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John Gabriel Perboyre
John Gabriel Perboyre, C.M.
Martyr and first Saint of China

*By Joseph Chow Chihyi, C.M **

The great news of the Canonization of John Gabriel Perboyre is a source of rejoicing for us and invites us to give thanks to the good God, and also to our Holy Father, His Holiness John Paul II, whom God has inspired to canonize him. Let us sing a “Te Deum” because it is a great honour for all the Congregation, and in particular, for the Chinese Confreres and Missionaries of China.

I. The Blood of John Gabriel stimulates our zeal for souls

Let us imitate the zeal of John Gabriel who, with insistence, asked to be sent to China to save the infidels. Having prayed fervently, he went and prostrated himself at the feet of the Superior General, Fr. Salhorgne, to beg him for leave to go to China to save the heathen. It is zeal which enabled him to put up with hunger and thirst for the greater glory of God in his pastoral ministry. It is zeal for souls that drove him to be always ready, day and night, to hasten wherever his ministry called him. He thought nothing of weariness or lack of sleep.

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It is zeal for souls which enabled him to reply to the judge, “I shall refuse until death to deny my Lord, or trample the Crucifix under foot.” Finally, it is due to his zeal for souls that he underwent more than twenty interrogations, in the midst of torments and most cruel sufferings, kneeling bare-legged on iron chains. In a word, he endured every suffering without the slightest complaint.

He lived only 38 years on this earth. His time among us was short, but he accomplished a great deal. Born on 6th January 1802, he was martyred on 11th September 1840. His stay on earth passed like a lightening flash. His zeal for souls drove him to go to China to save the Chinese, and even the whole world; his charity for the pagans, and his ardent love for God, brought him to his martyrdom. “He who lacks zeal, is also lacking in the love of God,” says St. Augustine. And, St. Paul can say “woe to me if I do not preach the Good News.” Are we charitable and zealous enough to evangelise the poor as John Gabriel did? Are we worthy to be his confreres?

II. John Gabriel Perboyre, model of self-denial

Amongst the wonderful virtues of John Gabriel is the great self-denial which he showed in a spectacular manner when his superiors sent him to Paris in 1821 to continue his studies. On this occasion, he was allowed to visit his family, but despite his tender love for

them, he declined this very legitimate satisfaction, replying to the superior who made him the offer, “St. Vincent went only once to visit his family, and regretted doing so; with your permission I will offer this sacrifice to God.”

John Gabriel’s self-denial was demonstrated especially in China, where he lived alone in the absence of all human support, with no protection, except that of Providence, in a non-Christian country, surrounded by enemies. His energy was admirable, not only when falling into the hands of pagans, but during the long months of his captivity, and when the hour of his immolation struck.

III. China, country of many martyrs, seed of Christians

China, the land of martyrs and apostles, was rendered fertile by the blood of Vincentians and Daughters of Charity. As Tertulian put it, “The blood of martyrs is the seed of Christians.” It is for this reason that I wish to cite for you the names of the Vincentian martyrs and victims in China.

— Blessed Francis Regis Clet C.M., who set out for China in 1791. When, in 1818 persecution redoubled its violence, he was thrown into prison, condemned to death on 1st January 1820, and on 17th February of that year, died for the Faith, by strangulation at Outch’ang, Hubei. On 9th July 1843 he was declared Venerable by Pope Gregory XVI. On 27th May 1900, Pope Leo XIII proclaimed this martyr “Blessed.”

— In 1825, Francois Cheng C.M., prison companion of Blessed Francis Regis Clet was condemned to exile and massacred.

— In 1840, Blessed John Gabriel Perboyre was martyred at Outch’ang, Hubei. On 11th September he was attached to a gallows, a post in the form of a cross. He was beatified by Pope Leo XIII in Rome on 10th September 1889. He will soon be canonized by Pope John Paul II.

— In 1857, Fernand Montels was beheaded along with two Christian companions, because they persisted in proclaiming themselves priest and Christians.

— In 1870, Claude Marie Chevalier and Vincent Ou, both Lazarists, were choked to death at Tientsin.

— On 21st June 1870, 10 Daughters of Charity were massacred at Tientsin.

— In 1900 and 1901, during the Boxer Revolution, 3 confreres (Maurice Doré, Pascal d’Addosio and Jules Garrigues) were massacred and burned.

— In 1903, André Tsu C.M., a young confrere aged 28, was torn to pieces by the pagans. His chest was opened up in the shape of a cross.

— In 1906, Jean Marie Lacruche C.M., was massacred in the town of Nanchang, Jiangxi.

— In 1907, Antoine Canduglia was beheaded.

— In 1937, the massacre of Monsignor Francis Xavier Schraven C.M., Bishop of Tchongting, together with 8 others took place. On the evening of 9th September, about 7 p.m., after the visit to the Blessed Sacrament in the Bishop’s Residence, there were 40 of us priests in the refectory for the evening meal. Because of the Sino-Japanese war, we had been unable to leave the Cathedral of Tchongting after the retreat which had lasted from 19th to

28th August. Almost immediately after the soup was served, 9 Europeans were arrested by the Japanese. Only one, an old Trappist of Notre-Dame de Liesse, named Fr. Alberic, escaped the massacre. He had been dining in his room because of his age and infirmity. The 9 victims were Monsignor Schraven, the Bishop of the Vicariate of Tchengting, aged 65, a native of Holland; Lucien Charny C.M., French, aged 55; Thomas Ceska, Austrian, Assistant Superior, aged 65; Eugene Bertrand, French, aged 32, the Bursar of the Vicariate; Gerard Vouters C.M., a Dutch missionary, aged 28; Anthony Geerts C.M., a Dutch lay brother, aged 62; Vladislav Prinz C.M., a Polish lay brother, aged 28; Fr. Emmanuel, a French Trappist of Notre-Dame de Liesse, aged 60, as well as layman of Czech nationality, named Biscopich, who was in Tchengting to repair the Cathedral organ.

— In 1940, at Kao-cheng, Shing-An, in the Vicariate of Tchengting, Father Laurent Ch'enn, a diocesan priest, was buried alive, together with his catechist, by the Communists, half-way between Siao-kuan-yang and his residence. He had just come from giving the Sacrament of Extreme Unction to a dying man. They were killed because the priest had reprimanded a woman who had had dishonourable contact with Communists.

In 1945 at Tchengting, Louis Uao, a diocesan priest, was imprisoned and later condemned to forced labour, as a result of which he died.

In 1947, in Tchengting, Joseph K'ung C.M., a colleague of Monsignor Job Ch'enn C.M., was condemned to death by a so-called People's Jury, then executed on the pretext that he had collaborated with the Japanese during the Sino-Japanese War.

— In 1950, at Che-kia-Tch'oang, in the Vicariate of Tchengting, Jacques Chao C.M. and Jacques Ou, a diocesan priest, were condemned to death. Before the execution, they were shackled and forced into a lorry to form part of a parade of prisoners in the streets of the town. The two victims shouted loudly, "Long live the Catholic Church, the Pope and the Chinese Republic." They sang the Ave Maria in Latin and called out, "Down with Communists." They were then executed by beheading.

— In 1950, at Nanchang, Jiangxi, it was the turn of the arch bishop, Monsignor Joseph Chow T'si-che C.M., who taught Latin to Joseph Chow Chihyi C.M., in the seminary. During their occupation of Mainland China, the Communists proposed to Monsignor Chow that they would have him appointed "Pope of the Patriotic Church of Communist China," with the intention of separating this so-called "patriotic" church from the Roman Catholic Church. One day some insidious Communist leaders contacted him and made known their intention in visiting him. But, Monsignor answered them with marvelous, even piquant adroitness, as follows: "Thank you for your visit. Your idea is praiseworthy, but it is impossible for me to be Pope Communist China, since Communist China is too small to have Pope. If you could propose me as Pope of the Universal Church, would willingly accept. Otherwise, it is useless to discuss the matter". The Communists departed angrily; the archbishop was put under surveillance, and later imprisoned. He died in a forced-labour camp 1972, after 22 years of imprisonment.

— In 1951, in Beijing, Pierre Souen C.M., Director of the Beijing Seminary, was imprisoned. His chains were so tight, that his wounds became gangrenous. He died on 16th September 1951.

— Miracles. According to some people who came back from Beijing after visiting relatives on the Mainland, some people prayed near the tomb of Fr. Pierre Souen, to obtain his intercession for a cure, which several of them did obtain, thanks be to God.

— Paul Tchang C.M. and Fr. Ignace Ts'i, a diocesan priest of the Beijing Diocese, were imprisoned on the same day as Fr. Souen.

— In 1952, in Tientsin, Jean Chao C.M., was condemned to the forced labour; since then there has been no news of him.

Finally, it must be stated that the most violent persecution took place between 1965 and 1967, during the great “Cultural Revolution.” At that time, the priests and people who remained faithful to Rome, was could not escape prison or forced-labour camps.

Having mentioned our Vincentian martyrs, or victims of persecution, I conclude this glorious record with that saying of Tertulian, mentioned already, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of Christians.” May their blood be the seed of many vocations for the two families of St. Vincent de Paul. It is by means of the blood of Blessed John Gabriel, of Francis Regis Clet and all the other martyrs who died for the Faith that we have received those marvelous spiritual benefits listed in “The Vincentian Missions of China (14th year 1936-1937),” which I hope to bring to light in the following pages.

IV. Spiritual Benefits

a) Formation of Native Clergy by the Vincentians in the Fourteen Vicariates

The object of the following lines is to point out that the Lazarists never lost sight of the recommendations which St. Vincent used to make to his missionaries, when sending them to evangelise the poor country people, nor of the double objective given them by the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, when confiding to them the mission of China — this is, the conversion of infidels and the formation of a native clergy.

To start with, in 1721, Fr. Muneller C.M., had opened a seminary in Macao. Of the 8 seminarists, 3 were ordained priests, 2 becoming Lazarists. Fr. Muneller himself was teaching Latin. The 2 ordained Lazarists were Frs. Shu and Paul Sou.

In 1802, Fr. Chislain C.M., had been confirmed as Superior of in the Lazarist Mission of Beijing, in succession to Fr. Raux C.M. Being a competent physicist, he could have been a member of the Academy of Mathematics, but declined the offer made him on behalf of an other confrere. In fact, his preference was for continuing in the country mission field and, in particular, in the formation of Chinese priests, with the help of Fr. Ferreti C.M., and a Chinese Lazarist, Fr. Joseph Han, who was the Assistant Director of the Novitiate. Up to that point, the Lazarists had completed the formation of 25 young confreres. In his lifetime, Fr. Chislain saw 18 of his students ordained priests.

Up to the year 1746, only 2 Chinese had been ordained priests for the Community; by 1852, in the whole of China, there were 25 Chinese of the total of 43 Lazarists. In 1859, 29 of the total of 56 Lazarists were Chinese nationals. By 1873, of the 125 Vincentians in China, a total of 105 were Chinese priests.

To achieve the object of forming a native clergy, each Apostolic Vicariate under control of the Congregation had, by 1900, its own seminaries (both major and minor) as follows:

- A Regional Major Seminary in the Vicariate of Ningbo (until 1937) with 15 seminarists.
- A Vincentian Major Seminary set up in 1902 at Kianshin, Tchekiang, with 45 seminarists.
- A Vincentian Major Seminary founded in 1909 at Chala, Beijing, which from 1920 on became the Regional Seminary, with 90 major seminarists.

According to the statistics of “Missions Lazaristes” (1936-1937) there were 260 major seminarists throughout all 14 Vincentian Vicariates, with 875 minor seminarists, while 637 priests had been “formed” by the Lazarists in China, of whom 450 joined the Congregation.

On 24th June 1926, Pope Pius XI, appointed 6 Chinese Bishops, including 2 Vincentians, and a diocesan priest formed by the Vincentians. Monsignor Joseph Hu C.M., Bishop of Taizhou; Meichoïr Souen C.M., Bishop of Ankou, Hubei and Monsignor Philippe Chao, Bishop of Suan-hoa.

Fourteen priests trained by the Lazarists were raised to the episcopate, among whom the Vicariate of Tcheningting contributed 3 arch bishops and 3 bishops.

b) List of Christians in the fourteen Vincentian Vicariates in China

These are the statistics from “The Vincentian Missions of China” (1936-1937).

a) In Hebei Province, comprising 7 Vicariates (Beijing, Tcheningting, Yongping, Baoding, Tientsin, Ankou and Shungtei) there were 226 diocesan priests, 174 religious priests, 607 minor seminarists with 83 in the major seminary. There were 21,666 adult baptisms, 12,209 baptisms of infants, with 542,874 Christians.

b) The Province of Zhejiang comprising 3 Vicariates (Ningbo, Hangzhou and Taizhou) had 80 diocesan priests, 74 religious priests, 81 minor seminarists, with 25 in the major seminary, 3,144 baptisms of adults, with 4,095 infant baptisms, and 100,236 Christians.

c) In Jiangxi Province, made up of 4 Vicariates (Nanchang, 56 Kiang, Yukiang and Ganzhou) there were 55 diocesan in priests, 93 religious priests, 185 students in the minor seminary and 16 in the major seminary, while there were 2,760 adult baptisms, 3,583 infant baptisms, making a total of 98,826 Christians.

c) Lazarists in Taiwan (Republic of China)

Four mission districts were handed over to the Lazarists in Taiwan since 1952. It was thus that the Dutch arrived in 1952 in the Diocese in Taipei, where they worked in 6 parishes. The Americans arrived next in 1953 in the Diocese of Tainan, where they run 5 parishes. After that, other Americans came to the Diocese of Kaohsiung, where they have 5 parishes. Finally, some Chinese confreres came to Sze-hu in Kiayi Diocese, where they have 4 parishes.

In 1963, Fr. William Slattery, Superior General, sent Fr. Joseph Chow Chih-yi, Visitor of the Province of Northern China, as delegate, to make a visitation of the Chinese confreres.

In 1965, St. Vincent's School was set up at Sze-hu for the purpose of recruiting vocations, and in 1987 an Internal Seminary was opened.

In our 4 districts of Taiwan, we have 16,248 Christians, 32 Lazarist priests, of whom 16 are Chinese with 1 lay brother.

V. Conclusion

My aim in making this presentation of the spiritual fruits of our mission in our 14 Vicariates in Continental China, and in Taiwan is to ask the prayers of readers on the occasion of the Canonization of John Gabriel Perboyre, and to thank the good God for the graces obtained by the blood of the martyrs and other Vincentian victims.

Finally, we would like the Vincentian Province of China to organise a pilgrimage to Rome in order to assist at the Canonization ceremonies, a pilgrimage in which both confreres and delegates from the parishes confided to us can participate and also, perhaps, priests from Taiwan who might volunteer to come.

Let us finish by singing "Haec dies quam fecit Dominus, exulte mus et laetemur in ea," because we have a confrere who is the first martyr saint of China.

(Andrew Spelman, C.M., translator)