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JOHN GABRIEL PERBOYRE

Thomas Davitt C.M.

John Gabriel Perboyre was born in 1802 on his father's farm, Le Puech, near the village of Montgesty about 70 miles north of Toulouse, the eldest of eight. His uncle, Jacques Perboyre, was a Vincentian who had survived the French Revolution and afterwards had established a boarding school for boys in Montauban. John Gabriel's father wanted some further education for his second son Louis beyond what was available in the local school, so he decided to send him to Jacques' school in Montauban. John Gabriel was the eldest son and was to inherit the farm, so it was not considered necessary for him to proceed beyond primary education. However, as Louis was only nine his father decided to send John Gabriel, aged fourteen, to Montauban to keep Louis company from November till Easter. After that he would be needed at home on the farm.

When his father arrived in Montauban to bring John Gabriel home he met with an unexpected reception. The teachers had suggested to Jacques that John Gabriel should continue his studies and enter the major seminary. Jacques passed on this suggestion to his brother and nephew; it was a surprise to both of them. After his father had gone home alone John Gabriel had time to think. On 16 June 1817 he wrote to his father:

My dear Father,

After you left town I thought over your suggestion that I should take up Latin. I prayed to God to know what life I should choose in order to arrive safely in heaven. After lots of prayers I came to the conclusion that I should study for the priesthood, so I've started Latin, but with the intention of giving it up if you don't agree with what I'm doing...

Jacques got him special lessons from a priest, who later wrote to him: "You were kind enough to hand him over to me for special attention. I had a good foundation to work on and he amazed me with his progress...". Thirteen years after his death Bishop Jean-Henri Baldus CM wrote:

I always thought him very intelligent, a deep mind capable of dealing with any sort of scientific, philosophical or literary subject; in such matters there were few confreres of his time, I think, who were his equal...

In his last year at school a mission was given in Montauban by the Vincentians and John Gabriel decided he'd like to join the Congregation. As the Congregation had been suppressed during the Revolution there was no internal seminary in France in 1818. His uncle's suggestion of starting one in his house in Montauban was accepted and John Gabriel was received there on 10 March 1818, two months after his sixteenth birthday, the first seminarist in France since the Revolution; two more were received later that year. During his time there he completed his secondary education, then began philosophy while teaching one of the junior classes. He took his vows in 1820 and then went to Paris to start theology. His uncle arranged his travel so that he could meet his parents, the first time since leaving home.

In October 1823 he was sent to Montdidier, between Paris and Amiens. The Congregation had a boys' boarding school there, and John Gabriel was given charge of the lowest class, with eight boys. In April 1824 he went back to Paris to be ordained sub-deacon, and returned to Montdidier to teach philosophy. In May 1825 he was back in Paris to be ordained deacon.

That year he was issued with an internal passport which has survived. It shows he was 1m 65cm (about 5'6") in height, with black hair coming down over the forehead, brown eyebrows, grey-black eyes, ordinary nose, small mouth, black beard (i.e. stubble), round chin, round face, ruddy complexion. He returned to Montdidier for another year's teaching.

On 24 August 1826 he wrote to his father:

In your letter of 9 June you give out to me for not writing to you and you urge me, both strongly and lovingly, to show a bit more diligence in this matter. After that I couldn't very well try to make excuses for myself for this further delay of two months. However, I'll say first of all that the reason for the delay is not forgetfulness, for since I got your letter not a single day has passed, I think, without my thinking of it. I could then add that lack of opportunity must take some of the blame. The day normally starts for us at four o'clock and never ends until nine or ten, and often what we have to do keeps us going till midnight. Above all, as the holidays draw near our work doubles, just as yours does at harvest time. A week ago I started a letter to Father Gizard and I'd no sooner started it than I had to break off, and it's only today that I got a chance to take it up again. Finally, my dear Father, I was putting off my reply so that I could tell you whether I'd be staying on in Montdidier for another year. I had some hope that I might be going to Montauban. My uncle made great attempts to get me but I now know that I'm not being appointed there. It seems certain, though that I'll be changed, and if little rumours which have reached me can be believed I may even be sent somewhere in the Quercy region. Be that as it may, I'll let you know my

new appointment before leaving Paris; I'm going to be there in a fortnight's time and don't expect to be leaving it until the end of September.

So, my very dear Father, the day isn't very far off when the Lord is to place on my shoulders the yoke of priesthood; that day will be the greatest of my life. What happiness for me if I could receive the priesthood with all the necessary dispositions! What a source of grace for myself and others! God's mercy must be very great for him to select such unworthy servants; you know how little I deserve such an extraordinary favour. Pray to our Lord, please, that I don't waste the graces he wants to give me.

In a month's time I'll be a priest, as I'm to be ordained on 23 September.

On 23 September 1826 he was ordained priest in the chapel of the Daughters of Charity in the rue du Bac, Paris. Many biographies put his ordination in 1825, but the above letter and several other documents show that 1826 was the year.

He was appointed to Saint Flour, less than 100 miles from his home, to teach theology. Shortly after his arrival he wrote to his father:

I'm very pleased with my new appointment. It looks as though the Auvergne climate will suit me just as well as that of Picardy; my health couldn't be better. I got here about three weeks ago; important work didn't leave me a moment to write to you before now; I hope you'll forgive me as you have done so many times before.

At the end of the academic year his uncle made another effort to get him for Montauban, but he was re-appointed to Saint Flour but to new work. In a letter to his brother Louis, who was in the internal seminary in Paris, John Gabriel describes his summer: Twelve days at home in La Puech, three in Cahors, twelve in Montauban, one in Toulouse, four or five in Carcassonne or Montolieu; the trip was long in distance but short in time, useful, pleasant and not too expensive.

His new job was to take charge of a boarding school for boys who intended to become priests. He held this post for five years and was later described as the man who put the place on a stable footing. Thirteen letters to his brother Louis have survived from this period. In May 1828 he told Louis that he was busier than Louis realised, with class every day, acting as "bursar, etc.", and being wanted by everyone, for everything at every moment. Louis is getting the letter only because John Gabriel neglected a cold and is in bed for a week. Louis was studying philosophy and had suggested a philosophical debate by correspondence. John Gabriel says he is no longer professor of philosophy, but suggests one on French grammar, and then lists all the grammatical errors in Louis' letter!

Louis told his brother that he wanted to go to China after ordination. John Gabriel suggests he take some courses in physics, as that subject would be useful there. Towards the end of the letter he writes:

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 100 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.

Later he writes:

The Easter fortnight which for most priests is a period of much work is one of rest for me. The boys are on holidays. I needed this break. During the last six months I don't think I've 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.

He never met his brother again, as Louis left for China after ordination and died at sea.

In his work at Saint Flour John Gabriel was influenced by the educational theories of Lamennais. In August 1832 Lamennais' ideas were condemned by Gregory XVI, and when John Gabriel returned to Saint Flour at the end of the summer holidays he found a letter awaiting him, appointing him Assistant Director of the internal seminary in Paris. In a letter at the time John Gabriel acknowledged that he accepted the decision of the Holy See on Lamennais.

The Director was a 65 year old pre-Revolution confrere, and the following year there were more than twenty seminarists, so John Gabriel had plenty to do. He was also appointed secretary of a sub-commission to study pre-Revolution community decrees.

One of the two confreres ordained with John Gabriel was Jean-Baptiste Torrette; he was immediately sent to China. In March 1834 John Gabriel wrote to him:

I used to flatter myself that I'd be able to go and join you later on but the precarious state of my health and, above all, my unworthiness seem to preclude for ever such a fine ambition. My position as Director of Novices enables me to compensate you amply for having failed you myself; I'll do my best to encourage any vocations for China which appear.

John Gabriel sent his uncle the Superior General's New Year letter of 1835, a quarter of which was about China. Three weeks later he sent him Part 3 of Volume I of the *Annales de la Mission*, also about China. These two documents reflect the thinking in the Mother House at the time, and it is not surprising that John Gabriel's thoughts also turned towards China. For the last half of 1834 he had been trying to get appointed to China but the Superior General and his council insisted that his health was not good enough. Finally they asked the doctor, and he gave permission. In February 1835 he wrote to his uncle:

I've great news for you. God has just granted me a very precious favour which I certainly don't deserve. When he was pleased to give me a vocation to the priesthood the main reason which made me answer his call was the hope of being able to preach to pagans the good news of salvation. Since then I've never really lost sight of this target, and above all the idea of the Chinese mission always made my heart beat faster.

After his death Antoine-François Peyrac, a late vocation who had been professor of philosophy in Saint Flour before entering the internal seminary, remembered him as Director:

He had a particular gift for going back to the truths of theology to seek out in depth the reasons for, and the meaning of, spiritual exercises and maxims of spirituality. He was especially attracted to the great masters, St Thomas and St Bonaventure, for example; he also thought a lot of Monsieur Olier. In order to heal more effectively he knew how to bide his time, turn a blind eye, go easy, when dealing with spiritual ills. His zeal was unhurried, never crude, and without bitterness; what he wanted to achieve he went for wisely, determinedly and with strength, calmly making use of the means available.

He sailed from Le Havre with two confreres, Joseph Gabet and Joseph Perry, in March 1835. They arrived the Portuguese colony of Macao at the end of August. In his first letter from Macao he says he has begun studying Chinese:

I think it will take me a long time to learn this language; going by first indications I won't be as successful as Fathers Gabet and Perry. It's said that Father Clet spoke it only with difficulty. May I, right to the end, be like that venerable confrere whose long apostolic life was crowned with the glorious palm of martyrdom...

Just before Christmas he left for the interior of China, a journey of 600 miles by sea, then 600 or 800 overland. He arrived at his destination in Ho-nan Province in mid-August 1836. He wrote twelve letters within a week of his arrival. In one of them, to a fellow-sufferer in Paris, he asks for "two or three trusses for an inguinal hernia of the right side", as he can't manage without one.

The twelfth is to his father, his first letter to him for two and a half years, and in it he wrote:

If we have to suffer martyrdom it would be a great grace given to us by God; it's something to be desired, not feared.

In spite of his protestations to the contrary it is clear that his health was a continuing problem. He was seriously ill in the autumn of 1836. Eight years after John Gabriel's death Bishop Jean-Henri Baldus CM took issue with something in Jean-Baptiste Etienne's obituary notice of John Gabriel. Etienne had written that John Gabriel got up regularly at four o'clock every morning:

I simply want to get the point across that our dear confrere couldn't get up at four without serious repercussions which would prevent his doing almost anything for the entire day. That's what he told me. So, even though it may be edifying to read the opposite in his Notice this latter, nevertheless, makes those who knew the facts stop for a moment for a bit of reflection. One sees in many notices, Annales de la Propagation de la Foi, and those of our own Congregation, statements which are so far from the truth as to be hurtful, and even cast doubt on the whole thing and reduce the value of reading them.

In December 1836 he preached in Chinese for the first time and then went on his first mission. After more than a year in China he wrote that anyone who had not personally experienced life there cannot understand missionaries' problems; for that reason he suggested that there should always be in Macao and Paris experienced confreres to act as intermediaries between the missionaries and the central administration.

Although he had specifically asked for trusses for a right-side hernia, those that arrived were for the left, and useless. The correct ones did not arrive till August 1839: Two lots arrived, as two different confreres ordered them, unknown to each other. He was criticised for the expense involved, and for things he had written about the administration. He apologised, but would not retract one point: the necessity of a confrere who had actually experienced missionary life in China being involved in administrative decisions in Macao and Paris.

From September 1838 till Pentecost 1839 he gave seventeen missions. He was then supposed to go on a round of visits to mission stations, but another confrere replaced him "out of pity for his poor legs". This meant that in September 1839 he was in Kou-tchen when a band of soldiers arrived. He was at breakfast with Giuseppe Rizzolati OFM and Jean-Henri Baldus CM. Rizzolati and Baldus ran off in one direction, John Gabriel in the opposite. The soldiers looted the house and set it on fire accidentally. John Gabriel was found in a wood the next day and arrested.

An account of his arrest was written later by Evariste Huc CM. In 1841 Baldus wrote to Paris pointing out that Huc's account had many errors, and that Huc had been nowhere near the place of John Gabriel's arrest at the time. Huc says that a catechumen met the soldiers, who explained that they were looking for the priest. According to Huc the catechumen asked what they would pay for information, and they said "Thirty taels". Then the catechumen pointed out John Gabriel. Baldus says this is incorrect; the soldiers so frightened the man that he betrayed John Gabriel through fear, and Huc's detail about an agreed price is "romantic and, at a minimum, very exaggerated". Baldus deals with this in another letter as well:

Secondly, the handing over, or betrayal, was brought about not by money but by fear, for Father Perboyre's supposed guide had been beaten up, according to the messengers from Hou-pé.

André Yang CM confirms this.

During the early period of his imprisonment he was treated very well, by orders of the mandarin. Later, however, another mandarin changed this, as Bishop François-Alexis Rameaux CM explained in a letter:

...he was interrogated and endured all the sufferings reserved for the worst criminals: he was made to kneel on iron chains, on pieces of broken crockery, and beaten in all sorts of ways, with the result that his flesh hung off him in strips.

This is confirmed by André Yang CM, who successfully passed himself off as a merchant who was studying the prison system and was able to visit the prisoner, bring him food and hear his confession. Many of the prison guards assured Yang that John Gabriel would be well treated.

The crime he was charged with was quite clear: he had entered China illegally to preach Christianity "and to deceive and seduce the people". He was, of course, guilty on that charge and was sentenced to strangulation on a cross-shaped gibbet, the sentence being carried out on 11 September 1840. Rameaux wrote:

...he was strangled in accordance with all the Chinese rules, that is to say in three stages, and a kick in the lower abdomen put an end to his sufferings.

A fortnight after the execution Baldus wrote to Jean-Baptiste Torrette CM, who was ordained with John Gabriel; only this part of the letter has survived:

If you were to ask me what's being said about Fathers Rameaux and Perboyre do you think I'd have nothing but praise to pass on from both Christians and confreres? Speaking only of Father Perboyre, on whom you counted so much in Macao and from whom you expected great things, I don't know what it was about him that displeased the Chinese, but of all the Europeans I have seen in China I haven't seen one who was less to their liking. His great merit would not have been appreciated here; he would have ended up not making a success of it. These are Father Rameaux' words, and he also used to say that if you haven't a better idea of how to get a move on you shouldn't come to China. In many areas the Christians showed great reluctance to have him, made great efforts and used many ruses to get someone else, some other European, but not myself. I know that the question of his physical appearance had nothing to do with it.

Alas! Perhaps I'm going too far, but I feel sort of bound to let you know. In my opinion, and I was there, and in that of all the other confreres, both European and Chinese, the reason for the persecution being so violent was because Father Perboyre was caught. If he was caught, then, humanly speaking, it was because he was a wet hen, and through his own stupidity.

There's no point in going into details. It wasn't just a question of having legs, but rather of being quick. Everyone agrees on this; the Christians are well able to repeat it; in a similar situation Father Rameaux would not have been caught. Our belongings, our vestments, would not have been destroyed. The other confreres counted on Father Perboyre, who had recently been appointed assistant superior. I saved only the money and myself.

Such happenings, when attributable to Providence alone, raise no problems for Christians, but when personal blame enters in there is always something which hurts.

Anyway, knowing Father Perboyre's personal holiness I'm quite convinced that he is not guilty in the sight of God, and I'd willingly change places with him...