

11-2002

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John Paul II

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Recommended Citation

Paul, John II (2002) "Decree of the Canonization of Blessed John Gabriel Perboyre," *Vincentiana*: Vol. 46 : No. 6 , Article 19.

Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/vincentiana/vol46/iss6/19>

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Decree of the Canonization of Blessed John Gabriel Perboyre *

JOHN PAUL, BISHOP SERVANT OF THE SERVANTS OF GOD FOR A PERMANENT RECORD OF THE MATTER

Since Jesus, the Son of God, demonstrated his love by giving up his life for us, “no one has greater love than this, that a person would give up his life for his friends” (Jn 15:13; cf 1Jn 3:10). Blessed John Gabriel Perboyre behaved with a wonderful similarity to Christ in both his life and death. He was born in France in 1802, into a fervent family in a place called Puech de Montgesty. This family gave to the Church three missionaries of St. Vincent, two Daughters of Charity and one Carmelite sister, as well as two married Christians. He went to a seminary, originally just to keep his brother Louis company, but the atmosphere of the place caught his attention, and he realised that he was definitely called to the priesthood.

In 1818 he entered the Congregation of the Mission and on 23 September 1826 he was ordained a priest in Paris. He held important and difficult posts in educational administration. He was a rather sensitive man and he felt the death of his brother Louis very deeply. Louis was going as a missionary to China and died during the voyage. John Gabriel was appointed to Paris as assistant to the director of seminarists, and he requested to be sent on the foreign missions. Many people were worried about his health, but he received permission to go, and in March 1835 he boarded a ship in the harbour at Le Havre.

He landed later in Macau, where he spent some time in getting acclimatised, and disguising himself to some extent as a Chinaman, he headed for the province of Ho-nan, to which he was assigned. He at once started into his missionary apostolate by visiting Christians scattered among small villages. He was outstanding in his way of dealing with people, and specifically in his love of the poor. He spent his time as a poor man with poor people, for whom he specially cared. “A neighbour to the poor” is what he became: “When I used to ask a catechist, a doctor who was travelling with me, about the causes of the diseases of so many persons, he always gave the same answer: hunger and material poverty. I used to walk on in silence, worried by twinges of conscience since I was living on and could not die with them.” Before he mounted the executioner’s cross he was on the cross of the poor. He was nailed to the cross by charity before persecution did it to him, being a disciple of St. Vincent whom he

* Translation from the original Latin text: AAS 89 (1997) 81-83.

loved as his father. The suffering Christ came first in his life, as the Man of the Cross. Because teaching, perhaps, did not lessen his hardship he totally understood what suffering meant. First of all an intention of martyrdom can be noted. John Gabriel seems to have desired martyrdom. In a certain letter written to his parents is the following statement: “We have weariness and various difficulties to put up with, but that is the case everywhere, and anyway we have to earn heaven by the sweat of our brow. If we have to suffer martyrdom that would be a great grace given by God; it is something to be wished for, not feared.”

In 1839 the arrival of a band of soldiers caught him unawares. The good shepherd tried to watch over his flock from close by, hiding in the vicinity. He was captured, and a long series of legal processes began, often accompanied by torture. They tried to make him renounce his faith, they ridiculed him for his religion and tried to get him to tread upon a crucifix. Eventually he was sentenced to death. John Gabriel suffered martyrdom in Wuhan, being strangled on a gibbet rather like a cross, on 11 September 1840. His relics were brought to France in 1860, to the main house of the Congregation of the Mission in Paris. Since he was believed to be a true martyr for the faith the cause for his canonization was meticulously initiated, and with all measures laid down by law completed, he was numbered among the Beatified by Leo XIII on 10 November 1889. On 6 April 1995 a decree about a case of healing, divinely brought about through the intercession of the Beatus, came before Us. A consistory was held on 29 January 1996 at which We decreed that the rite of canonization be celebrated on the following 2 June.

Today, therefore, in the Basilica of St Peter, We proclaimed the following formula of canonization during Mass:

In honour of the Holy and Undivided Trinity, in praise of the Catholic faith and for the growth of Christian life, by the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ, of the blessed Apostles Peter and Paul, and by Our own authority, after mature deliberation and frequent praying for divine help, and on the advice of several of Our brothers, We declare and define that Blessed John Gabriel Perboyre, Blessed Giles-Mary-of-St-Joseph Pontillo, and Blessed John Grande Román are Saints, and We inscribe them in the catalogue of Saints, laying down that in the universal Church they should be honoured as Saints with due devotion. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

We wish that what We have decreed have effect now and in the future, notwithstanding anything whatsoever to the contrary.

Given in St Peter's, Rome, on 2 June in the year of our Lord 1996, the eighteenth of Our Pontificate.

I, John Paul II
Bishop of the Catholic Church

Eugenius Sevi
Protonot. Apost.

Loco + Plumbi
In Secret. Status tab., n. 395.478

(THOMAS DAVITT, C.M., translator)