

## History of the Cause of Beatification and Canonization of St. John Gabriel Perboyre

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When we speak of the causes of beatification and canonization of the saints of both the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity, a major theme we need to remember is that, in the past, the Vincentians always avoided taking the first steps and initiating causes to obtain the canonization of their own members, a stance taken because of the way humility was thought of, a stance whose only exception was made for our Founder, St. Vincent de Paul, beatified in 1729 and canonized in 1737.

Fr. Chierotti, in his *Summarium historicum* [Historical Summary] (1974) found in the “Positio” [State of the Question] prepared for the cause of the servant of God Fr. Marcantonio Durando, CM, brought to light the reason for which no process of beatification should ever be begun in the Congregation (p. XIV). In the 18<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of 1835 *Unanime voce reiecta est propositio* [the proposal was unanimously rejected] (the possible presentation of the cause of beatification of Fr. Francesco Folchi of the Province of Rome) ...*quia humilitati instituti nostri minus consentanea videtur* [because it is seen as a diminishing of humility in our Company] (session 8).

It was actually the cause of Perboyre, begun in 1842 with that of [Blessed Francis Regis] Clet, which made a break with this older mentality and began a different way of thinking to which Fr. François Verdier made reference in his Circular Letter of 1 January 1931:

*With time, points of view change and today, while humility is still seen as one of the most necessary virtues for our Congregation, we do not think that we are lacking in it as we pursue, in the Roman Office, the causes of several of own.*

Only two years had passed since Perboyre’s death. His reputation spread rather quickly. St Justin de Jacobis in Eritrea (*Diario* II, 125) remembered with great devotion the death of his confrere on 11 September 1842. Cardinal Fransoni, Prefect of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, who had sent Justin de Jacobis to Africa, advised the Procurator, Vito Guarini, to open the cause of Clet and of Perboyre.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Roberto D’Amico, C.M., “The History of the Canonization of Francis Regis Clet” in *Vincentiana* 45 (2001) pp. 54-55.

By a Decree of Pope Gregory XVI, dated 9 July 1843, the Cause of Perboyre was united to that of others martyred between 1799-1840. Perboyre's name appears in a first *Sommario* published in 1842 as the last of 41 people. Similarly, Clet's name appears in a second *Sommario* as the 13<sup>th</sup> of 14 people listed.

In number XXXVI of the *Relazioni* of the first group, the *Relazione* of Bishop Joseph Rizzolati, OFM, Vicar Apostolic of Hu-quang (28 October 1840) on the martyrdom of Perboyre is published and, in number XLIV, the miraculous healing of Sr. Antoine Vincent, DC, in Constantinople in 1842.

These reports and other documents — along with the dispensation of the Pope on 10 April 1842 — substitute for the required Ordinary Process, which is normally done in the local diocese. This is one of the concessions made to make the path easier, given the particular difficulties that prevented a literal carrying out of the normal path for a cause of beatification. As one can see, from the Brief of Pope Urban VIII (*Caelestis Hierusalem Cives*) of 5 July 1834 to the Constitution *Divinus Perfectionis Magister* of Pope John Paul II (25 January 1983), the path of the causes is fraught with difficulties and very complicated procedures (easily a hundred of steps to complete). Thus, all the easing of the path notwithstanding, Perboyre's cause, from its beginning until his beatification (10 November 1889), lasted 45 years. If we use the measure of its time, it was a process that was completed fairly fast.

In 1855 the separation and acceleration of the Cause of Perboyre was asked for *because of the abundance of documentation, of the deposition of witnesses and of the graces that had been received.*<sup>2</sup>

In the *Animadversiones* on the Introduction of the Cause, on p. 15, the Promoter of the Faith, Msgr. Frattini, had been impressed by the power of the documentation and of the testimonies about this champion of the faith, and could make only small observations, given little value by himself, on spelling errors of names.

A request was made to dispense from the so-called Apostolic Process, that is, from the second Inquiry that was to be carried out under the direction of the Pope, as normal procedure dictated. A concession was granted so that the Apostolic Process could take place in China, along the lines of the Ordinary Process spoken of previously; above all, to make a value judgment on the testimony that would be able to be gathered in Rome on the occasion of the visit of some people from China. This was put together, in 1857, but the Process in

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Davitt C.M., "The Cause for the Canonization of John Gabriel Perboyre" in *Vincentiana* 40 (1996) p. 108.

China did not happen in time, and so the Pre-preparatory Commission of 22 July 1862 could examine only the documentation we have described.

In the meantime, the Decree on the Validity of the Acts already accomplished had been obtained on 20 December 1860, that on the *non cultu* on 20 February 1861 and that on his Writings on 21 September 1861. On 28 February 1861, a dispensation was obtained from the norm that 50 years had to pass from the death of a person declared Venerable before a conclusion could be drawn on the heroicity of his virtues and on his martyrdom.

However, the need to complete everything with the Apostolic Process in China meant, for all practical purposes, an interruption of the process. But his reputation kept growing. After bringing his remains to Paris (Motherhouse, 1860), a more solemn resting place was made for him in a side chapel in 1879. On the occasion of the Recognition of the Remains, on 2 March 1889, the magazine *Annales de la Mission* (44), 1889, pp. 319-333, published a review of all these events.

Graces kept multiplying. A true and proper canonical process was done in Versailles for a miracle in 1866.

Finally, in 1870, in Hu-nam and Hu-pen (the two vicariates into which Hu-quang had by now been divided), the two Processes required were closed. But the transcript sent to Rome was lost; before it was found in 1880, the Postulator had obtained another copy of it, which was sent to Rome in 1879.

The Decree for the validity of these processes was signed on 2 June 1881. The final Decree of Martyrdom was announced in the presence of the Pope on 25 November 1888. The Superior General, Fr. A. Fiat, was able to assist at the ceremony.<sup>3</sup>

The Decree called *de tuto* (one can surely continue on) was signed by Cardinal Laurenzi (30 May 1889), and the Pope published the Decree of Beatification on 9 November 1889.

The Rite of the Mass was made a *Double major*, and the tribute in the Martyrology recounts what happened on 11 September, the date of his death.

*In China, Blessed John Gabriel Perboyre, priest of the Congregation of the Mission, born in Puech in France, after having tolerated with strength and constancy the most cruel and most prolonged torture in the defense of the faith of Christ, he became like his Redeemer in a singular manner. Strung up by the neck with*

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<sup>3</sup> *Annales de la Mission* (44) 1889, pp.5-6; *Osservatore Romano*, 25 November 1888.

ropes, and suspended on a beam, he completed the admirable innocence of his life by martyrdom. His feast, however, is celebrated on 7 November 7. Translation in the *Annali della Missione* (54), 1948, supplement to nos. 4 and 5. (As is noted with the Office for his feast updated in 1975, on the basis of the Reform of the Liturgical Calendar of 1969, the celebration now falls on 11 September).

A request to obtain for him, even though he was only a Blessed, the title of *Secondary Patron* of the six Chinese vicariates was presented by the Postulator Natale Barbagli in 1891, but it came to nothing.

### **Beatification**

The ceremony of Beatification on 10 November 1889 is described in the *Annali della Missione* (45), 1890, pp. 27-32, making reference to the *Monitore Romano*, 12-13 November 1890.

In the *Sala della Loggia* his brother James, CM (who was 79 years old), and his sister Gabrielle (Sr. Marie, DC, who was 72 years old), were present. His other sister, Antoinette, DC, was in China.

The magazine *Annales de la Mission* had followed the various steps in the process through the years. In the above-mentioned volume 45 it notes all the triduum celebrated in honor of the new Blessed, in particular, the one celebrated in Naples in the Provincial House of the Daughters of Charity, at which his sister Gabrielle (Sr. Marie) assisted (4-6 February 1890). She died in Naples in 1896, and was buried there in the chapel of the Daughters of Charity.<sup>4</sup>

### **The Miracle Granted to a Daughter of Charity in 1889**

The miracle, which led to the canonization of the Blessed martyr John Gabriel Perboyre (1802-1840), occurred on the very day of his beatification, 10 November 1889. A Daughter of Charity of Héverlé, Diocese of Malines (Belgium), Sr. Gabrielle Isoré, DC (1851-1906), was healed of a type of paralysis, first diagnosed as myelitis, later designated as acute ascending spinal lepto-meningitis, when she was 38 years old.

The sister, having arrived at a very critical point in her illness, invoked the intercession of Blessed Perboyre through a Novena which the superior of the house, Sr. Joseph Hauff, had organized at the suggestion of a fellow sister, asking all the houses of the Company in Belgium to join them in it. The Novena ended

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<sup>4</sup> *Presenza Vincenziana* 19 (1996) pp. 23-26.

on the actual day of the ceremony of beatification in Rome, Sunday, 10 November 1889.

Sister by now had become totally immobilized, and had a sad prognosis that predicted her death; on 9 November — the doctor said — “...*I had lost every hope of seeing sister’s condition improve. Her death seemed imminent.*” Instead, on Sunday morning, Sr. Isoré got out of bed, healed.<sup>5</sup>

“...*I went then as far as the chapel; I opened the door and exclaimed: Either I am crazy, or I am healed!*” As she and the other sisters had promised there were prayers of gratitude, and diffusion of devotion to Blessed John Gabriel Perboyre. The sister enjoyed good health from that point on and returned to her work until she died in 1906. Her doctor had to recognize that “*for a sick woman who arrived at the point to which Sr. Gabrielle was reduced, entire months of active treatment would have been called for to obtain a healing that would still have been incomplete.*”

The process [to approve the miracle] took place in Malines in 1892. The witnesses deposed were the doctor who took care of her, Dr. Boine, the superior, the protagonist of the healing and others.

In 1901 the Pre-preparatory Commission took place in Rome. In 1903 the Preparatory Commission was held with a *Nova Positio super miraculis* [new presentation concerning the miracles].

Everything indicated that a positive judgment would be forthcoming. The Postulator General, Fr. Veneziani, wrote thus to the Superior General:

*As Your Paternity will see in the catalogue of the causes of beatification and canonization treated by the Sacred Congregation of Rites that I sent you a few weeks ago, the cause of Blessed Perboyre is the one that is most favored by the Congregation, as is the cause of Blessed Chanel. If nothing to the contrary happens, either for the next papal jubilee, or at least for the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the definition of the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception, our Blessed martyr, along with Blessed Chanel, will be solemnly inscribed in the register of saints. For now, these affairs are going forward quite well; already a doctor has been named ex-officio to study the position in order to give an opinion on the miracles. The Promoter has promised to give me soon the “animadversions”*

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<sup>5</sup> Because the norm required that a miracle had to happen “after” the beatification, and sister was healed the same morning of the beatification, a rescript and indult was asked for and granted *ad cautelam* [for discretion’s sake] on 15 December 1994 from the Pope [John Paul II].

[problems connected with the cause] (from a letter of Fr. A. Veneziani to the Superior General, 11 June 1901).

*As I wrote to Your Paternity on other occasions, Dr. Lapponi, the Pontifical Archiatra [Doctor], is convinced that the proposed miracles are excellent. The lawyer Morani, who is quite expert in these matters, says that the cause will succeed* (letter of Fr. A. Veneziani to the Superior General, 23 December 1902).<sup>6</sup>

There is talk approved miracles because, in fact, two of them were proposed; the other was the healing of Sr. Joseph Destailleur, which took place at Reims, France.

Objections, however, did arise, or rather doubts proposed by two doctors who asked if the “myelitis” diagnosed might not have caused by a hysterical illness, and thus be functional. At the level of the Preparatory Commission, held in 1903, the decision was made to seek further examinations. The Pope granted a new looking into this miracle by two very expert doctors.

As the Postulator, Fr. Bisoglio, notes in a letter to the Congregation of Rites (3 June 1957), “*from the inquiries made there is no evidence that any act was put in motion from this decision.* He therefore asked that the new examinations asked for be done.

In fact, we have a *Report of Professor Vincenzo LoBianco* about the miracle of Sr. Gabrielle Isoré (10 May 1959), in which the Professor basically says that he would not have any knowledge to add to what the doctors had already said for and against.

In 1991, our office of the Postulator General focused its energies on the case of Sr. Gabrielle Isoré, to see if, in light of modern scientific advances, one could better clear up the doubt that had brought discussion to a halt: was the sickness organic or functional? Could one explain naturally the healing as it was documented?

In their detailed report, two practicing medical experts interpreted those documents above all in the light of modern scientific advances, thanks to which they were able to exclude positively the hypothesis of a functional cause of the sickness (hysteria), noting that the precise diagnosis of this case in today’s terms would be *ascending polyneuritis*. The opinion of the Medical Meeting, 17

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<sup>6</sup> Fr. Thomas Davitt has noted with good reason the caution of the Superior General, Fr. A. Fiat. In the Circular Letters of these years there is no hint of an imminent canonization, and no disappointment, therefore, with the fading of hopes for it: cf. *Vincentiana* 40 (1996), p. 108.

November 1994, was that the healing was to be considered as instantaneous, complete, and lasting, and could not be explained by our scientific knowledge.

Important in this determination were the records of the *Archive of the Daughters of Charity* (Motherhouse in Paris, Rue du Bac) from 1887-1906, from which could be seen that the health of the sister, at first serious, was, from 1889, the year of the presumed miracle, good, until her death in 1906.

The Congress of Theologians was held on 21 February 1995, and the Meeting of the Cardinals on 4 April 1995. The Holy Father approved the Decree in which the miracle was definitively accepted on 6 April 1995.

## **Canonization**

The final steps that led to the day of canonization were those foreseen by the process laid out by the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, culminating in the Consistory in which the Pope asks the opinion of the cardinals before proceeding to the ultimate and definitive act of canonization. The Consistory took place on 29 January 1996.

A detailed recounting of the events of the day of canonization and of the celebrations that followed it was published in the *Annali della Missione*.<sup>7</sup>

On 1 June, the day before the canonization, a Prayer Vigil to prepare for the canonization was held in the Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls, presided over by Rev. Robert P. Maloney, CM, Superior General.

On 2 June, the canonization of St. John Gabriel Perboyre took place in St. Peter's Square, presided over by the Holy Father. Canonized with him were Blessed Egidio Maria di San Giuseppe Francesco Antonio Portillo (1729-1812) of the Order of Friars Minor, and Blessed Juan Grande Román (1546-1600) of the Order of the Hospital Workers of St. John of God.

In the homily the Pope also spoke of other Chinese martyrs:

*To the memory of John Gabriel Perboyre, whom we celebrate today, we wish to unite the memory of all those who have given witness to the name of Jesus Christ in the land of China during the past centuries. I think in particular of the blessed martyrs whose common canonization, hoped for by so many faithful, would be a*

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<sup>7</sup> *Annali della Missione* 103 (1996) pp.99-166: all of number 3 is dedicated to the new saint. Also *Vincentiana* 40 (1996) dedicated issue number 2 to Perboyre on the occasion of his canonization, as did other magazines and newspapers, which we do not list here.

*sign of hope for the Church present in the midst of this people, to whom I remain close in heart and in prayer.*

In this way the Pope acceded to the request that came to him from many Chinese bishops, and what he hoped for came to pass four years later, on 1 October 2000, Mission Sunday in the Jubilee Year, with the canonization of 120 martyrs of China, among whom was our own Blessed Francis Regis Clet.<sup>8</sup>

The next day, Monday, 3 June, after the solemn Eucharistic concelebration in St. Peter's presided over by the Bishop of Cahors, Most Rev. Maurice Gaidon, the diocese of origin of Perboyre, the Holy Father spoke again in the Paul VI Audience Hall, where he greeted the bishops who had come from China, from France, and from other countries, in particular His Beatitude, the Patriarch Stephanos II, who is our confrere, and the Superior General, Fr. Robert P. Maloney.

The fact that in the first days of June the Meeting of all Visitors of the world had been organized in Salamanca (which in fact took place 4-15 June 1996), it happened that they were already travelling and thus the great majority could take part in the Canonization in Rome. So there was a large gathering of faithful, Vincentians, Daughters of Charity, and representatives of the Vincentian Family from all over the world.

(ROBERT STONE, C.M., translator)

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<sup>8</sup> D'Amico, *op. cit.*, pp. 53-61.