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## John Gabriel Perboyre in his Letters to his Family

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John Gabriel died in 1840, and in 1940 Brother Joseph Van den Brandt CM edited, printed and published all the letters written by John Gabriel which he could locate, either originals or copies.<sup>1</sup> This book contained 102 letters. In 1996 a new and revised edition of this work was published,<sup>2</sup> but still with the same number of letters; no other letters had been discovered since the first edition.

Sixty-three of the letters were written to members of his family, and most of the others were to confreres, with a very small number to other persons. The family member who received the most letters was his uncle Jacques Perboyre CM (1763-1848), who received 17 totalling more than 50 printed pages. Next comes his younger brother Louis (1807-1831) who received 14, and then his father Pierre (1771-1860) who received 11. His brother Antoine (1813-1860) got seven and his brother Jacques (1810-1896) six. His sister Antoinette (1815-1898) got one. There are no letters to his sisters Jeanne (1805-1854), Mariette (1809-1826?) and Marie-Anne (1817-1896). There are some letters to cousins. There are no letters to his mother; I think that this probably indicates that she was illiterate. There is one letter addressed jointly to his father and mother, written after he had heard of his brother Louis' death. It must be remembered that we are dealing only with letters which have survived. We have no way of knowing whether there were other letters, written by him to family members, which have not survived.

### Letters to his father

In November 1816 John Gabriel, some months before his 15<sup>th</sup> birthday, was sent to a boarding school which his uncle, Jacques Perboyre CM, operated in Montauban, about 70 kilometers from John Gabriel's home. He was being sent there to keep his young brother Louis, aged nine, company for the first few months. The parents' intention was that Louis would get full secondary education, while John Gabriel, the eldest son, would leave school at about 15 and start work on the family farm. About six months after arriving at the school he wrote to his father, on 9 May 1817. It is a short letter and he says it is the first he has ever written, and that he has never even received a letter. It is a typical

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<sup>1</sup> *Lettres du Bienheureux Jean-Gabriel Perboyre, Prêtre de la Mission*, Annotées et publiées par Joseph Van den Brandt, Frère Lazariste, Pékin, Imprimerie des Lazaristes, 1940, 300 pages.

<sup>2</sup> Saint Jean-Gabriel Perboyre, Prêtre de la Mission: *Correspondance*, Annotée et publiée par Joseph Van den Brandt, Frère Lazariste, Pékin 1940; Nouvelle édition revue et corrigée; Congrégation de la Mission, Rome 1996, 324 pp.

schoolboy letter, including “My brother is well, my uncle and my cousins are well... We need socks, jackets and trousers.” At the end of the letter he writes: “I hug you. I also tenderly hug my dear mother, my brothers and sisters” (Letter 1). That hug for his mother is a feature at the end of most of his letters to his father. The style and vocabulary of the letter would suggest that his uncle probably helped him in writing it.

When his father came to Montauban in June to bring John Gabriel home, according to plan, he found an unexpected development. The school authorities suggested that John Gabriel should complete his secondary education and enter a seminary to study for the priesthood. This suggestion did not come from the boy himself but, once he knew of it, he had to think about it. His father returned home, and John Gabriel remained at the school. On 16 June he wrote to his father and said he accepted the suggestion, provided his father had no objection. It is probably reasonable to suppose that his uncle helped him in coming to that decision, and also helped him in composing the letter, as the following two sentences do not seem typical of a 15-year old boy writing his second letter:

*I have consulted God in order to know the state which I should adopt in order to arrive safely in heaven. After many prayers I have believed that the Lord wishes me to enter the priesthood* (Letter 2).

The end of the letter is more typical of his young age; he still needs money for clothes, and Louis is well. Then hugs for everyone, especially his mother.

After that letter there is a gap of almost five years before his next letter home. This was written in January 1822 from Paris, where he was studying at the Vincentian mother-house. It begins with something which will reappear in other letters home, namely making excuses for not writing more frequently, saying that he knows his uncle will give news of him to the family (Letter 3). In the next letter, 30 October 1823, he again makes excuses for not writing: “I admit being somewhat careless,” but he says he thinks of the family all the time. He gives his father some advice about how to deal with his brother Antoine, then aged ten. He is not to be “pushed” towards the priesthood; he is in danger of being corrupted by servants and farm workers, who can be foul-mouthed; these persons are very different when they are out of their employer’s sight (Letter 4).

His father had to reprimand him for not writing more frequently, in June 1826, yet he did not answer that letter till late August, and had to make excuses for the delay. He asks for prayers in view of his up-coming ordination to the priesthood. There is no reference to his mother in this letter (Letter 5).

He was ordained in September 1826 yet did not write home again till 2 November, saying he had celebrated Mass for his parents and all his relations, and thanks them all for their prayers (Letter 6). There was one letter home in 1827 and one in 1829. He gives news of his work as a teacher, mentions his health and his plans for the summer. In the letter of 17 July 1827 he does not mention his mother till a postscript:

*If I finish off this letter without referring to my filial love for my very dear mother, it is not because I forget, but because I know that you will accurately convey my feelings to her (Letter 7).*

In his next letter, 17 July 1829, he tells how busy he is in his work, but that he is availing of the opportunity of sending a letter home with someone who is going in that direction. There is no reference to his mother (Letter 18). On 15 February 1832 he sends a very emotional letter from Saint-Flour, where he was teaching at that time, to his father and mother, after learning of Louis' death at sea:

*My dear Father and my dear Mother,  
Let us mingle our tears, let us join our prayers;  
our dear Louis is no more!  
What sorrowful news for you, for me, for the whole family!*

He then continues with advice on how to look at the sad event from the point of view of Christian hope and confidence in God (Letter 29).

The next letter is a year later, 12 January 1833, from Paris, after taking up his new appointment there; he had no time to write before leaving Saint-Flour, but he had written to his sister as soon as he arrived in Paris and she would have given all his news. His new appointment is better for his health than his previous one. His brother Jacques was a first year seminarist since the previous September, and John Gabriel reports that his health is good. He says that a letter from his sister Antoinette tells him that his father's health is good. All these references to health lead in to some advice to his father:

*[D]on't neglect the care which your age calls for; health is necessary for you to be able to look after the temporal needs of the family and to give serious thought to spiritual matters of conscience, for it is of supreme importance that you be ready to give an account of these to God when he sees fit to call you to himself (Letter 32).*

At the time of that letter his father was 62 years of age. It is not clear why his son thought such advice necessary. In fact his father lived a further 27 years, dying in 1860 at the age of 89; his mother died in 1862, aged 84.

In January 1834 he reports that his sister Antoinette, who had entered the Daughters of Charity some months earlier, had given him a letter to send home, but he inadvertently sent it to his Uncle Jacques! (Letter 42).

His final letter home was written from China on 22 August 1836, a year after his arrival in Macao. It is not a very long letter, less than two printed pages. It gives an outline of the missionary apostolate in China. In the middle of the letter are a couple of sentences, some lines of which were quoted in the decree of his canonization:

*We have to put up with being tired, and other difficulties, but that is so everywhere, and anyway we have to earn heaven by the sweat of our brows. If we have to suffer martyrdom, it would be a great grace offered to us by God; it is something to be wished for, not feared.*

He asks for prayers for himself and for the conversion of the Chinese, and says that on the fourth of each month he will offer Mass for his living relatives and on the fifth for his deceased ones (Letter 83).

### **Letters to his brother Louis**

In his letters to his father John Gabriel never seems to be completely at his ease. Some of the letters give the impression of having been written from a sense of duty, as though he realised that he *should* write home rather than that he really *wanted* to write home. His letters to his brother Louis are completely different. They are clearly letters that he wanted to write, that he enjoyed writing, and which show the deep affection which he had for Louis, reflecting at the same time the affection which Louis obviously had for him.

The earliest surviving letter to Louis is dated 2 September 1827. John Gabriel has just finished his first year as a priest, teaching in the major seminary in Saint-Flour. It is written one week after his arrival in Montauban where he is staying with his uncle. Louis was in the *Maison-mère* in Paris finishing his *seminaire* and due to take his vows three weeks later. The beginning of the letter is a contrast to the start of some of his letters to his father, where he makes excuses for not writing. His letter to Louis starts:

*I have so many opportunities of writing to you these days that it would be inexcusable for me not to do so; today it is a young convert Protestant who is leaving for Saint-Sulpice; tomorrow it is Fr. Gratacap who acts as postman; he is going to Paris and will, no doubt, go to see you (Letter 8).*

He says he arrived in Montauban on 26 August and on the 28<sup>th</sup>, the feast of St. Augustine, he “unloaded” a one-hour panegyric on the saint which the Ursulines “threw on his back.” His letters to his father do not have that sort of flippant vocabulary. The Ursulines and his uncle take such good care of him that Louis need not worry about his health. He gives news of Montauban affairs in which Louis would be interested, such as the prize-giving day, and speculates about possible community appointments. The whole style of the letter is more relaxed and familiar than that in his letters home.

His next letter to Louis was written two months later, dated 31 October 1827. Once again he avails of an opportunity which occurred for sending a letter, because a confrere is leaving Saint-Flour for Paris. He congratulates Louis on his vows, gives news of his visit home during the summer and also what he has heard from there since then. He outlines his summer travels: 12 days at home in Le Puech, three in Cahors, 12 in Montauban, four or five in Carcassonne or Montolieu. The trip was long in distance but short in time, useful, pleasant and not too expensive. He then continues:

*Eventually I got back to Saint-Flour at the height of the row which I have neither the time nor the inclination to describe to you. Neither will I refer to the various phases of my position here which have followed each other so rapidly since then: promoted to authority I was then demoted, and now here I am in authority again. Tragedies could be written about all this, or even an epic poem...*

*The rest can wait till some other day; it is nearly eleven o'clock at night (Letter 9).*

There is a postscript which lets us see something more of John Gabriel's character:

*Fr Trippier carries with him the regrets and the high regard of the diocese, excepting some people, perhaps, whose ill will still honours him. As for myself, I have never before felt parting from a confrere so much.*

Jean-François Trippier was the confrere who was bringing the letter to Paris, and whose position, as superior of a boarding hostel for boys attending the state school, John Gabriel had inherited. Trippier was at the centre of the row referred to in the letter, which involved the bishop, the Vincentian superior of the major seminary and the Superior General. Jean Grappin, the superior of the major seminary, recommended the appointment of John Gabriel as Trippier's successor, a post which he was to hold for five years.

There was not another letter to Louis till five months later, 24 May 1828. Louis had complained that John Gabriel did not write to him often enough. John Gabriel's answer is that Louis has no idea of how busy he is, with

four or five classes or tutoring sessions every day. Because I am director, bursar, etc., etc., I have to be available always, to everybody, for everything, and everywhere at the same time, so how could I take time off to relax with you [by letter] in Paris?

He then explains that Louis is getting this letter only because he himself has been ill for a week and has the opportunity and time to write. He then continues in a way that shows the good relationship the two of them enjoyed, as he pokes gentle fun at Louis:

*You then suggest that we have a philosophical debate. Are you forgetting, then, that nowadays I walk a different path?... If you had suggested some small questions of grammar, that is something else, and I would have tried to answer you. I would begin by pointing out the mistakes which you overlooked in your letter. I would have said, for example, that the French conjunction *quoique* always takes the subjunctive; that there is no diaeresis on *ait*, the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular of the verb *avoir*; that there is an acute accent, not a circumflex, on the 2<sup>nd</sup> *e* in *réfléchir*; that "somebody's letter" means a letter from somebody, not to somebody; that *such and such* an expression is not French, etc., etc., etc. But as regards philosophy, what do you want me to say? I no longer think about it.*

He then teases Louis about being ambitious of becoming a professor of philosophy:

*It is no joke being a professor of philosophy at a time when each one has his own personal ideas about this science, where each one has his own system, his opinions, where there are as many schools as masters.*

And he then proposes what would appear to be a weighty reading list, probably not to be taken seriously (Letter 11).

The next letter was seven weeks later, written at ten o'clock at night because John Gabriel has brought into his office two rowdy boys who "after disturbing the other boys' rest prevent my going to take my own" (Letter 12). Their punishment, apparently, was to be kept standing in his office for a period. He

then gives some news about their younger brother Jacou, who was 18 years old in 1828. He was at their uncle's school in Montauban. All reports from the school about him are good, and he is near the top of his class. Then the Perboyre family failing is mentioned once again: "It is a long time since he himself has written to me." The possibility of Jacou's following his two older brothers into the Vincentian community is mentioned, as something which obviously had already arisen and was known to the two older brothers. John Gabriel writes:

*I do not know what line of action I should take. So, until I see my way more clearly I will avoid any initiative with regard to our dear brother. As regards yourself, if you have any special insights on this matter, go ahead and act on them.*

He is disappointed that Louis did not give any news of the confreres and activities of the *Maison-mère*, even though he should realise that he is always interested in getting such news. Perhaps "gossip" is what he really wanted to hear!

The next letter is five weeks later, dated 16 August 1828, again from Saint-Flour. The first two paragraphs refer to financial matters on which a footnote would have been helpful. John Gabriel, apparently following a thinly-veiled suggestion from Louis, agrees to contribute towards the expense of Jacou's education, as he has already done for their sister Antoinette who was 13 in 1828. The letter also seems to imply that the Superior General, Pierre-Joseph de Wailly, had aided the Perboyre family financially. The letter continues:

*You can imagine how pleased I am to see our brother going to finish his education in the college in Montdidier, where study flourishes and such perfect order reigns! ... Here I am on holidays for the last week. Unless some unexpected order arrives I will spend the whole time in this region. It is only right to work a little for oneself after working a lot for others. Pray for a brother who loves you as himself. Adieu (Letter 14).*

Five weeks later there is a short factual letter, written from Cahors where John Gabriel had stayed for a fortnight, including his annual retreat. He had been three or four days at home in Le Puech, where many were asking about Louis and sending him their good wishes. John Gabriel is just about to set out on his return to Saint-Flour.

*Jacou's departure, for Paris, was to have been at the same time as my own, but Fr. Brunet, who is supposed to be his guide, is not ready yet. The two of them will leave Cahors next Monday evening, September 29, and will therefore arrive in the capital*



*Friday evening or Saturday morning. Make sure our brother leaves in good time for Montdidier. It is rumoured that you will be sent to Montdidier this year; congratulations; you will get on well there sub omni respectu. You will take care of Jacou (Letter 16).*

After that letter there is a gap of seven months, and then John Gabriel accuses Louis of sulking and continues:

*I realise why; you have persuaded yourself that I have not repaid all your advances in the matter of correspondence. Oh Lord! Cool down your rage, and please do not bring on my own... But that would be overdoing the complaints. It is better that I grant you a plenary indulgence; all circumstances favour my sending you my brief. I am on holidays because of the Easter fortnight... On re-reading your October letter (because I have to read again the old ones, since I have no new ones) I have noticed several mistakes which I must point out to you. I know it is not very flattering for a writer in the capital to be instructed by a small-time country teacher... So, I am giving you the tutoring you need, am I not?*

He then asks for help in return, the help of Louis' prayers, as he is "constantly and deeply worried" about his responsibility for others, presumably the students in his care (Letter 17).

It was another seven months before he wrote to Louis again, on 28 November 1829. It is an interesting letter because of the way it moves from the sort of brotherly banter which he often uses, to practical advice for Louis who will be going to China, then spiritual advice for him, then a reference to his own possible vocation to the Chinese mission, then some practical financial matters about Jacou's education, then a short reference to their uncle's unspecified problems in Montauban, then some more on paying for Jacou's education, and ending with a paragraph on his own workload:

*In spite of all your threats or all your forecasts, my position as superior still stands.... I can only approve and admire your fine resolution to go to evangelize the Chinese. In spite of the affection I have for you, what a joy it would be for me to see you traverse the huge oceans of the hemisphere for such a noble cause!*

He then suggests that it would be a good idea for Louis to follow courses in "physics, etc" in a state college, but warns that too much reliance should not be placed on that sort of learning, even though it has its place as "a supernatural means, although indirect and remote," in evangelization. This leads on to the pre-eminence of spiritual learning, and he advises Louis "to clothe yourself

solely with J.C.” Then comes a reference to his great fear of “having stifled, by my infidelity to grace, the seeds of a vocation similar to yours.”

The matters concerning paying for Jacou in Montdidier seem to have arisen through lack of clarity in the arrangements between John Gabriel, the Superior General and a Fr. Pierre-Nicolas Vivier, probably the bursar in the *Maison-mère*. As Louis made the arrangements he is told to sort this matter out, but John Gabriel will pay. In the final paragraph of the letter comes this passage:

*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 a hundred 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 (Letter 19).*

The next letter is dated 24 February 1830 on the first page, and 11 March at the end. He had received, all on the same day, letters from each of his three brothers, and he rhapsodises a bit about this before getting down to the main points of the letter:

*You charge me with the criminal offence of not having, in my last letter, given you any news of the confreres in the major seminary, and of normally not giving you enough news. The first point is of no value, with those Fathers writing to Paris more frequently than I do. With regard to the second, I judged it better to say nothing, for reasons of sensitivity, so as not to trespass on the rights of others....*

There were two community houses in Saint-Flour. The one referred to above was the major seminary, and later in the letter John Gabriel says he meets the confreres from there only occasionally. In his previous letter he advised Louis to attend lectures in physics, and now he endorses his attending ones in moral theology, and continues:

*Pile up treasure now, equip yourself with all the theological knowledge which you may need in the future, for it will not be easy for you to acquire it if you go on the foreign missions, and you will not have the time for this if you ever happen to get a job like mine.*

Then follows another bit of teasing about Louis' grammatical mistakes, and then:

*... only write to me more often, and forgive me if I am not always able to reply to you.*

And there is a postscript:

*So that you may be able to bring the two dates on this letter into agreement, I should tell you that I had hardly begun it when I was forced to break it off and give it a rest for a fortnight. You see from that how little free time I have for writing to you. Pray for me! (Letter 20).*

The next letter, four weeks later, is short, and echoes something he had said about his workload five months earlier:

*The Easter fortnight, which for most priests is a period of extra work, is one of rest for me. The boys are on holidays. I needed this break. I think that in the past six months I have not 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. Don't be worried, though, about my health; I'm not yet at the end of my tether; I'm going to take advantage of the remaining days of the holidays to build up my strength, mental and physical (Letter 21).*

In July 1830 the French king, Charles X, dissolved the Chamber of Deputies. The people of Paris rose in protest during the "Three Glorious Days," 27-29 July. When news of this reached Saint-Flour John Gabriel became worried about the safety of Louis and even made mention of him at the Memento of the Dead in his Mass. He was also upset at a rumour that St. Vincent's remains were thrown into the Seine. By the time he wrote to his brother on 24 August he had heard that both his fears had been groundless. After dealing with the above in the first paragraph, he continues:

*It is hardly possible for me to go and visit you these holidays. The situation is rather critical. My purse is not loaded. I am needed in Saint-Flour. All the same, I very much want an opportunity to see before you leave for China. Although I am not too far from taking the same road as yourself, I am not really ready nor completely sure of myself to set out this year. In the meantime I will applaud your courage and initiative.*

Then come details about how he will be paying for Jacou's education, including provision of pocket money. He then asks Louis to check whether a certain journal of Christian philosophy is good enough to be worth subscribing to (Letter 22).

His hope of seeing Louis before his departure was not fulfilled, and he wrote on 8 October:

*I am experiencing in a very real way what St. Augustine said, that one never realises how attached one is to somebody until separation occurs. Realising that you are leaving is something I cannot accept unfeelingly, and forgive me if I admit that I am not sufficiently in control to prevent tears... I am afraid that I may not have been faithful to the vocation which the Lord has given you. Pray to Him that He may let me know His holy will and may enable me to follow it... No, my very dear brother, I myself will never forget you. I will remember you at the altar. There we will find each other united in the Divine Heart of Jesus... I am going to write to our parents to console them; they must be in need of that. I will give you news of them as often as possible. Take every opportunity that occurs to write to us. Goodbye, my very dear brother; I hug you in O.L. with all the affection of my heart (Letter 23).*

The next letter was sent three weeks later, on 27 October, to Le Havre to catch Louis before he went on board ship on 2 November. He refers to the general air of pessimism in France, including a rumour that the Arabs will invade and sack Paris. He asks Louis to send “detailed” descriptions of the voyage and of his eventual ministry in China and of “everything which might interest curiosity” or be edifying (Letter 24).

John Gabriel’s final letter to Louis was written eight and a half months after Louis’ departure. At the time of writing, July 1831, the news that Louis had died at sea on 2 May had not yet reached France. John Gabriel sent it to Macao, where Louis would have been expected. Previous letters had begun “My very dear brother,” but this one starts “My very dear Louis.” John Gabriel is availing of an opportunity which had arisen to send the letter to China. After the introductory sentences, he continues:

*Since you left, how many times have I not thought about you? In proportion to the increase of distance my recollection of you has been more deeply impressed in my memory, and my heart dilated more and more under the impulse of brotherly love. On Pentecost Sunday I offered the Holy Sacrifice for you, and that was not the first time; since my first Mass I have never wept so much at the altar.*

He then gives brief family news and says he hopes to get to Le Puech during the summer.

In the letter which he sent to Louis in Le Havre he had asked his brother to include “details” in the letters which he would be sending back from China. He now does that for Louis, giving details about the political and ecclesiastical situation in France. He has something to say about the newspaper *L’Avenir* (The Future):

*As you know, this is run by an army of intrepid ultramontanists, of whom Fr. de Lammenais is captain. The doctrines which are defended in it are nothing more than elaboration of the principles which Fr. de Lamennais had already expounded in his work on Progrès de la Révolution. You have no idea what a stir this journal has created. In general the French bishops do not like it. It is found, though, in more or less all the dioceses. Everywhere there are fervent supporters and numerous opponents. It is doing marvellously in Belgium. In Rome there are some for and some against it.*

In his teaching in Saint-Flour John Gabriel had been influenced by the educational ideas of Lamennais (whose name he always mis-spelt, and not always in the same way), and it would seem that the eventual condemnation of Lamennais by Pope Gregory XVI in August 1832 was responsible for John Gabriel’s transfer from Saint-Flour to the *Maison-mère* in Paris that same month.

The next section of the letter describes what is happening in other European countries, the Papal States, Poland, Belgium, Holland, Ireland and Austria. He says he could give much more news, but has not the time. (In passing, in view of this section of the letter, it would be interesting to know how he dealt with N° 16 of Chapter VIII of the Common Rules, when he later became director of the seminarists and students in Paris!) (Letter 26).

### **Letters to his brother Jean-Jacques<sup>3</sup>**

Six letters to Jean-Jacques, known in the family as Jacou, have survived. They do not have the same spontaneity as those to Louis. Jacou was eight years younger than John Gabriel, but also they possibly had not seen each other from the time John Gabriel left home in 1817 until he paid his first visit home after ordination in 1826. The first letter we have was written from Saint-Flour in August 1828. Jacou was to leave his uncle’s school in Montauban to go to the college in Montdidier and John Gabriel would like to see him if Jacou could

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<sup>3</sup> When I was a first year seminarist in 1946-47, an old Irish confrere, Joseph Sheehy (1865-1948), told me that when he was a seminarist in Paris Jacques Perboyre was still alive in the *Maison-mère*; he did not die till 1896. Fr. Sheehy was told that at the time of John Gabriel’s death there was no authentic picture of him. Jacques was regarded as being very like John Gabriel in appearance, so all the pictures produced for the beatification and afterwards were based on Jacques.

travel via Saint-Flour. He was 18, and John Gabriel tells him that he is pleased with his reports but that standards are high in Montdidier and that it would be prudent to repeat Second Year. (In the French numbering system the lowest class is Sixth, and the pupils advance year by year to First, the final year). He advises him to be “less taciturn, and more open” or he will have problems later in relationships. “As for myself, I well know what effort this takes” (Letter 15).

The next letter is from February 1832, on the death of Louis. It is, understandably, very emotional. He mentions that their parents are coping well with their bereavement. He says Jacou is not writing often enough. It is again interesting to note that John Gabriel accuses others of this failing, while others accuse him of the same. He warns Jacou of the danger of getting too immersed in philosophy and reducing God to a mere idea (Letter 31).

The next letter is from Batavia (now Jakarta) in July 1835, by which time Jacou was in his third year in the *Maison-mère*. John Gabriel reports on his health during the voyage: he slept well, the peculiar food did not cause him too much trouble and the sea air suited him. Half way through the voyage he fell down some brass-bound steps and bruised himself badly, but suffered nothing worse. He admits to having always previously had a fear of the sea, which he no longer has. He says that to alleviate the boredom of the long voyage he used to picture to himself what Jacou would be doing in the *Maison-mère* at various times of the day (Letter 59).

The next letter, from Macao in September 1835, is very short; he has nothing to report since his previous letter from Batavia (Letter 66).

Three months later he writes again from Macao, and the opening sentence is interesting: “I must rush this in order to tell you about myself and not to deprive you of news for too long.” It is a short letter and most of it concerns the journey into China which he is starting that day. He is dressed as a Chinaman, has a shaved head, a long pigtail, has grown a long moustache, stammers in Chinese and eats with chopsticks (Letter 71).

His last letter to Jacou is from inside China in September 1838, a year before his capture. He had received a letter from him, in which Jacou wrote that he had prayed that God would make John Gabriel into another Francis Xavier; John Gabriel pooh-poohs this suggestion (Letter 94).

### **Letters to his brother Antoine**

Antoine was 11 years younger than John Gabriel. In the letters to his brothers, John Gabriel shows closest ties of affection to Louis, less to Jacou and still less to Antoine. Given the difference in age and the fact that Antoine was only four

when John Gabriel first left home, the simple fact would seem to be that John Gabriel did not really know Antoine very well. This is reflected in the different tone of the letters to him. They give the impression of being the sort of letters that an elder brother, who had joined a religious community, thought he should write to a much younger brother at home. They are also short letters. The first one was written from Saint-Flour in July 1828, almost two years after his ordination, to Antoine in the college in Montgesty, aged 15. The opening sentence is about spelling mistakes in Antoine's letter. When Louis used to make such mistakes John Gabriel would tease him about them. With Antoine there is no teasing. It is an older brother showing understanding of such errors on the part of a much younger brother. He also advises Antoine to follow any advice he receives from his parents, but that above all he must try to please God. He sends greetings to both parents. It is quite a short letter (Letter 13).

The next letter is nearly five years later, from Paris to Antoine at home; it is quite short. It starts: "One would think you must be sulking, it is so hard to wrench a letter from you." John Gabriel wants to know whether Antoine has been called up for military service or not. Once again Antoine is advised on how to behave towards his parents, to be attentive to his religious duties, to make a good confession, not to follow the bad example of most young men who abandon their religion. "We have a brother and a sister in heaven; we must go to join them." (Letter 34).

The next letter is ten months later, in reply to one in which Antoine mentioned that their father was ill. John Gabriel's first reaction is that no expense must be spared in treating him. He continues: "We may be sure that the good God afflicts him only for his good. In suffering, he expiates the pains he would have to endure in Purgatory and he merits a greater glory in Heaven." John Gabriel advises his father to make a general confession and to discuss that with his confessor. He tells Antoine that although he is young he could die any day: "Live as if each day were the last day of your life." He sends a dozen Miraculous Medals. In a postscript he sends good wishes for the feast of St. Anthony, three days later (17 January) and says he will celebrate Mass for Antoine that day (Letter 43).

The next letter is three months later, once again a short one, and he complains that Antoine has not sent any further news about their father's state of health. He gives news of their sister Antoinette, who had joined the Daughters of Charity a year earlier and was in Paris. He mentions that their part of the city had been spared in recent street violence, because of the presence of St. Vincent's body, which was visited by large crowds during a recent novena (Letter 47).

The next letter is dated 20 January 1835, eight months later. It is very short, and starts with New Year's greetings to all at home. The next sentence is: "Don't

forget, my dear brother, that our life disappears like a shadow, and that at death we will be treated as we will have deserved by our vices or our virtues.” As with his letter at the same time the previous year John Gabriel remembers the feast of St. Anthony and says he celebrated Mass for Antoine that day (Letter 54).

The next letter is from Macao, in September of the same year, 1835. It starts by referring to a letter which he sent to his father from Java; this letter has not survived. He says he has already travelled further than Louis did, and adds: “Do not, therefore, think that to go to China means to go to death. My confreres who have come to this country live there in the way they do elsewhere.” He refers to the fact that Antoine had said that after John Gabriel’s departure for China he (Antoine) would be deprived of the good advice which he used to receive. John Gabriel’s answer is:

*First of all you must remember that God has specially entrusted your salvation to your Parish Priest and confessor. It is to them that you must frequently go in order to receive their instructions and advice. If, then, your spiritual affairs are not going well, this must be attributed to your negligence rather than to the lack of means of salvation and my absence (Letter 65).*

I mentioned earlier that in his letters to his father John Gabriel sometimes made no mention of his mother, or inserted an afterthought in a postscript. In all the letters to Antoine he mentions her. In the letters to his father he always uses the rather formal “Mon père et ma mère,” while in the letters to Antoine he uses, almost always, the more familiar “Papa et Maman.”

### **Letters to his uncle Jacques**

Jacques Perboyre was eight years older than John Gabriel’s father. He joined the Congregation of the Mission in 1783, aged 20; the date of his ordination is not on record, but it would have been around the start of the revolutionary troubles. During that period he exercised an underground ministry, and when things were more settled he started a school in Montauban. He died in 1848.

It seems likely that from his schooldays in Montauban onwards John Gabriel was greatly influenced by his uncle. His letters to his uncle are different from his letters to other family members, because as well as being from nephew to uncle they are also from a junior confrere to a senior one. They are, in fact, more interesting for the insights into community matters than for anything they tell us about the family. There is usually only a passing reference to other family members, such as statements that a brother or sister is getting on well. There are 17 surviving letters to his uncle. The first is from Saint-Flour in 1832, when John Gabriel was 30, and the last is from Honan in 1836.



The first letter, written in February 1832, is about the news of Louis' death. As with the letter to his parents, this is a very emotional one. Towards the end of the letter he says that Louis

*headed off across the sea in search of the death of martyrs. He found only that of an apostle. Why have I not been found worthy to go and take up the place he has left empty! Why can't I go and expiate my sins by the martyrdom which his innocent soul longed for so ardently? Alas! I am already more than thirty years old, years which have slipped away like a dream, and I have not yet learned how to live! When, then, will I have learned how to die! Time disappears like a vague shadow, and without noticing it we arrive at eternity* (Letter 30).

The next letter is from Paris, just over a year later. As with so many other letters, it starts with an apology for the long delay in writing and an admission that there was really no reason for the delay. One paragraph indicates that the Superior General had already suggested to Jacques Perboyre that he come to Paris and resume full community life. John Gabriel points out that this was only a suggestion; the idea apparently was that he would be confessor to the Daughters of Charity in the rue du Bac. John Gabriel assures his uncle that he can stay on in Montauban "without incurring either censure or irregularity" (Letter 33).

The next letter is only three months later. There is a flu epidemic in Paris, and his brother Jacques, a first year seminarist, and many of the priests have it, but it does not prevent them from carrying on with their normal activities. The main purpose of the letter is to ask his uncle to send on to Paris any further copies of the *Méditations* of Pierre Collet CM (1693-1770) which he may find (Letter 37). John Gabriel looked to his uncle for information, books and documents about the Congregation in the period before the Revolution.

Two months later the next letter begins with apologies for not writing. He tells his uncle about the confreres who are going on the foreign missions. A priest, a seminarist and a brother have just left for Syria. Two priests are on the point of leaving for China, bringing a printing press with them. In a month's time a confrere is to go to Constantinople, and more will leave for Syria in the spring. He adds:

*Those who leave are at the peak of happiness. Those who stay behind can console themselves only with the hope that they will follow later.*

Then he says:

*If by any chance you have any old printed material concerning the Congregation, such as coutumiers, regulations, circulars etc., I would be very pleased if you were to make me a present of them (Letter 38).*

*Coutumiers* were notebooks giving guidelines for office holders.

A letter in November 1833 (Letter 39) has nothing of interest, other than an apology for delay in writing. The next one, dated 14 December, is fairly long. It begins with the question of a foundation of the Daughters of Charity in Montauban, with much detail as to what the town must provide for such a foundation. Many of John Gabriel's letters from Paris show that he was very well informed about what the Superior General and his council were thinking and doing. He was obviously very anxious to keep his uncle informed as much as possible about community affairs. Many of the pre-Revolution confreres never resumed community living. He encloses a circular from the Superior General addressed only to French confreres, and will send on the New Year's general circular letter when it is printed. He gives information about the Miraculous Medal, using that name, and the unexpected recovery of a confrere with a "monstrous hernia" because of it. He will send some medals at the first opportunity. He mentions that Jean-Marie Odin, a French confrere working in Texas, is in Paris, on his way to Rome.

*He is asking, with loud cries, for workers to gather in an abundant harvest among the Protestants and savages (Letter 40).*

He writes again about seven weeks later, at the end of January. His uncle had asked John Gabriel to obtain permission from the Superior General for him to eat with the Daughters of Charity when he went to them as their confessor. His nephew has to confess: "I did my best to plead your case, without, however, winning it." The General said he had resolved never to give permission for this to anyone, and has already refused it to many. Uncle Jacques may eat before or after the sisters, or in a separate room, but never with them.

The uncle had also asked about suffrages for deceased confreres. John Gabriel quotes seven lines in Latin from the General Assembly of 1668. He asked about Mass stipends, and is given quotations from a circular of the Superior General in 1788.

Following the wish of the previous General Assembly in 1829, the Superior General has set up a commission to study old decrees. Charles-François Lamboley (1763-1847) is chairman and John Gabriel is secretary; they meet once a week. He mentions several recent appointments of confreres, and says that if his uncle wishes to change his mind and come to Paris the Superior General will

welcome him. He also says that his uncle is the second youngest of surviving pre-Revolution confreres. This is one letter which gives the uncle some family news. John Gabriel's father has severe rheumatism, so two dozen Miraculous Medals intended for his uncle in Montauban have been diverted to his father in Le Puech. Then in the margin he added later that two dozen more were being sent to his uncle (Letter 44).

Letter 46, 15 March 1834, gives news about John Gabriel's sister Antoinette who has finished her seminary as a Daughter of Charity in the rue du Bac and taken up her first appointment in another Paris house. He then asks his uncle some very detailed questions about a young man who has applied to Jacques in Montauban to join the Congregation. Finally he mentions that another young confrere has left for China, and that two of those who left for China a short while previously have arrived and written back to Paris.

The next letter, dated 20 May 1834, is quite short. His brother Jacou is to receive tonsure on the eve of Trinity Sunday. Two confreres are to be ordained priests with more to follow in September. One of those ordained in Lent will be going with others to the Levant during the summer (Letter 48).

The next letter, two months later, is longer. He starts by giving news about the Daughters of Charity, and saying he would like to see their work in Montauban developing. He says that he has heard more than once that the diocese of Montauban misses the Congregation of the Mission, which used to be in charge of the seminary. He makes reference to unspecified previous disagreements and says these will not affect any future request from the diocese for the confreres to return. He says, however, that many similar requests to take charge of seminaries have been turned down, as sending confreres to foreign missions takes priority. The promised two dozen Miraculous Medals for his uncle have now become two hundred, which he promises to send with the sisters the following week. Two confreres who left for China in September have written back from Batavia (Letter 50).

A short letter, accompanying the 1835 New Year's circular of the Superior General, says that his brother and sister join him in sending greetings to their uncle for the New Year (Letter 53).

On 27 January 1835 he tells his uncle that he has brought over to the rue du Bac a package with one hundred ordinary Miraculous Medals and ten silver ones, as well as some engravings about the medal. The third edition of the story of the medal has sold almost the whole 20,000 copies within a month and an enlarged fourth edition is being prepared. He also sends No. 3 of the *Annales de la Mission* (Letter 55).

In an undated letter, but obviously from February 1835, he tells his uncle that he has been appointed to China and will be sailing from Le Havre about 10 March. He has written to tell his parents and he hopes they “will make their sacrifice like good Christians,” and suggests that his uncle should, when the opportunity occurs, help them with his good advice (Letter 56).

The remaining four letters to his uncle are from Le Havre on 18 March 1835, from Surabaya on 27 July, from Macao on 13 September and from Honan on 10 August 1836. They are “community” letters very much more than “family” ones. There are very few nephew-to-uncle family references; most of the space in them is confrere-to-confrere news. He does, though, refer to having sent letters to other family members. In Letter 57 from Le Havre he says that his “parents, after much weeping, are perfectly resigned” to his departure, and that his brother and sister in Paris are “well disposed” towards it. Letter 61 from Surabaya, five pages in the printed version, is almost entirely “travel news.” He says he has written a letter to his father, which has not survived, and one to his brother Jacou by a different ship. The letter to Jacou is No. 59, mentioned above. Letter 64 from Macao is almost entirely community news. He mentions, though, that he has written to his two brothers. The letter to Antoine is No. 65 and that to Jacou No. 66, both of which have been mentioned above. He says that his wish is that all his relations should above all look after their own important affairs and the only attention they should pay to him is to pray for him. There is one very interesting sentence about his uncle’s influence on him: “You know that I owe to it [the Congregation] as well as to yourself more than I can possibly say.”

The last letter, No. 76, written from Honan a year later, on 10 August 1836, takes up 23 printed pages. It describes his journey from the Portuguese colony Macao, where he had spent almost four months, to his final destination in the interior of China. He left Macao 21 December 1835 and arrived in Honan in June 1836. It is quite a detailed description of the long journey, which was a combination of overland travel and river transport. It is largely factual with not many personal reflections on what he was seeing or experiencing. Part of the explanation for that may have been his fatigue. He begins the letter, like all others to his uncle, with “My very dear Uncle,” and once in the course of the letter he uses that expression again. Even more revealing is a sentence in the first paragraph. He is sending the letter as soon as he can because:

*I am obliged, therefore, to reply as soon as possible, because of the affection I have for the best of uncles, and the affection which he himself has for me...*

He ends this letter, unlike all the others, with: “I am for life, my very dear Uncle, your very affectionate and dutiful nephew....”

The other self-revealing thing in this long letter is his interest in François-Régis Clet. When he was near Ou-tchang-fou, where Clet was executed, he was struck by the coincidence that the first office which he prayed in the breviary on arrival there, on 25 April, had included a commemoration of St. Cletus, pope and martyr. The French form of Cletus is Clet. He adds:

I did not need such a striking similarity to remind me that I was in the very area where our dear martyr Fr. Clet had given his life for J.C.

When he describes his arrival at midnight at the community house in Nanyang-fou he says:

*Although it was in this house that Fr. Clet was captured, I am safe in it and in complete security.*

### **Tailpiece**

Towards the end of a letter which he wrote in 1832 to a cousin, who was curé of Jussies, he said:

*I must be boring you with my lengthy gossiping (Letter 28).*

“Boring” is certainly not an adjective which can be applied to his letters. They are all interesting and informative. The ones to family members are self-revelatory in varying degrees. The ones to confreres give interesting information about the Congregation as it was developing in the years after the Revolution. In many letters, to confreres and others, he shows a competence in dealing with practical matters of different kinds. Spiritual matters are introduced only where he judges that the context calls for such reference. His letters cover his life from the age of 15 until just before his death. We do not have that span of correspondence for any other beatified or canonised confrere.