995. Le Saint-Père approuva le Décret par lequel le miracle a été définitivement accepté, le 6 avril 1995.

## La canonisation

Les étapes ultimes qui conduiront au jour de la canonisation ont suivi la procédure prévue par la Congrégation pour les Causes des saints, pour arriver au Consistoire dans lequel le Pape demande l'avis des Cardinaux, avant de procéder à l'acte dernier et définitif de la canonisation ; le Consistoire eut lieu le 29 janvier 1996.

Une chronique détaillée du jour de la canonisation et des festivités qui ont suivi a été publiée dans les *Annali della Missione*<sup>7</sup>.

Le 1<sup>er</sup> juin, une veillée de prière, présidée par le père Robert Maloney, Supérieur général, en préparation à la canonisation du 2 juin, fut célébrée à la basilique Saint Paul hors les murs.

Le dimanche 2 juin, sur la place Saint-Pierre eut lieu la Célébration solennelle présidée par le Pape : avec Perboyre étaient canonisés le Bienheureux Egidio Maria di S. Giuseppe Francesco Antonio Portillo (1729-1812) de l'Ordre des Frères mineurs, et le Bienheureux Juan Grande Román (1546-1600) de l'Ordre hospitalier de Saint Jean de Dieu.

A l'homélie, le Pape parla aussi des autres martyrs chinois : « *A la mémoire de Jean-Gabriel Perboyre que nous célébrons aujourd'hui nous voulons unir la mémoire de tous ceux qui ont témoigné du nom de Jésus Christ sur la terre de Chine au cours des siècles passés. Je pense en particulier aux bienheureux martyrs dont la canonisation commune, souhaitée par de nombreux fidèles, pourrait être un jour un signe d'espérance pour l'Eglise présente au sein de ce peuple, dont je demeure très proche par le cœur et par la prière* ». De cette manière le Pape accueillait la demande qui lui était parvenue de la part de nombreux Evêques de Chine, et en effet son souhait se réalisa quatre années après, le 1<sup>er</sup> octobre 2000, au cours de la journée missionnaire de l'année jubilaire, avec la canonisation de 120 martyrs de Chine, parmi lesquels notre bienheureux François-Régis Clet<sup>8</sup>.

Le lendemain, lundi 3 juin, après la solennelle concélébration eucharistique à Saint-Pierre, présidée par Mgr Maurice Gaidon, Evêque de Cahors, diocèse d'origine de Perboyre, le Saint-Père parla encore à l'Audience dans la salle Paul VI, où il salua les Evêques venus de Chine, de France et d'autres pays, en particulier notre confrère Sa Béatitude le Patriarche Stephanos II Ghattas et le Père Robert Maloney, supérieur général.

<sup>7</sup> *Annali della Missione* 103 (1996) pp. 99-166 : tout le numéro 3 est consacré au nouveau saint. *Vincentiana* 40 (1996) a aussi consacré son n. 2 à Perboyre à l'occasion de sa canonisation, de même que d'autres revues et journaux que nous n'énumérons pas ici.

<sup>8</sup> P. R. D'Amico, *Histoire de la cause de canonisation de François-Régis Clet* in *Vincentiana* 45 (2001) pp. 54-61.

Le fait qu'au début de juin avait été organisée à Salamanque la rencontre de tous les Visiteurs du monde (elle se déroula en effet du 4 au 15 juin 1996) fit que tous les Visiteurs étaient déjà en route et c'est pourquoi une très grande partie put participer à Rome à la canonisation, qui fut ainsi aussi une Assemblée de fidèles, de missionnaires et de Filles de la Charité, de toute la famille vincentienne du monde.

(Traduction : JEAN LANDOUSIES, C.M.)

## **Decree of the Canonization of Blessed John Gabriel Perboyre \***

### **JOHN PAUL, BISHOP SERVANT OF THE SERVANTS OF GOD FOR A PERMANENT RECORD OF THE MATTER**

Since Jesus, the Son of God, demonstrated his love by giving up his life for us, “no one has greater love than this, that a person would give up his life for his friends” (Jn 15:13; cf 1Jn 3:10). Blessed John Gabriel Perboyre behaved with a wonderful similarity to Christ in both his life and death. He was born in France in 1802, into a fervent family in a place called Puech de Montgesty. This family gave to the Church three missionaries of St. Vincent, two Daughters of Charity and one Carmelite sister, as well as two married Christians. He went to a seminary, originally just to keep his brother Louis company, but the atmosphere of the place caught his attention, and he realised that he was definitely called to the priesthood.

In 1818 he entered the Congregation of the Mission and on 23 September 1826 he was ordained a priest in Paris. He held important and difficult posts in educational administration. He was a rather sensitive man and he felt the death of his brother Louis very deeply. Louis was going as a missionary to China and died during the voyage. John Gabriel was appointed to Paris as assistant to the director of seminarists, and he requested to be sent on the foreign missions. Many people were worried about his health, but he received permission to go, and in March 1835 he boarded a ship in the harbour at Le Havre.

He landed later in Macau, where he spent some time in getting acclimatised, and disguising himself to some extent as a Chinaman, he headed for the province of Ho-nan, to which he was assigned. He at once started into his missionary apostolate by visiting Christians scattered among small villages. He was outstanding in his way of dealing with people, and specifically in his love of the poor. He spent his time as a poor man with poor people, for whom he specially cared. “A neighbour to the poor” is what he became: “When I used to ask a catechist, a doctor who was travelling with me, about the causes of the diseases of so many persons, he always gave the same answer: hunger and material poverty. I used to walk on in silence, worried by twinges of conscience since I was living on and could not die with them.” Before he mounted the executioner’s cross he was on the cross of the poor. He was nailed to the cross by charity before persecution did it to him, being a disciple of St. Vincent whom he

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\* Translation from the original Latin text: AAS 89 (1997) 81-83.

loved as his father. The suffering Christ came first in his life, as the Man of the Cross. Because teaching, perhaps, did not lessen his hardship he totally understood what suffering meant. First of all an intention of martyrdom can be noted. John Gabriel seems to have desired martyrdom. In a certain letter written to his parents is the following statement: “We have weariness and various difficulties to put up with, but that is the case everywhere, and anyway we have to earn heaven by the sweat of our brow. If we have to suffer martyrdom that would be a great grace given by God; it is something to be wished for, not feared.”

In 1839 the arrival of a band of soldiers caught him unawares. The good shepherd tried to watch over his flock from close by, hiding in the vicinity. He was captured, and a long series of legal processes began, often accompanied by torture. They tried to make him renounce his faith, they ridiculed him for his religion and tried to get him to tread upon a crucifix. Eventually he was sentenced to death. John Gabriel suffered martyrdom in Wuhan, being strangled on a gibbet rather like a cross, on 11 September 1840. His relics were brought to France in 1860, to the main house of the Congregation of the Mission in Paris. Since he was believed to be a true martyr for the faith the cause for his canonization was meticulously initiated, and with all measures laid down by law completed, he was numbered among the Beatified by Leo XIII on 10 November 1889. On 6 April 1995 a decree about a case of healing, divinely brought about through the intercession of the Beatus, came before Us. A consistory was held on 29 January 1996 at which We decreed that the rite of canonization be celebrated on the following 2 June.

Today, therefore, in the Basilica of St Peter, We proclaimed the following formula of canonization during Mass:

*In honour of the Holy and Undivided Trinity, in praise of the Catholic faith and for the growth of Christian life, by the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ, of the blessed Apostles Peter and Paul, and by Our own authority, after mature deliberation and frequent praying for divine help, and on the advice of several of Our brothers, We declare and define that Blessed John Gabriel Perboyre, Blessed Giles-Mary-of-St-Joseph Pontillo, and Blessed John Grande Román are Saints, and We inscribe them in the catalogue of Saints, laying down that in the universal Church they should be honoured as Saints with due devotion. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.*

We wish that what We have decreed have effect now and in the future, notwithstanding anything whatsoever to the contrary.

Given in St Peter's, Rome, on 2 June in the year of our Lord 1996, the eighteenth of Our Pontificate.

I, John Paul II  
Bishop of the Catholic Church

Eugenius Sevi  
Protonot. Apost.

Loco + Plumbi  
*In Secret. Status tab., n. 395.478*

(THOMAS DAVITT, C.M., translator)

# St. John Gabriel Perboyre

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(There exist, moreover, small publications with eulogies, novenas, triduums, homilies and hymns dedicated to our saint).

**The Poor, the Clergy and the Laity**  
*Interview with the Visitors of the United States<sup>1</sup>*  
General Curia — Rome, 30.V.2002

**A. The Poor**

*This past week some leaders of the most powerful countries of the world convened here in Italy and discussed matters that affect the poor: What are the cries and the hopes of the poor from your perspective?*

**1. W. Hartenbach** (Midwest): As Provincial of the Midwest Province I needed to be attentive to the poor in the Central United States and in East Africa. The challenges in each place are hugely different. In the United States the cry of the poor comes from those who do not have the training, the education, or the wherewithal to gain access to what is, generally, a very successful economy. The consequence of their lack of access to the economy results in their inability, often, to provide their families with food and the material things that this society judges to be adequate. The poor in the United States are, statistically, more likely to be women and children than men — they represent all of the various ethnic groups in the United States, not only African-American and Hispanic.

In East Africa the poverty is more stark and much more obvious. Kenya is one of the richest agricultural areas in the world and yet there are people who go hungry. The poor cry for their share of the country's wealth; the leaders of the country are more likely to misappropriate the wealth of the country than to share it. The cry of the poor in East Africa is for honest leadership that will see to it that each individual has his or her share of the country's goods.

**2. T. McKenna** (East): Along with respect and equal opportunity, it seems to me that many of the poor are calling for viability. Especially with shrinking financial markets and the need for someone to blame, there is an increased tendency to stereotype the poor as dishonest, lazy people who are scheming to live free off the government while “honest, hard-working people” have to struggle to earn their just wage. Also poor people are looking for better education, seeing this as the key ladder up the social and economic scale. With two Universities, the Philadelphia Province has a special opportunity to search out those poor who desire education and offer them what we can.

**3. J. Sledziona** (New England): The cries of the poor and the hopes of the poor surface everywhere. In the United States these cries and hopes focus on: a living

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<sup>1</sup> At the time of publication of this interview two of the Provincials who responded have finished their mandate as Visitor: W. Hartenbach (USA-Midwest) and B. Quinn (USA-West).

wage, health care availability, access to decent schools, a break-up of the cycle of violence and despair in some of our cities, a more welcoming spirit for immigrant diversity and ethnic plurality, and the desire for deep community and compassion.

**4. B. Quinn** (West): The poor of the USA continue to challenge us CMs to know them and their issues, both material and spiritual. Poor people are too often a category for us and not faces and names of people we actually interact with. I believe they carry with them the inheritance passed on to us from Jesus and St. Vincent. We can do many things for them through our institutions and our connections; e.g., through the greater Vincentian Family, but there is a great power in our personal relationships. I think Mother Teresa's advice to love the poor one person at a time is a great Vincentian idea.

**5. D. Borlik** (South): Here in the United States, particularly in areas of new economic growth, we have seen the appearance and rapid growth of a new underclass, with great needs for living wages, basic medical care, education and formation both for integration into American society as well as into the Catholic Church. These people, traditionally Catholic and typically young, often find themselves margined from basic human services and Church organizations because of differences both in language and culture. Particularly in the states of Texas and Arkansas we Vincentians have noticed the growing numbers of these immigrants, particularly from Mexico and Central America, in parish communities, both in the larger metropolitan areas as well as in the countryside. From the Catholic Church many<sup>2</sup> of them have asked for more Spanish-speaking priests, sisters and qualified lay pastoral workers, for basic formation as Catholics, and advocacy around such issues as more just immigration law and family violence. However, these newcomers also bring a youthful vitality and a genuine interest and ability to work and celebrate together as community. In general, many Spanish-speaking Catholics continue to be margined because of inadequate family income and the challenges of adapting to a new language and cultural mores. They need Church leaders to develop a pastoral style that respects their religious and family traditions and that will include them in the parish and diocesan Church structures. We Vincentians find these cries challenging both in the short-term and long-term — both for our own direct ministry to the poor as well as informing our efforts to form other men and women for church ministry.

## **B. The Clergy**

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<sup>2</sup> By means of a *Needs Assessment* in preparation for rewriting the *Diocesan Pastoral Plan* for the Diocese of Little Rock, 2000-2001, Vincentian missionaries helped to design and coordinate the study and final document.

*We are living in the midst of a very difficult crisis caused by the sexual abuse of minors by priests and the way this issue has been dealt with by Church leadership: What, in your opinion, are the challenges for the formation of the clergy in this regard?*

**1. W. Hartenbach** (Midwest): I believe that initial formation needs to develop to the point where it can facilitate the candidates' confrontation with their own humanity — that certainly includes sexuality in all its various forms but it should also take into account the other human drives that need to be integrated into life rather than suppressed. The great need now, I think, is ongoing formation of the already ordained. In the United States — given the declining number of priests — individual priests need to be helped to deal with the fact that they cannot do by themselves what, once, two or three priests did. The leadership of the Church must be challenged to acknowledge that fact. I am convinced that any ongoing formation of the clergy that does not involve the hierarchy's coming to terms with the current conditions will be doomed to failure.

**2. T. McKenna** (East): In the first place, a more candid, realistic portrayal of the pervasiveness and power of sexuality in a man's personality over a lifetime is needed. Along the same line, so is a more recognizable description of the concrete struggles a celibate has to go through to be successful in living his life. Allied to this is an emphasis on the very practical disciplines, which have proven helpful for living celibacy well. There has been some work done on the "characteristics of successful celibates" and I think these findings could be more pointedly used in the practical formation needed.

**3. J. Sledziona** (New England): One of the greatest challenges for formation of the clergy in the United States is finding a way to minister to diocesan clergy in supportive ways to form a united presbyterate around their bishop. In July 2002, two confreres (one from the New England Province and one from the Eastern Province), will begin serving the Diocese of Portland, Maine, as co-vicars for the clergy. This new collaborative enterprise is an effort to "pastor the pastors" and to serve the Church by continuing to form the clergy.

**4. B. Quinn** (West): In recent years our involvement in seminary formation has greatly diminished. However confreres still involved in this work approach formation from a much broader perspective. The psychosexual aspect of formation is and has to remain one of the key elements in every formation program. The formation of priests must always seek the integration of all aspects of the human person. We must also promote the kind of openness and honesty in our relationship with the laity that has been a large part of the problem involving the way Church leadership has dealt with the behavior of abusive clergy.

**5. D. Borlik** (South): Our vocation promoters and formators are our Community's bridge to those who aspire to Church ministry and leadership. They need to be selected with great care and foreknowledge, to be expected to develop their competencies continually, and to maintain close relations with their supervisors, counselors, and Visitor. In addition, since recent abuses demonstrate some disastrous consequences of the arrogance that can accompany an exaggerated regional and group isolationism, our programs for recruitment and formation should be a nationwide and collaborative Community enterprise. For instance, one NCV<sup>3</sup> goal would be to develop support from and accountability to a broad-based supervisory board including: developmental psychologists, Church and civil law professionals, intercultural communication experts.

### **C. The Laity**

*The General Assembly of 1998 asked us to promote the Vincentian Family (to get to know each other, to work together on behalf of the poor, formation, etc): How has this been going in your province?*

**1. W. Hartenbach** (Midwest): In the Midwest Province we have a fairly long history of a cooperative relationship with the St. Vincent de Paul Society and with the Ladies of Charity. Men from this province are part of the leadership of both national organizations. We have slowly begun to develop programs that will help form young men and women in the spirit of Vincent: there are Vincentian Volunteer Programs in Denver and in St. Louis; DePaul University in Chicago has a number of programs whose goal is service in the spirit of Vincent. There are ongoing efforts to facilitate meetings between and among the members of the various organizations who look to Vincent for their inspiration. Some of those efforts are successful and some are not. We have certainly begun and have moved forward to meet the challenge of lay and clerical cooperation; the challenge, of course, is continuous and so needs to be met continually.

**2. T. McKenna** (East): There have been some notable successes in joining with the other Vincentian organizations, particularly the outreach to the St. Vincent de Paul Society. Some new cooperative programs, especially in regard to formation, are being planned. On the other hand, there does not seem to be a rising ground swell of enthusiasm from some of the grass roots levels about this kind of family cooperation.

**3. J. Sledziona** (New England): The promotion of the Vincentian Family in the New England Province is only now beginning to take root, but not in all the

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<sup>3</sup> The July 1, 2002 *Decree Concerning the Establishment of the National Conference of Visitors of the United States (NCV)* states that "the National Conference will develop, and provide a report to the Superior General on, a mission-driven plan for ... vocation ministry and formation in the United States."

places where we serve. In some of our parishes there is an increased willingness to collaborate with the St. Vincent de Paul Society. One of our brothers will soon be working with the Daughters of Charity in the Province of the West. There is as yet no contact with the Ladies of Charity, except at National Leadership Council meetings.

**4. B. Quinn** (West): The CM of the Province of the West continues to find ways to implement the call of the last General Assembly to interact with Vincentian laity. One confrere is a full-time advisor of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul and several confreres serve as advisors to the Ladies of Charity and in both cases some of these advisors participate regularly in local, regional and national meetings. The province has hosted a Vincentian Family Day for over 12 years in the Los Angeles area and now more frequently in other regions of the Western USA. A new organization/movement has developed at St. Vincent's Parish, Los Angeles, the "Misioneros Vicentinos" and four married couples from this group will attend the Vincentian month for Spiritual advisors in Paris this summer. More and more, the people we serve and collaborate with in our various apostolates are introduced in more formal ways as well as informally to the charism of St. Vincent de Paul.

**5. D. Borlik** (South): In general, the ideal of working closely with and promoting the Vincentian Family is quite attractive and desirable. However, it is far from realized in our geographically large province where Catholic organizations and associations have tended to appear and work in isolation from each other. Nevertheless, we have begun to think and act differently, especially where we share common pastoral challenges. In Arkansas, Daughters of Charity and Vincentian missionaries have begun to collaborate in planning and parish missions; in Louisiana a young-adults version of the St. Vincent de Paul Society has begun and is thriving (New Orleans area) and a Vincentian missionary works closely with lay team members for parish evangelization (Lafayette); in Texas and Louisiana we participate in the formation of the Vincentian Family through seminars and days of prayer. In addition, we have worked more with youth. First by inviting young people to join us for a service opportunity in our parishes and as "intern missionaries" on missions to such groups as migrant workers. Second, we help organize and encourage wide participation in international and inspiring youth events such as the recent **World Youth Day** and other **Vincentian Family Worldwide Gatherings**.

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