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THE HOLINESS OF J. G. PERBOYRE

André Sylvestre, C.M.

More than 150 years after his death, we are getting ready to canonize our confrere John Gabriel Perboyre. Some troublemakers might say: "*He was not holy enough for this!*" But we need to imitate the models that the Church gives us. Then they might say: "*He is hardly someone to imitate _ not everyone can be martyred in China!*" That is quite obvious. But even so I would insist that even if he were not a martyr, he would still merit to be honored as a saint.

I do not think that anyone could come to a voluntary acceptance of martyrdom without being prepared by a life of holiness. Heroism is desirable, but it cannot be improvised at the last moment _ requires long training. Anyone who weaves little failures into each day of life will not suddenly be transformed into a hero.

Some confreres have said to me, "*Your John Gabriel is so perfect I am driven to despair!*" They would probably prefer that he were like this monk I know at the Abbey of St. Mary of the Desert, about 20 miles from Toulouse. The dear man makes no secret of the years he has spent in prison for who knows what escapades. But, like St. Paul, he encountered the Lord who put his hand on his shoulder and transformed his life between one day and the next. Another confrere said to me: "*Now if John Gabriel had just spent some of his life carousing, like Charles de Foucault, we would be able to tell ourselves _ even if we did not do that sort of thing ourselves _ `Why could I not achieve a holiness like his?`*" St. Augustine, who did do that sort of thing, observed: "**Quod isti et istae, cur non ego?**" Why cannot I achieve what these men and women have?

To put it another way, John Gabriel would most certainly have done better to be a saint only because of his martyrdom, because the holiness that fills his whole life leaves an example that discourages us poor sinners, mere mortals that we are. But we remind ourselves of what Jesus has said: "*Be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect!*" He knew how impossible that would be for us, but he also knew we needed that ideal shining before us, no matter how exalted, to light our footsteps. And if the divine perfection seems totally inaccessible, that of a saint who has lived a life like ours (except for the martyrdom) seems closer to us, even if it shines much brighter than the best of our modest abilities.

So I would like to tell you that even if John Gabriel had not died a martyr, his holiness would not be less dazzling, because it shines out in the different stages of his life.

Holiness: a family legacy

John Gabriel was born to a family with a deep faith. The holiness of children is shaped on a mother's or grandmother's knee and is nourished by the faith of their ancestors. One of John Gabriel's uncles, his father's brother, **Jacques Perboyre** (1763-1848), had become a Vincentian and contemplated going to China as a missionary. During the Revolution and under the Reign of Terror, he led the dangerous life of a fugitive, celebrating Mass and dispensing the sacraments in secret, always threatened by arrest and the death sentence that had already claimed some 20 confreres.

After the winter of those terrible years, a religious renewal gave life to a spring in which many flowers of saintliness blossomed. So it was in the home of Pierre Perboyre and Marie Rigal, who led their family in daily prayer on their knees. Of their eight children, six gave themselves to the Lord: three sons became Vincentians, two of their sisters became Daughters of Charity and a third was called to be a Carmelite.

A Precocious Holiness

Let us examine John Gabriel, who was the first to answer the Lord's call. He was the oldest child in the family, and his seriousness gave him an authority over his sisters and brothers and their playmates that all accepted. Their opinion of him took a step forward when the parish priest had to leave him in charge of a catechism class. His behavior at church was exemplary, to which his old classmates bore witness around 1845. The priest, who tested his understanding of the catechism, asking questions about more difficult points, used to say: "*Let us ask our little doctor!*" In light of his excellent aptitude, the priest let him make his First Holy Communion at age 11, well before the usual 14.

John Gabriel had an excellent memory, and on Sunday, when he got back home, he would repeat the message of the parish priest's sermon for any who could not attend Mass. This provoked his father's impressed surprise. His old playmates, talking about his life in Montgesty 40 years earlier, said that even then they called him **the little saint**.

Our little saint was not thinking about becoming a priest _ at least he never talked about it. It was quite by accident that he came to ask himself that question. When he was 15, his parents sent him for a few months as a companion to his little brother, the 10 year- old Louis, who was beginning his studies at the seminary in Montauban that their uncle Jacques had started. After three months, his uncle Jacques had observed such tendencies to spirituality and intelligence that he suggested John Gabriel continue his studies in preparation for the priesthood. He proposed this to his brother, the father of his two nephews. In this delicate situation, John Gabriel showed remarkable obedience to what seemed to be the Will of God, and at the same time, an admirable deference and availability towards his parents.

During his three and a half years at Montauban, he amazed everyone with his dedication and piety. One of his teachers said of him much later: "*I never saw in him*

the slightest foolishness or the least lack of discipline." He spent long periods in the chapel. He would voluntarily help anyone who asked him, and one of them said long afterwards: "*His willingness to help me was admirable.*"

After John Gabriel's death, a fellow novice at Montauban, Fr. Rossignol, wrote to Uncle Jacques:

His obedience was such that I do not believe anyone could have renounced himself more. He missed no opportunity to practice mortification.... You might think his virtue would make him austere or rigid. Not in the least _ he was happy and very pleasant during recreation.... This was a pure soul into which no breath of evil ever entered.

I was vexed to see him so perfect, and I can tell you I searched for ways to trip him up _ but I found him invulnerable. I would never have believed it possible for a novice to come so close to perfection.

He was most solicitous about the confreres of his house, and each one, when they said their farewells, kept affectionate memories of him.

John Gabriel went to Paris for his theological studies in January, 1821. Here, too, he left the reputation of a saint with his classmates. This is what one of them said during the enquiries after his martyrdom:

Around him you breathed the perfume of an edifying holiness. I never saw the slightest fault in him. He often accused himself of failures in kindness, but I could never figure out what those failings might be. You can say anything good on his account that you want, and I do not think you could exaggerate. I was amazed to find him perfect in everything and in every situation.

In the Work of Formation

After his theological studies, John Gabriel was sent for a while to be a professor at the Montdidier school in the diocese of Amiens. Everyone was won over by his gentleness and kindness.

Ordained a priest on September 23, 1826, he was appointed to the major seminary of St. Flour as a dogma professor. The seminarians liked him for his goodness and friendliness. A good number asked him to be their spiritual director. One of the other professors told the seminarians one day: "*Look to Fr. Perboyre, he is a saint. I believe he has preserved the innocence of his baptism.*"

He prepared for his classes by study, as one should, but especially by meditation. He himself said: "*The first and the last book that we should consult is the crucifix.*"

At the request of Bishop de Salamon of St. Flour, who had come to know and esteem him, he took responsibility for the minor seminary. Some of the diocesan clergy collaborated with him and later remembered his reputation for holiness. One of them witnessed this, saying:

He had every quality you would ask for in a good superior. He must have learned well how to obey, for he governed us without a single harsh word or bossy tone _ he treated us like the apple of his eye.

Another expressed the same opinion when he said:

If you asked me to list the faults I found in him, I would be very embarrassed, because I never saw even a shadow of an imperfection in him.

Those who worked in the house were full of admiration of him and said:

Ah, what a holy man! How pleasant it was to work for him. He really knew how to make us feel better when we were distressed! And what a touching interest he took in our welfare!

The door keeper went further in his testimony:

I used to have to bother him very often! I never once saw in his manner or in his words that he was in the least annoyed.

Fr. Perboyre did better at running the minor seminary than anyone could have hoped. Everyone, beginning with the bishop, ascribed this outcome above all to the holiness of the young superior, and the praise of the Vicars General on his behalf never ceased. The Vincentian superior of the major seminary, Fr. Grappin, passed this judgement on him:

Fr. Perboyre is the most accomplished man I know. He is a man of God, and never loses awareness of that Presence for even a moment.

The whole town of St. Flour felt disappointment when they heard of his departure for Paris in the autumn of 1832. The new Superior General, Fr. Salhorgne, sent for him to be an assistant to and perhaps even replace the elderly director of the novitiate. Fr. Salhorgne knew of John Gabriel's work at Montdidier and St. Flour, which is why he did not hesitate to call him to this delicate task: the spiritual formation of the candidates for the Mission.

We have two extraordinary witnesses to Fr. Perboyre's holiness during these next two and a half years, from the autumn of 1832 to the beginning of March, 1835. One is Fr. Girard, a 43 year-old diocesan priest who had joined the Company, and who was later the superior of the major seminary in Algiers. His knowledge of people is such that his testimony should be quoted at length:

The first time I saw him, he was with Fr. Étienne, who was then the Procurator General of the Congregation. They were standing side by side across from me. Fr. Perboyre looked so humble and modest that I took him for a brother of the Congregation, assigned the lowest tasks in the house. I was amazed that Fr. Étienne seemed to make much of him and be most considerate of him. This most poor and quiet confrere, who seemed so like our suffering Savior, keeps coming to mind and touches me the way a saint would.... After he left the room, I was stupefied when Fr. Étienne told me that this man, dressed like a poor person, was the director of the novitiate.. .. I, who saw in him only a serving brother, should have been trying to see him as master of the novices and to get him to speak, for he said nothing in our discussion.... I seemed to see in his person all the virtues I had read about in the lives of the saints.

For many years, I had wanted to meet a saint. It seems a great grace and a real help to my own sanctification that God has granted me this kindness. Everything I had seen until then did not take away the hope that I might be a saint. I think God strengthened my desire by seeing Fr. Perboyre. He was so holy that I did not see him stumble in word or action. And I watched him most deliberately during the six months I spent in very close proximity to him.... Holiness ran in his blood, and I do not know if anyone could have been holier. As I said several times to his confreres before he was martyred: "*You will see Fr. Perboyre canonized!*"

The other testimony was given by one of the young novices, who later became the pastor of St. Anne's in Amiens _ Fr. Aubert. This is how he describes what he often witnessed.

When I would serve his Mass, I saw his feet leave the ground several times _ sometimes more, sometimes less. I do not know whether they lost all contact with the earth. I can tell you that once his feet lifted so noticeably that I could easily see the soles of his shoes, and if he was still touching the ground it was only by the merest tip of his shoes, in a way I think would be physically impossible. Another time, in a similar situation, he called me over after the Elevation and said to me: "*Look carefully at the Host; do you see something there?*" I had to say "*No,*" and went back to my place. Our holy confrere very carefully hid from the public anything that might seem extraordinary, or might earn him others' esteem.

The testimony of these two clerics about Fr. Perboyre in exceptional circumstances is the proof of a holiness that did what it could to remain unnoticed. But its radiance was such that as notable a confrere as Fr. Étienne, when he wrote the life of the martyr some time after his death, declared:

It would be impossible to make kindness work harder than he did. You could justly apply to him the prophet's words that we apply to the Savior that "*he would not break the bent reed nor extinguish the smoldering wick.*" It is impossible to think of someone exercising more control over the self: always calm, he seemed undisturbed in the midst of events most able to upset us. An angelic serenity colored his every feature. No one could cite even one example in his life of a situation in which the slightest impatience showed in him. This virtue was, in his hands, the key that opened every heart, and the means he used to work the most difficult conversions. His kindness was perfect _ not one single one of the many pupils he taught could speak of one harsh word coming out of his mouth. Their affection for him was unchanging, and you can attribute that to the charm of his kindness.

John Gabriel always told his novices that Jesus is our light and the ideal we should imitate, and he put these words in Jesus' mouth: "*I have not given you the example of my virtues so you could admire them, but so you might imitate them.*" He would add, when preaching the Word, this example:

The saints in heaven are portraits of Jesus Christ risen up and glorious, just as on earth they were pictures of Jesus Christ suffering, humiliated and hard-working.... We should have our eyes always fixed on Jesus Christ, sharing his thoughts and imitating his virtues.

John Gabriel was teaching this conformity to Jesus Christ in this prayer which he wrote:

O, my divine Savior, by your great power and infinite mercy, change me and transform me into you. May my hands be the hands of Jesus! May my words be the words of Jesus! May all my senses and my body serve only to glorify you! But, above all, transform my spirit and all its abilities: may my memory, my intelligence, and my heart be the memory, the intelligence and the heart of Jesus! May my actions and my thoughts be like your actions and thoughts so that, just as your Father said of you: "*This day have I begotten you,*" God might say the same to me and add, as your heavenly Father did: "*This is my beloved son, the object of all my favor.*"

This prayer perfectly reflects the effort at total conformity to Jesus Christ achieved by Fr. Perboyre and proposed as the spiritual program to his novices.

Conformity to Jesus Christ was always the central element of his priestly spirituality. John Gabriel focused his entire life, day after day, to making his life conform to that of Christ. He could most honestly proclaim with St. Paul: "*It is not longer I who live, but Christ lives in me.*" He was given the grace to become a perfect imitator of Christ, even in his Passion and Death. We see him follow, step by step, and repeat in his own flesh the various phases of the Passion of Christ.

He shared this desire to imitate Christ even in his Passion with the novices when he showed them the habit Fr. Clet wore to his execution and the rope that strangled him. Fr. Perboyre said to them:

Here is the clothing of a martyr, the habit of Fr. Clet! Here is the cord with which he was strangled! What happiness for us if we come to the same end!

Once, as the novices were coming out of a room, he took one aside and said: "*Pray hard that my holiness will grow strong so that I can go to China, to preach Jesus Christ and to die for him!*"

After his brother, Louis, died on the trip out to China, John Gabriel was mystically certain that he would replace him. He lived by this conviction, and he wrote of his joy to his uncle.

The novices who knew of his desire were enthusiastic when they learned he was actually going to go, and some of them offered to go with him, so much did they love and admire him.

The goodbyes in the courtyard of the *Maison Mère* were addressed mostly to a confrere and friend, but also to the saint who was leaving for the place to which God called him, toward his missionary vocation which they had the premonition would be crowned with the martyrdom he desired. The Superior General, Fr. Salhorgne, was not the least moved of the confreres when he knelt on the pavement with all the others and asked of our hero a final blessing.

Towards the Heights

Our missionary took ship from Le Havre on Saturday, March 21, 1835. His companions, Mr. Gabet and Mr. Perry, were still deacons. This little group got along very well with the crew during the three-month voyage between Le Havre and Batavia. The radiance of Fr. Perboyre's holiness in the eyes of the officers and seamen was such that at the moment the missionaries left the boat after saying goodbye, the members of the crew shared their impressions, saying of John Gabriel: "**That one is a real saint!**"

They boarded an English ship in Batavia which took them first to Surabaya and then to Macao. When the French Vincentians in Macao, Frs. Danicourt and Torrette,

learned that Fr. Perboyre was coming, they wrote joyfully to Paris about this good news, for the reputation of the assistant director of the novitiate had already arrived: **"You have sent a real treasure to China!"**

The holiness of our hero did not prevent him from appreciating the pleasures of the voyage or the company of his confreres: a sad saint is a sad excuse for a saint. For example, at Surabaya, he went swimming with his shipmates. They also made several excursions on the rivers in Java and the nearby isle of Madura. During the time he was passing thru Macao and traveling towards his mission, he experienced the joys of friendship with a pleasure his letters make clear. In Macao, he met up with Fr. Torrette, an old schoolmate. On the trip to Jiangxi, he spent several days with Fr. Laribe, like himself originally from the Diocese of Cahors _ they spoke together in the language of their birth place, called "quercynol," swapping news and stories. Later, he spent some time with Fr. Rameaux, who was the same age and ordained the same year, 1826, but in Montauban, where he was well acquainted with Uncle Jacques Perboyre.

John Gabriel threw himself into apostolic work when he got to his mission. But, in the design of God, he had to fulfill in himself a most perfect resemblance to Christ his model. He was battered by two great tests. He had hardly arrived at the place of his apostolic labor when he was struck with a terrible fever that so wore him down that he was given the Last Rites. He was not up and about until November, two or three months later. Then a spiritual trial followed this physical test. He felt he was an obstacle to grace and was convinced of his uselessness. He went so far into this night of faith that he thought himself lost. These were weeks of real agony, from which Christ himself delivered him, appearing to him and reassuring him. A Chinese confrere, who worked with him for many years, did not share John Gabriel's opinion of himself, but used to say to any who would listen: **"He is a living Saint!"**

From the time of his arrival at his mission station in August, 1836, a series of events completed the extraordinary resemblance between our martyr and Christ, especially in the details of his Passion. His Holiness, Leo XIII, was pleased to emphasize them in the Brief of Beatification.

During one of the many interrogations his judges forced on him, he was made to put on the priestly vestments that had been confiscated from the mission. Seeing him dressed that way, filled with a prayerful majesty, the witnesses to the scene cried out full of admiration: **"He is the Divine Fouo; the Divine Fouo lives!"** _ calling him an incarnation of Buddha.

In prison, John Gabriel's patience and gentleness made such an impression on the other prisoners and the guards that they treated him with respect, and toward the end of his captivity they worked to surround him with care and kindness.

Jean Guitton, in his book, *Portrait of Marthe Robin*, says that

it would be good for the fundamental moment (which roots our faith, the Passion of Christ) to repeat itself. The story of the saints is this reproduction: it is good and wonderful that there are these occasional imitations of the Passion in our word... (p. 239)

John Gabriel achieved this perfection, imitating and bearing living witness to the Passion of Christ. No element was missing: the agony, betrayal for 30 pieces of silver, arrest, the back and forth between tribunals, the Cyrenean, abandonment by his own, denial by a trusted companion, a crown of thorns, the torture on a cross-shaped gibbet, the thieves, the sharing of his garments.

Passing through the region some time after the death of our martyr, Fr. Huc inquired about the facts and wrote:

When Fr. Perboyre was martyred, a large cross, luminous and very well-defined, appeared in the sky.... Many pagans saw this marvel and some of them cried out: "*That is the sign Christians worship.... I want to serve the heavenly Master....*" According to the inquiry made by Bishop Rizzolati, this cross was seen at the same place in the sky by a large number of witnesses, both Christian and pagan, in areas far distant from one another. The bishop carefully questioned the Christians who knew Fr. Perboyre, and every one of them said that **they always thought of him as a great saint....**

That our martyr appeared to be a great saint in the eyes of his Christians should not surprise us. The final years of his missionary life and the circumstances of his passion and death clearly demonstrated his holiness. But his whole life had been a movement toward that holiness as we have seen in the testimony of witnesses at every stage of this full life.

In Conclusion

The Little Company and the Diocese of Cahors will be able, when Fr. Perboyre is canonized, to honor this saint whose amicable holiness won every heart. Sometimes a saint can seem a little harsh. That was the case with Alain de Solminihac, whose beatification was promoted by the Diocese of Cahors and the Canons Regular. This friend of St. Vincent was one of the exemplary bishops of the 17th Century. However, St. Vincent wrote about him to the Daughters of Charity he was sending to Cahors: "*It is a matter of conscience for him to say even one indulgent word.... But this is a prelate **that everyone thinks is a saint!***" (Coste X, 578-580). His desire for reform at any price earned him the hostility of some of his priests. The present Vicar General said to me: "*When there was an idea of seeking his beatification, we searched the documents and the archives of the bishop, looking for a new and more pleasant image which might make him seem friendly, but could not put one together. Everything makes him look surly and not very engaging.*"

This was certainly not the case with John Gabriel _ everyone agrees that they found in him happy and friendly characteristics. Put simply, a holiness just like Christ's shone in him.

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