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The Cause for the Canonization of John Gabriel Perboyre

Thomas Davitt C.M.

John Gabriel Perboyre was executed in China on 11 September 1840. On 9 July 1843 a decree of Pope Gregory XVI authorized the introduction of the causes for beatification of forty-three martyrs, including Francis Regis Clet and John Gabriel. John Gabriel's cause was separated from the others, because of the amount of documentation, evidence of witnesses and graces received. On 10 November 1889 Pope Leo XIII beatified him. His liturgical commemoration was originally celebrated on 7 November, but in the last revision of the calendar it was changed to 11 September, the anniversary of his death.

In 1891 a decree was issued authorizing the resumption of the cause, with a view to canonization. At that time two miracles attributed to the intercession of the beatified person were required for canonization. In the case of John Gabriel the two allegedly miraculous cures both involved Daughters of Charity, Sisters Gabrielle Isoré and Joseph Destailleur. Medical experts examined the cures and gave their opinion in 1897. There were further comments, questions, and answers during 1900-1902, and then the revised medical opinion was submitted in 1902.

In correspondence between the Postulator General and the Superior General it was taken almost for granted that this would be accepted without any problems. In the old St. Joseph's, on Temple Road, Blackrock, Dublin, a stained glass window was installed with "St. John Gabriel Perboyre" on it. However, it is interesting to note that in the Superior General's New Year circular letters there is no indication of such a degree of expectancy. In the letter of 1900 it is said that the cause had received a momentary set-back, but that there was nothing to worry about. In that of the following year it was reported that the cause was moving forward. In the *Annales de la Mission* around that time there was no reference to John Gabriel's canonization in the immediate future.

The new *Positio* was discussed at a Preparatory Congregation on 28 April 1903, and objections were raised. There were 21 members voting and on the allegedly miraculous cure of Sister Gabrielle Isoré, the only one of interest now (see below), 9 voted affirmatively, 4 negatively, 6 abstained, and 2 abstained pending further expert medical opinion.

The reason for the negative votes and abstentions was a doubt as to whether the illnesses of the two Sisters were organic or functional. "Functional" would

mean the illness had a hysterical basis, and therefore the apparently instantaneous cure could be natural and not miraculous.

The result of the voting was presented to Leo XIII by the Cardinal Prefect of the Congregation of Rites, Cardinal Serafino Cretoni. The Pope decided that two more experts should be appointed to undertake further investigation.

It seems that for many years after this disappointment no further move was made by the Congregation of the Mission. Once again it is interesting that neither in the Superior General's New Year letter of 1904, nor in the *Annales* of that year, is there any reference to the disappointment.

In 1943 new norms were promulgated about presenting alleged miracles, but at that time the war was still going on.

In 1959 the sponsors of the cause approached the Promoter General of the Faith with a view to moving the cause forward. He asked Professor Vincenzo Lo Bianco to re-examine the evidence. The professor's conclusion was that with the long lapse of time since the original diagnosis he could not, from the documents, make a "definite diagnosis".

In 1969 and 1983 there were new Apostolic Constitutions on canonization. The second one decreed that only one miracle was now needed for canonizing a beatified person.

In 1993 Fr. Giuseppe Guerra CM, the Postulator General, decided that of the two alleged miracles voted on in 1903 the cure of Sister Gabrielle Isoré had the better chance of succeeding as it was better documented. All the documentation on it was given by the Congregation for the Saints to two medical experts, Professor Franco De Rosa and Professor Cristoforo Morocutti for re-evaluation. The decision of the former was that the instantaneous cure of Sister Gabrielle merited discussion at a meeting of the medical commission, while that of the latter was that the cure was inexplicable. The medical commission discussed it at their meeting on 17 November 1994 and their unanimous opinion was that the cure was inexplicable according to current medical knowledge. The case was then passed on to the theologians and once again the decision was affirmative. Finally, on 6 April 1995 the decree for the canonization of John Gabriel, along with those for other beatifications and canonizations, was read in the presence of the Pope, and now (July 1995) all that remains is for a date to be set for the canonization ceremony, with late 1996 seeming to be the most likely time.

The cure of Sister Gabrielle Isoré, D.C.

Céline Isoré, according to the documentation of the cause, was born "in Quaid-Ypres in northern France" in 1851. In 1871 she entered the Daughters of Charity, and was known as Sister Gabrielle. Her first appointment was to the hospital in Nivelles, then to Ghent in Belgium for home care of the sick and then to Héverlé near Leuven to teach in a girls' school. During all this time she enjoyed good health. After fourteen years in Héverlé she began to get ill, in February-March 1889. She began to experience pains in her feet, then right up her back, intermittent at first but later continuous. Her movements became gradually restricted and eventually this necessitated her being confined to bed. The Sisters judged her condition to be rheumatic, and treated her accordingly. But her condition got worse, and the doctor, Joseph Boine, was called in for the first time in July. He was the only doctor who saw her during the period of her illness. She suffered also from insomnia, urinary and respiratory problems. From September she was also partially paralyzed in her lower limbs.

On 2 November her Sister Servant arranged with a priest of the Fathers of the Sacred Hearts (Picpus Fathers) for a novena of prayer and masses for Sister Gabrielle's cure through the intercession of John Gabriel Perboyre, to end on 10 November, the day on which he was to be beatified. On the 9th the doctor saw her as usual; he said later that he had by then given up all hope of her recovery and expected her to die soon.

On the 9th, at 11.30 in the evening, she fell asleep without any medication, and slept till 4.30 the following morning, something which had not happened before. When she woke up she had no pains, could move normally and was able to get up, dress herself and go down to the chapel. In the chapel she cried out "I'm either off my head or I've been completely cured". She stayed for mass with the others, then went to the refectory and ate a normal breakfast.

Diagnosis

Dr. Boine's diagnosis, which he put in writing for the Sister Servant, was that Sister Gabrielle was suffering from a severe form of myelitis. When the medical experts discussed the case in 1891-92, with a view towards the introduction of the cause for canonization, they came to the conclusion that she had suffered from ascending spinal leptomeningitis of a sub-acute form. Two other experts, though, tended towards accepting a hysterical basis for her condition. (She was still alive at that time; she died in 1906). At the voting on her cure in 1903 the eight members who abstained did so because they were not completely satisfied that her illness had been organic; they thought there was a possibility it had had a hysterical element. If the latter were true then her instantaneous cure could have been merely natural and not inexplicable.

In 1959 Professor Lo Bianco felt that after such a lapse of time he could not give a definite diagnosis from the evidence available to him.

In 1993 the documentation was once again submitted to medical experts, Professors Franco De Rosa and Cristoforo Morocutti. The former said the case was worth discussion by a medical commission, especially the instantaneous nature of her cure, the latter gave a positive opinion on the inexplicable nature of the cure.

Professor Morocutti first dealt with the possibility of hysterical illness. He decided that from what was known of the Sister before her illness a hysterical basis was unlikely. Also, it would be unusual for someone aged 38 to develop a such hysterical condition for the first time.

He did not agree with Dr. Boine's diagnosis of myelitis, as many of the symptoms associated with that illness were not mentioned in the documentation as being present.

He thought the diagnosis made in 1891-92 of spinal leptomeningitis was more probable. But here again he noted that in the documents there was no evidence of the presence of symptoms he would have expected if that were the correct diagnosis. Not only that, he also noticed reference to the presence of signs which should not have been there if that were the correct diagnosis.

He then gave as his final opinion that the most probably correct diagnosis of Sister Gabrielle's illness would be ascending polyneuritis, the Guillain-Barré syndrome (GBS); more recently this has been called acute idiopathic polyradiculopathy.

His report was dated 9 June 1994. It was accepted by the medical commission on 5 December 1994.