

The Canonization of St. John Gabriel Perboyre, CM June 2, 1996

by Timoteo Marquina, C.M.

I. Introduction

This writer is forced to confess _ has to get it off his chest _ that he writes this chronicle by devotion above all and also because of luck. Since it is about the canonization of one of our new saints of the Vincentian Family that we can venerate and pray to, devotion is self-explanatory. The luck part can be explained by the Scripture (Prv 16:33): "Men the lot is cast into the lap, its decision depends entirely on the Lord." This and no other is the cause of being the "luck and devotion" writer of the canonization of St. John Gabriel Perboyre, C.M. in Rome, the first martyr from China in the official martyrology of the Church. Praised be the Lord, and gratitude to the Community that such "luck" was granted to me.

II. All roads lead to Rome.

Continuously, people travel to Rome from all over the world. As the pilgrims have said since the Middle Ages, "all roads lead to Rome". It is Rome itself _ and all guides agree _ that is an extraordinary world for the traveler who "knows how to visit it with love and intelligence" (Eugenio Montes). Even better yet, if it is done with faith and devotion, like it is in our case. In a similar vein, the great German poet Goethe describes Rome in one of his *Roman Elegies*, "A world are you, o Rome, and since a world without love is not a world, neither you, o Rome are Rome." Certainly in Rome the Eternal has vested all the love of the world and will keep on doing it even more. Aristotle proclaims in his *Poetics*, for calming the pilgrims and even the tourists, that "learning is the best of pleasures." And back then one "learned," in the same way as today in the twentieth century, mainly by traveling, knowing towns and discussing ethical, religious, and artistic values. This is why so frequently Rome has always been visited not only on study trips, but also on trips of faith and devotion, like in our case. How truthful it is, on the other hand, that "from the golden Rome the globe clarifies itself" (Eugenio D'Ors). Cervantes felt it too and proclaimed it to the four winds of the universe in his famous *Sonnet to Rome*:

*O Rome, o powerful, o sacrosanct
soul city of Rome! To you I bow,
devoted, humble and a new pilgrim,
to whom admits to see such beauty.
Your sight, that to your fame advances
the ingenious suspends, although divine,
to whom by seeing you and to praise you came*

*with tenderness affection and with naked plant.
The earth from your soil, that I contemplate
with the martyrs' blood combined,
it is the universal relic of the ground.
There is no part in you that does not serve as an example
of sanctity, therefore drafted
from the city of God as the grand model.*

All this was foretold fifteen centuries ago by the great Latin poet Horace, in his *Carmen seculare*: "Father sun... could you perhaps be able to see something greater and more glorious than the city of Rome?" To be convinced of all this, once more, has been a graceful dream for all those who have fortunately arrived in Rome.

III. Activities celebrated in Rome for the Canonization.

For the sake of brevity and following the official program of the Canonization, we need to mention the following three: Prayer vigil (June 1), Canonization (June 2) and Mass of Thanksgiving (June 3). Each one of these functions had its own setting, different and yet appropriate, as we shall see. Besides these celebrations, each pilgrim group, of course, had its own agenda and calendar for other visits and activities. This convocation in Rome gave an extraordinary opportunity to the Vincentian Family for other international gatherings. Very significant and helpful was the visit of the members of the Congregation with Father Maloney and the Curia in the Leonine College of the Congregation's house in Rome, where a great number of missionaries visited from all over the world.

1. Welcome Vigil and Prayer Service (June 1st)

This was celebrated on Saturday, June 1st at 7:00 p.m. in the Major Basilica of St. Paul Outside-the-Walls, third in importance after St. Peter's Basilica and St. John Lateran (the Cathedral of Rome) and second in capacity (more than eight thousand). It was an appropriate setting in all aspects for the great and touching Vincentian gathering, a vigil of welcoming prayer for the extraordinary experience of the following day. Without doubt, the great apostle of the people, St. Paul, was used as an example of missionary activity by our beloved St. John Gabriel Perboyre, C.M.

The Prayer Vigil, during the week after Pentecost, signified and was, in effect, a new Pentecost in 1996 for the entire Vincentian Family, formed in this great cenacle by men and women, mainly by young people of all languages, races and nations. (Acts 2).

The ceremonies were celebrated with perfect detail, a strong rhythm and youthful spirit, appropriate for the occasion. Not in vain did the great Bossuet define the Church with these words: "The youth of the living God spread and spilled over the world." It is difficult to say how many attended this emotional, beautiful and significant event. We were handed a program, beautifully printed in different

languages, and we could follow perfectly the evening of prayer. Since the beginning of the first ceremony, the large number of sick and handicapped persons attracted the attention of the writer (without doubt from centers staffed by the Daughters of Charity in Italy). There were many youth groups, some of them with signs, with their own distinctive insignia prepared for the canonization. A large group of bishops attended, among them three from Taiwan and also the Coptic Patriarch from Egypt, His Beatitude Ghattas Stephanos II (Vincentian).

In the church, large and beautiful because of the richness of the magnificent baldachin, a work by Poletti, there was a large picture of the crucified saint. On both sides and in the center there was a large priest procession preceded by a great Cross covered in red: a Crucified Christ opening the road for the fervent people of God to a crucified St. John Gabriel. "I will feed the victorious from the Tree of Life" (Rv 2:7), words which opened liturgically the solemn Vigil celebration. Every moment in the Celebration of the Word was easily followed, and the multilingual prayer service was celebrated with a profoundness rooted in faith and love. It consisted of two parts: the first part or evocation (condemnation, test, and farewell) and the second part (homily and final song). The texts were composed by the Superior General, Fr. Robert P. Maloney, who also preached the homily. The music was beautiful, reflecting the contemporary taste of the Church.

The Superior General said that St. John Gabriel has a message to communicate to today's youth: The mission of a Church always young and moving. The Vincentian vocation, as the life of the new saint expresses, is eminently missionary, ecclesial, and youthful in its approach like that of Christ's, St. Paul's and St. Vincent de Paul's. It was very meaningful that the liturgy began with a modern musical rendition of the Gloria. It was even more meaningful that Fr. Maloney presided along with five Vincentian missionaries of different races, one for each of the five continents, helping us to understand the universality of the Vincentian mission. There was a hope that all of this was a foretaste of a new missionary vitality in the Vincentian Family, by means of the inspiration and example of St. John Gabriel Perboyre.

Fr. Maloney's homily in Italian was understood by many, even those not knowing Italian: *"My brothers and sisters, Perboyre's view of God is clear. He sees God as good, gentle, loving. The treasures of God's providence are "inexhaustible." He regards his sufferings as "gifts from heaven."*
"He believes in the attentive presence of a personal God who walks with us in the daily events of life: in light and darkness, grace and sin, peace and turmoil, health and sickness, life and death.... Perboyre sees suffering as a part of the mystery of God's provident love."

At the end of such a beautiful Vigil Service, Fr. Maloney, in the name of Christ, called to everyone who wants to follow in the Congregation of the Mission and Daughters of Charity and aspirants to the Double Family. Without a doubt, it was the most powerful moment in the entire Vigil. Before the final hymn, there was the recitation of prayers in many languages, including Chinese and a special prayer for the Church of Silence in China.

2. Canonization (June 2nd)

There was a certain nervousness to be on time and find a good seat. A ticket was necessary. Designed by the great architect Bernini, St. Peter's Square, because of its capacity and greatness, was the perfect setting for the canonization of the three new saints. Their great portraits were hung from the central windows of the facade, designed by Maderno : St. John Gabriel Perboyre, French and Vincentian (in the center), St. Egidio Maria, Italian and Franciscan (on the right side) and St. John Grande, Spanish and from the Order of St. John of God (on the left side). Thousands and thousands of pilgrims were approaching the square from all parts of the city, to the point that it was completely full one hour before the start of the solemn ceremony, which started at 10:00 a.m. with Vatican punctuality.

The ceremony was televised to all parts of the world, and it was followed with special interest, of course, in Spain, France, and Italy, the homelands of the three new saints. On both sides of the platform in the front of the Basilica's facade, the Diplomatic Corps to the Holy See, bishops, cardinals and guests were seated. It was impossible for this writer to estimate the thousands of pilgrims who filled the huge St. Peter's Square. Thousands of those devoted to St. John Gabriel Perboyre stood out, because of the custom to wear a distinctive scarf and other insignias.

The pilgrims to St. Peter's followed the great celebration once again with a liturgical program well printed, even with illustrations, and included all the information regarding our three saints and the various liturgical highlights of the canonization in Italian, French, Spanish, and English. Emotions and silence, piety and veneration were the dominant notes during the lengthy celebration (2 hours and 15 minutes).

The canonization rite consisted of the following parts: Request to the Holy Father by the Cardinal Pro-Prefect of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints accompanied by a consistorial lawyer and the postulator, to proceed with the canonization of the three new saints; the Pro-Prefect reads a short biography of each one of them (in their respective languages); Litany of the Saints; the Holy Father pronounces with solemnity the Canonization Formula; Chorus and Assembly's joyful acclamation which represents the Universal Church; the Pro-Prefect, accompanied by the consistorial lawyer and the Postulator, request the Holy Father to confirm the Apostolic Words of canonization and the Holy Father responds "we order it." Everyone congratulates each other with a sign of peace. Following the Liturgy of the Word (in various languages, including Greek), an important moment, naturally, is the Holy Father's homily, in which he referred to each one of the new saints, in French (the first: St. John Gabriel Perboyre), Spanish, and Italian. The Pope's words were frequently interrupted by applause, giving praise to each saint's virtue and each respective town. The homily lasted 20 minutes.

The Eucharist, of course, was in honor of the Holy Trinity. The famous Sistine Choir sang with its usual mastery and beauty. Other choirs, with great and pure voices, accompanied the Sistine Choir. As is the Holy Father's custom, at the end of

the unforgettable liturgical celebration, he greeted all the delegations and groups of pilgrims in their respective languages.

3. Mass of Thanksgiving (June 3rd)

This particular Mass was celebrated by the Vincentian Family in a most appropriate place: St. Peter's Basilica, behind the "Papal Altar" having as background the Cathedral Altar, both made by the great sculptor Bernini. Over five hundred priests concelebrated (most of whom were Vincentians) and more than three or four thousand pilgrims attended. Bishop Gaidon of Cahors (France) presided at the Eucharist and preached the homily. Cahors is close to the city of Montgesty, the area where St. John Gabriel was born on January 6, 1802.

On this occasion we were also given a beautiful program to follow the Eucharist in the respective languages. In the readings and at meaningful moments, representatives from different nations and languages read and prayed. The homily, in French (20 minutes), was translated into English, Italian and Spanish. Some of his ideas were as follows. *The third millennium Church needs to continue having glorious martyrs. St. John Gabriel helps us to open our hearts to the experience of God's love for all the people. Martyrdom is something that we have to desire and not fear (lesson from our saint). The Vatican is the martyrs' Church. In the Eucharist we contemplate and adore Jesus, the first martyr, who was betrayed. The Martyrs are traces of light toward our next life. China is here and the mission starts in our homes and in our communities.*

A delightful surprise for everyone was the presence at the Eucharist of a young Chinese choir, who came to the canonization from Taiwan.

4. An Audience with His Holiness, John Paul II (June 3rd noon)

This audience took place in the Paul VI Hall, which was filled to capacity with approximately 20,000 people. Three large delegations of pilgrims, devoted to the three new saints, were present on this occasion. It is important to note the Spanish speaking delegation because of their distinctive flavor and also the Vincentian delegation. Also present were many bishops and the Coptic Patriarch from Egypt, His Beatitude Ghattas Stephanos II, C.M., whom His Holiness greeted with special affection.

The Pope entered the room exactly at 12: 1 0. The applause and enthusiasm were prolonged for several minutes. Finally, he started his greetings to everyone of the delegations in their respective languages. Then he delivered a short biography about each one of the saints: in French (St. John Gabriel), in Spanish (St. John Grande) and in Italian (St. Egidio Maria). He made a special reference to Fr. Maloney and the Vincentian Family. To die for Christ and for souls, said the Pope in the midst of his talk, was the goal of the daily prayer of St. John Gabriel Perboyre.

IV. The Canonization and the Media

The solemnity of the canonization of St. John Gabriel Perboyre has been recorded extensively in the media. It has been said that in many European countries different TV stations televised the most important event, the Mass of Canonization in St. Peter's Square on the bright morning of Sunday June 2nd, the feast of the Holy Trinity.

It is important to mention the two issues of the *Osservatore Romano* (Saturday, June 1 and Sunday-Monday, June 2-3), which made references to this canonization. It is also significant to mention the biographic study-reports included in the *Osservatore Romano: Giovanni Paolo II proclama tre nuovi Santi*, which includes these titles under the general heading of John Gabriel Perboyre, *Presbitero e martire della Congregazione della Missione: Sottoposto a torture e a grandi sofferenze non cesso di incoraggiare i cristiani che condividevano il suo stesso patire* (by Robert P. Maloney, Superiore Generale della Congregazione della Missione); *Offri generosamente la vita per portare il Vangelo nel cuor della Cina* (by Luigi Mezzardi); *Con il coraggio della fede sui sentieri della storia* (by Luigi Novo); *Il desiderio del martirio nell'ideale della santità* (by Giuseppe Guerra)

Besides the general account of the canonization, *Osservatore Romano* of Monday- Tuesday (June 3-4, 1996) under the general title, on the first page, *Giovanni Paolo II Proclama in Piazza San Pietro Tre Nuovi Santi*, included the beautiful homily (a profound synthesis of life in Christ of the three new saints). The homily started with the following words: *In questa domenica della Santissima Trinità la Chiesa desidera rendere gloria al Padre, al Figlio e allo Spirito Santo mediante la canonizzazione dei beati Jean Gabriel Perboyre, Egidio Maria di San Giuseppe e Juan Grande Román. La Città del Vaticano* also presented a timely article : *Tre vite eroiche al servizio dei fratelli* (by Gianfranco Grieco), with the news: *Pellegrine provenienti da Taiwan per onorare il loro martire*, and a detailed account about the canonization. In the article entitled *La preghiera mariana in Piazza San Pietro*, Pope John Paul II made another reference to the canonization of the three new saints and expressed his greetings and appreciation to all the pilgrims who came for this purpose to Rome: *I cordially greet the pilgrims who came to Rome with the purpose of the canonization of John Gabriel Perboyre. I hope that the example of the new saint, who followed Christ by way of his passion and cross to announce the Gospel in China, may help you to serve God and your brothers with a new love, in happiness and fidelity.* At this same event, and in Polish , the Holy Father spoke to the members of the St. Vincent de Paul Society (founded by Ozanam) in these terms: *I cordially greet the pilgrims from Poland who participate in today's canonization, in particular the Priests of the Mission, the Daughters of Charity, and the members of the St. Vincent de Paul Society.*

On the next page of this same issue of the *Osservatore* there was an account of the papal audience given to the thousands of pilgrims from the three delegations, as well as the talk given by His Holiness John Paul II, which was mentioned earlier.

There was also an article by José María Román, entitled *Jean-Gabriel Perboyre primo martire della Chiesa in Cina*.

V. Conclusion

On one of the tombs in the Roman church of St. Mary of the Angels, this writer read

VIRTUTE VIXIT,
MEMORIA VIVIT,
GLORIA VIVET.

(He lived virtuously, he lives in memory, he will live with glory). It is a fitting tribute to our beloved brother St. John Gabriel Perboyre. His life and virtue were recognized at the highest level, by the Church on this joyful day June 2nd, 1996. The glory of Bernini embraced on this occasion anthems, prayers, applause, thanksgiving, and the presence and living memory of a loyal son of the great missionary of Charity, St. Vincent de Paul. Of this we have been a privileged witness. Thousands and thousands of pilgrims gathered in Rome, brought together as the People of God and by their belief in "one Lord, one faith, and one baptism." The Vincentian Family must feel more committed, encouraged, motivated, and at the same time strengthened in its mission of evangelization.

LAUS DEO VIRGINIQUE MATRI.

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