

Homily on John Gabriel Perboyre

St. Paul's outside the walls

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Canonizations are for us. Those heroic men and women whose holiness is "certified" already stand in the presence of God. The Church canonizes them in order to strengthen and encourage the rest of us who continue on the journey.

We have all known uncanonized saints. Our own Vincentian Family has seen thousands and thousands of them, I am sure. Is there anyone among us who has not known a heroic priest who labored tirelessly in the service of the most abandoned, or a Daughter of Charity who brought the presence of God to the homes of the sick or who walked the corridors of a hospital bringing God's presence and peace to the dying. Among the uncanonized saints I list a Vincentian brother who shortly before he died talked with me about what the Kingdom of God would be like. I think too of a Vincentian layman, a lawyer _ wise, self-sacrificing, deeply in touch with God. I think too of the living martyrs: a priest who spent 23 years in prison for professing his faith; a sister who worked for 20 years in a forced-labor camp because she had witnessed to Jesus.

But from time to time the Church canonizes saints, holding them up before us as models. It says to us: look carefully at this man, meditate on this woman, learn from them what it means to be holy.¹

So it is with John Gabriel Perboyre. Tomorrow he will be declared, officially, a saint. What does he teach us about living God's life?

Let me speak with you this evening about the most common theme in his writings: trust in God's providence.

"I love the mystery of Providence very much," Perboyre wrote to a friend.² The depth of this love is very clear. The mystery of providence is a leitmotif that runs through Perboyre's letters. It is a melody that plays in the background as he reflects on life's events. For Perboyre, providence has three different shades of meaning.

First, God's providence is a journey-theme: God walks with him, protecting him. He writes to the Superior General asking him to join in praising "the providence of the heavenly Father" for all the wonderful things that had happened during his trip to China. Perboyre is quite concrete about providence. While attributing everything to God, he

¹Apostolic Constitution, *Divinus Perfectionis Magister*, introduction.

²*Letters*, p. 119.

clearly recognizes that God works through human persons.³ While he believed deeply that it was providence which had prepared the way for his whole missionary adventure in China, he also was grateful to his superiors⁴ for sending him. While he acknowledges that the missionaries owed their safety to providence during their long sea journey, he is also grateful to the captain! During his journeys on foot within China, he was utterly convinced that God was leading him step by step, but he was also grateful to his guides.⁵

Secondly, Perboyre sees providence as God's hidden plan. He tells his brother Louis, just before Louis' departure for China, that God knows how to achieve his goals and how to obtain his greater glory.⁶ Perboyre's letter is all the more poignant in that it was their last contact. Louis died on the way, never reaching China. On hearing of his brother's death, John Gabriel writes to his parents: "The providence of God is very gentle, very admirable in regard to his servants, and infinitely more merciful than we can imagine."⁷

Thirdly, Perboyre sees suffering as a part of the mystery of God's provident love. He states that the life of the missionary is 50% suffering.⁸ He writes to the Superior General from China: "I do not know what is in store for me in the career that is opening up before me: without doubt, many crosses _ that is the daily bread of the missionary. But what better can one hope for, when going to preach a crucified God?"⁹ Not long before his capture, he writes, "For the rest, I have no great concern about these matters. It is all up to providence!"¹⁰

His final letter to his confreres attests to the sufferings he endured during his imprisonment. He was forced to kneel on chains while hanging by his thumbs and hair braid. Besides other tortures which he does not describe, he was struck 110 times. He says discreetly that his readers will find out many other details later, as they surely did when they heard the account of his painful death by strangulation.

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."¹¹ He regards his sufferings as "gifts from heaven."¹²

³Letters, p. 116.

⁴Letters, p. 211.

⁵Letters, p. 172.

⁶Letters, p. 41.

⁷Letters, p. 53.

⁸Letters, p. 98.

⁹Letters, p. 141.

¹⁰Letters, p. 284.

¹¹Letters, p. 211.

¹²Letters, p. 61.

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. For Perboyre, providence focuses on a God who loves deeply, who accompanies us, who strengthens us, who listens to us, who speaks to us, who comforts us.

What sustained Perboyre during his year of imprisonment? What enabled him to be faithful, even in the face of a painful death, strangled on a cross? He believed that a loving God walked with him and he abandoned himself to God's love.

Is that our belief, my brothers and sisters? Is our faith in the personal, loving presence of God fully alive? Do we believe deeply that God walks with us, listens to us, speaks to us, strengthens us? Do we hear God in the voices of the poor? Do we see him in the faces of the sick and abandoned? Do we sense his presence everywhere in life, and even in death? That is the challenge that Perboyre offers us as we celebrate his canonization.