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John Gabriel Perboyre*

Thomas Davitt, C.M.

Le Puech and Montauban 1902-1818

In his book on the Congregation of the Mission, Georges Goyau suggests that it would be a good idea to study the documentary evidence about the martyrdom of John Gabriel Perboyre and “very carefully distinguish what is said by the witnesses from what is said by later panegyrists.”¹ Some panegyrists and biographers have ill-advisedly tried to sustain the thesis that he was faultless and a model of every virtue even in childhood; some have over-emphasised, exaggerated, and, in part, invented resemblances between his sufferings and those of Christ.

He died in 1840, and two years later Jean-Baptiste Etienne published, anonymously, the first book about him.² Towards the end of the decade, François Vauris, C.M. wrote to many persons who had known John Gabriel asking them to let him have their recollections with a view to his writing a more complete *Life*.³ It would be interesting to know how exactly he worded his letter

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¹Goyau: *La Congrégation de la Mission des Lazaristes*, Paris 1938, p. 243.

²*Notice sur la Vie et la Mort de M. Jean-Gabriel Perboyre*, Paris, 1842, 286 pp.

³Vauris' book was published anonymously in 1853 with the title *Le Disciple de Jésus*. In passing it should be noted that Aristide Chatelet, C.M. in his life of JGP (Meudon, 1943) in all his footnotes giving page references to Vauris is in fact referring to another book, published anonymously by Mgr. Demimuid in 1891.

because there is a certain sameness about many of the replies. A fairly typical example is this extract referring to the three years which John Gabriel spent teaching in Montdidier before ordination: "I remember that he was the perfect model of all clerical virtues, modesty, humility, meekness, simplicity and mortification, but unfortunately I cannot furnish you with any details in all this." Another correspondent, who knew him in his secondary school days, says that the brainier boys, including himself, used to amuse themselves during class by annoying the others and sticking pins in them, and that when John Gabriel was the victim he used to turn round to his tormentors "with a really divine look" and ask to be allowed to listen to the teacher. Now, if he was as nauseating as that, some trace of it would be bound to surface in his own letters, yet the one hundred and two of them which have survived are refreshingly normal and healthily free from such aberrations.⁴ Bishop Jean-Henri Baldus, C.M. wrote to Vauris in 1953 that there was nothing in John Gabriel's manner which was out of the ordinary, nothing different from any good confrère.⁵

He was born on January 6, 1802 on his father's farm, Le Puech, near the little village of Montgesty, about seventy miles almost due north of Toulouse; he was the eldest of eight. His father's brother, Jacques, was a Vincentian, ordained at the start of the French Revolution. He had wanted to go to China but was appointed to the seminary in Albi. He was able to continue his work there until 1791 when he had to go on

⁴*Lettres du Bienheureux Jean-Gabriel Perboyre*, edited by Brother Joseph van den Brandt, C.M. Peking, 1940. All quotations from the letters will be according to the numbering of this edition. £

⁵The three letters are in the CM Archives, Paris (henceforward CMAP). Baldus was nine years younger than JGP, was ordained in 1834, and went to China the same year; was ordained bishop in 1845 and died in 1869.

the run. He returned after a while and took up residence in a cave from which he used to venture out in various disguises to carry on his ministry. He survived the Revolution and, when things were returning to normal, he was offered a parish by the Bishop of Cahors. As the Congregation was still suppressed in France, he took it, but after a few years he asked to be relieved of it as he wanted to start a school in Montauban, mainly with the idea of preparing boys for entry into the major seminary. He got some financial help from his relatives and in due course eighteen of his nephews were educated there.

On April 16 he wrote to Dominique-François Hanon, who had been Vicar General of the Congregation in Paris since 1807. He says he is at Hanon's disposition and is willing to accept any appointment, and that they try to live a Vincentian community life as far as their position allows.⁶ He lists thirteen pre-Revolution confrères who are working in the diocese of Cahors and says there are many others in the diocese of Agen and several in Toulouse, and continues:

I have had several of our students wanting to join the Community; some of them have gone off elsewhere. There is still one who has done his philosophy, a good lad, who very much wants to join the Congregation. What can I tell him? What hope is there for him?...All he's waiting for is some sign from us and he'll join.⁷

Hanon died a week after that letter was written, so Jacques Perboyre probably did not get any answers to his final questions. On October 6, 1816 a Circular Letter

⁶"They" refers to Perboyre and Antoine Gratacap, who together ran the school. There is some doubt as to whether Gratacap was a confrère, though Perboyre always refers to him as such and says in a PS to a letter in 1817 that the late Vicar General, Hanon, received him into the Congregation on March 25, 1809. Gratacap in his will does not refer to his being a member of the CM. The letter and will are in CMAP.

⁷CMAP.

informed confrères that Marie-Charles-Emmanuel Verbert had been elected in Paris to replace Hanon as Vicar General. Perboyre wrote to him on October 29 thanking him for the two copies of the letter, which he will pass on to the other confrères. He is glad that things are returning to normal in the Congregation, and once again says he is at the Vicar General's disposition, but explains his position. He is alone in the house with Gratacap, who suffered a lot during the Revolution and is still ill, and there are 150 boys, mostly boarders. Then he has more questions: a priest friend called to see him, saying that he and some others wanted to join the Congregation. Although they worked in parishes, they also gave missions and retreats. What are they to be told?⁸

The following month John Gabriel, aged almost 15, and his nine-year old brother, Louis, took up residence in their uncle's school. It was Louis' education which was being planned, but because he was so young and of delicate health it was decided that John Gabriel should go along with him to keep him company and prevent homesickness. It was winter and he could be spared from farmwork. As well as that, it was felt that the rather rudimentary education he had received in Montgesty could be improved by a few months with his uncle, but he was to return to the farm in early summer.

His first letter home was not written until May 1817:

My dear father,

I haven't heard any news of you for a long time and I'm anxious to know if you're all in good health. I've been wanting to write to you, but since I've never written any letters, nor even read any, I hadn't the courage to take up the pen to do so. I'm doing it today for the very first time. It is very fitting that you, my very dear father, should receive the first efforts of my limited skill. (Letter 1)

⁸CMAP.

He then continues in rather typical schoolboy fashion to add that his brother is well and that they both need jackets, trousers, and socks.

The father seems to have been pleased with this letter, but he was thinking of his vines and what John Gabriel could do for them. He took the stagecoach from Cahors to Montauban to collect his eldest son, but found a surprise awaiting him. The teachers had approached the uncle to suggest that John Gabriel be asked to stay on and complete his studies and then enter the major seminary. Jacques Perboyre had the delicate task of breaking this news to both his brother and his nephew, as neither of them had been thinking along those lines at all. John Gabriel has not even been doing Latin, although young Louis had. The outcome was that the father returned alone to his farm and the son got down to some serious thinking about what had been suggested.

A couple of weeks after the visit, John Gabriel wrote to his father, on June 16, 1817:

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 go on for the priesthood, so I've started to study Latin but with the intention of giving it up if you don't agree with what I'm doing....

If you do want me to go on, I'll have to get some new clothes made. You'll be good enough to send me some money as I don't think uncle's purse is so full that he can lend me any. (Letter 2)

That John Gabriel hadn't previously been thinking on these lines, or at least had not shown that he had, is confirmed by a letter from Verbert to Gratacap dated October 25, 1817. It is about the need to recruit vocations for the Congregation and refers to a young person whom Gratacap had mentioned; Verbert says:

If it is Fr. Perboyre's nephew you mean, I saw him last year and he didn't indicate to me any with to join us.⁹

As his father did not make any objection, John Gabriel continued his study of Latin and other subjects in which he was behind boys of his own age. His uncle got him a grind from a Fr. Theyeis, with whom he studied all through the summer holidays. After John Gabriel had been killed, his uncle wrote to Theyeis asking for some memories of this period. Theyeis answered:

You ask me for all the details I can give you, going back over the past, about the student days in Montauban minor seminary of your glorious nephew Fr. John Gabriel Perboyre....

If I remember rightly, when he first came to the seminary it was not with the intention of staying; he came only to be with his brother Louis, a pupil at the school. He himself was supposed to return to the family home after a while. I can still see him, fair-haired, fresh-faced and rosy cheeked....

We urged you to get him to follow the curriculum; at first you refused. You used to say his father had to have one of the sons to look after the vines....

You then gave in, and John Gabriel found himself with a Latin grammar in his hands.... Then came the summer holidays; 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....

At the end of the holidays, say six months after he had begun his studies, he entered second year; with the first exercise he got second place and immediately afterwards first, a place he almost always kept.¹⁰

He mentions John Gabriel's progress through the various classes; he was fifteen and a half when he started his special studies, and in the next term, in November, he

⁹CMAP.

¹⁰CMAP.

went into second year; at Easter 1818 he went into third, and the next November he jumped a year and went into fifth and a few weeks later into sixth.

In May 1853, thirteen years after John Gabriel's death, Bishop Jean-Henri Baldus, C.M., who was nine years younger, wrote of him:

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 confrères of his time, I think, who were his equal, not excluding Bishop Rameaux even though he had a higher reputation among the Chinese, but they are very poor judges of ability.¹¹

In late 1817 a mission was given in Montauban and John Gabriel got the idea he would like to be a Vincentian and said so to his uncle. His uncle laughed at the idea, so he kept quiet for the moment and prayed, including a novena to St. Francis Xavier. His idea took on the additional aspect of wanting to go to China. He took it up again with his uncle, who eventually gave in. In May of that year the uncle had written to Michel Wuillermé, Director of the Daughters of Charity, that he had seven boys in his school who wanted to join the Congregation, but there had been no mention of John Gabriel.¹² On December 23, however, he wrote to Verbert that the house would be suitable for an intern séminaire (novitiate) as much repair work had been carried out during the year, and added:

I have a nephew of mine here, quite exceptionally gifted, who is going to don our habit soon. There are several others as well but they need some further testing.¹³

¹¹CMAF. This is the letter already quoted from. François-Alexis Rameaux, C.M. was four months younger than JGP, was ordained in 1826, went to China in 1832, was ordained bishop in 1840 and died in 1842.

¹²CMAF.

Seminaire and Studies, Montauban and Paris, 1818-1823

Joining the Congregation in those days was not quite as simple as it sounds. The Congregation had been suppressed in France during the Revolution. It was re-established during the Napoleonic period only to be suppressed once again. It was finally re-established under Louis XVIII on February 3, 1816, but it took some time for things to get going again in an organised way and by December 1817 there still was no intern seminaire. Jacques Perboyre's suggestion of establishing a seminaire in the house in Montauban was taken up, and John Gabriel was received into the Congregation there on March 10, 1818, two months after his sixteenth birthday, the first seminarist in France since the Revolution; two more were received on October 4 and another in October of the next year.¹⁴ Jean-Baptiste Maisonneuve, who was born in 1752, went to Montauban as Director.

During his seminaire, John Gabriel continued his secondary education, then did his philosophy, and at the same time taught one of the junior classes. He took his vows on December 28, 1820, nine days before his nineteenth birthday, and shortly afterwards was called to Paris to begin theology.

In 1817 the former town-house of the Duc de Lorges, 95 rue de Sèvres, had been given to the Congregation as a Motherhouse by Louis XVIII, and about fourteen elderly pre-Revolution confrères had taken up residence. Jacques

¹³CMAP.

¹⁴Maisonneuve to Charles Boujard, C.M., Vicar General, December 10, 1819 (CMAP). Van den Brandt and others give the date of his reception as December 15, 1818.

Perboyre had arranged his nephew's travel in such a way that he had to spend a few days in the seminary in Cahors before catching the Paris coach. This was to enable his parents to have a chance of seeing him before he left for Paris; he had not been home to Le Puech since he left in 1816.

He was in Paris from January 1821 till October 1823, but the only memory of his period there which seems to have survived is that he was very keen on St. Thomas Aquinas. There is one letter, though, to his father, dated January 20, 1822, a year after his arrival:

My very dear father,

You must find it odd that I've put off writing to you for so long. It's true that lack of opportunity is partly the reason, but it's not the main one and if I didn't have others I would consider myself inexcusable, as indeed I would be. What really caused me not to write to you sooner was the fact that I knew my uncle would have passed on news about me, as I asked him to do in the letter I wrote to him as soon as I arrived in the capital.

I was very glad to hear recently that you are all in good health but was also saddened to hear of the deaths of several relatives. Don't worry about me. I've got all I need here. I'm in good health, thank God, and very happy. It may happen that I won't always be writing to you directly; since I'll be writing from time to time to my brothers to give them bits of news, I'll get them to pass on news of me and to give me some about you.

I embrace my very dear mother and all at home.

Give my regards to Fr. Gizard and lots of greetings to all my relatives around Le Puech. No matter how far away I am from you I won't love you any the less and all my life, my very dear father, I'll never be less than

Your very obedient and very respectful son
John Perboyre
(Letter 3)

Montdidier 1823-1826

In October 1823 he was sent to Montdidier, about three quarters of the way from Paris to Amiens. The

Congregation ran a boarding school there which before the Revolution had been run by the Benedictines and afterwards had been under the civil authorities. In 1818 the authorities handed it over to the Congregation. It was not a minor seminary, but the Superior hoped to be able to make it one eventually. John Gabriel was given charge of first year, with only eight boys.

At the start of April 1824 he went up to Paris and on the Saturday before Passion Sunday he was ordained Sub-Deacon by the Archbishop of Paris, Hyacinthe-Louis de Quelen, in his private oratory. He returned to Montdidier, but this time as professor of philosophy for a course in the college which had recently received university approval. In May 1825 he was up in Paris again, this time for the Diaconate which he received in Saint-Sulpice from Jacques-Louis de la Bruë de Saint-Bauzille, Titular Bishop of Tempé, and then went back to Montdidier for another year's teaching.¹⁵

On September 18 that year he was issued an Internal Passport which has survived; it gives the following particulars of his appearance: Height 1m65cm (about 5'6"), black hair coming down over the forehead, brown eyebrows, grey-black eyes, ordinary nose, small mouth, black beard, round chin, round face, ruddy complexion.¹⁶ The reference to the black beard must mean *in potentia* rather than *in facto esse* as it does not seem that he grew a beard until he went to China.

There do not appear to be any surviving reminiscences of those who knew him in Montdidier. There is no letter of his own until one to his father on

¹⁵The details of his ordination to the sub-diaconate and diaconate are in a transcript of an original document which was in the CM Procure in Shanghai. The transcript is in CMAP.

¹⁶The original passport is in CMAP. The details are entered in handwriting in blank spaces after printed words such as "Height," "Hair," "Beard."

August 24, 1826:

My very dear 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 Fr. 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 know now that I am not being appointed there. It seems certain, though, that I will be changed, and if little rumors 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 up 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 a 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 favor. 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 September 23.

I hope that you, my very dear father, my sisters, all my relatives, will all join your prayers to draw Heaven's blessings down on me; I particularly ask for the prayers of my aunt Rigal. You'll be well rewarded for this when I have the joy of celebrating Mass, not because of my own prayers but through the merits of Him who offers Himself to His Father in my hands. Please let me know the names of any relatives who have died since I left home.

You'd very much like if I could get to see you these holidays;

for my part it would be the peak of my desire if I could kiss my parents who are so dear to me and whom I have not seen for so long. I can't promise you this for this year; it depends a lot both on where I'm appointed and the work I'm given, and what I'll have to do during the bit of holidays remaining after ordination.

Don't be too surprised, my dear father, that I didn't let you know of Louis' illness; I didn't know about it myself until it was all over. They kept it from me in case I'd be worried; as a matter of fact it was so serious that at one stage they had given up all hope for my poor brother. But by the grace of God he's completely over it now. I'm told that during this crisis he grew a lot, that his character has matured well since, and finally that he's more charming than ever and his Superiors are very pleased with him. Please give my regards to my uncle Jean-Louis, my Caviole cousins, and pass on my greetings to all my relatives.

I am, for life, etc.,
J.G. Perboyre, deacon.
(Letter 5)

His brother Louis, referred to in the letter, had been received into the seminaire in Paris a year previously, on September 9, 1825.

On September 23, 1826, the anniversary of St. Vincent's ordination, he was ordained Priest in the chapel of the Motherhouse of the Daughters of Charity in the rue du Bac, Paris, by Louis-Guillaume Dubourg, Bishop-designate of Montauban, who had been Bishop of New Orleans.¹⁷ Two other confrères were ordained with him, Jean-Baptiste Torrette and Pierre-Jean Martin, and eleven Irishmen, nine for priesthood and two for Diaconate, presumably all from the Irish College.¹⁸ He

¹⁷Letters 5 and 6, and also the Shanghai document referred to already, show that he was ordained priest in 1826. All the early lives gave 1825, thus shortening his stay in Montdidier and lengthening that in Saint-Flour. At the time of his ordination the Daughters' house in the rue du Bac was No 132; the number was later changed to its present 140.

¹⁸The names and dioceses of the eleven Irishmen are given in *Annales de la CM*, vol. 112-113, page 508. The Archives of the Irish College, Paris, do not have a complete register of students for that year but five of those listed were recipients of burses in the ICP.

celebrated his first Mass at the altar in the rue du Bac in which St. Vincent's body was enshrined since the re-establishment of the Daughters after the Revolution.

Saint-Flour 1826-1832

Jacques Perboyre did not succeed in getting his nephew appointed to Montauban. He was sent to Saint-Flour, about fifty miles south of Clermont-Ferrand in the Massif Central. Shortly after his arrival he wrote to his father, on November 2, 1826:

My very dear father,

I'm not much more than thirty leagues from you; I've been sent to Saint-Flour where I'm professor of theology in the seminary.

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.

I was ordained on September 23 as I told you I would be. Every time I've had the happiness of offering the Holy Sacrifice I've never forgotten, my very dear father, to recommend you to God, as well as my very dear mother, my brothers, my sisters and all my relatives. I've said Mass several times for my poor sister Mariette and also for my other dead relatives.¹⁹ What I've done up to now I'll continue to do for the rest of my life.

When I left Paris my brother Louis was quite well, his health getting better every day and there is now no longer any doubt that he will make a complete recovery; he's always very happy.

You'd have very much liked, my very dear father, if I could have gone to see you this year, and the chance of embracing you would have fulfilled the most cherished wish of my heart, but it was absolutely impossible. These past holidays, if I can call them that, I was busier than at any time during the year. I hope to make a trip to see you next year, unless Providence arranges something

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¹⁹Mariette, born 1809, was fourth in the Perboyre family; she died young, in a Carmelite convent, probably before the age of 20; few details are available.

else. I must thank you for praying to God for me at the time of my ordination; I still look to your fatherly goodness for the help of your prayers, for the present and the future; I've so much need of them, as my duties are so heavy and so difficult to carry out. I heard from Fr. Gizard that everything's going well at home; I thank God for this and ask him to continue to shower you with his blessings.

Please give my best love to all my relatives, my very dear father, I embrace you, and also my loving mother, with all the filial love in which I am for life

Your very obedient and respectful son
J.G. Perboyre, Priest of the Mission.
(Letter 6)

At the end of his first year at Saint-Flour he writes again to his father, on July 14, 1827, the last day of class. His health is good but he's very tired. He has written to Paris for permission to go to Le Puech and expects to get it, but he will go via Montauban where he wants to be present at Prize Day. From there he'll go on home with his second brother, Jacques, known as Jacou, who was a student there. In the course of the letter he says:

I don't see much chance of your wine catching on here. It's rated very highly but the transport causes too many problems.

There is a PS to the letter:

If I end this letter without showing any signs of filial love for my very dear mother, it's not because I forget her but because I know that you will perfectly interpret my feelings.

(Letter 7)

There had been no Superior General since the death of Jean-Felix Cayla de la Garde in 1800 and the Congregation had been governed by a succession of Vicars General, with a certain amount of confusion as to whether some of them were for France alone or for the entire Community. On January 16, 1827 the Pope appointed Pierre-Joseph de Wailly as General; he was 68 years old.

On July 20, six days after John Gabriel's letter to his father, Jacques Perboyre wrote to the new General, and added a PS:

I'd very much like if John Gabriel could absent himself from Saint-Flour and come to see me during the first days of his holidays. His presence here could be very useful to me at the moment.²⁰

John Gabriel arrived in Montauban on August 26 and on September 2 he wrote to Louis in Paris with various bits of news: on August 28 he had to give an hour's sermon on St. Augustine which the Ursulines "threw on my back;" Prize Day was one of the best he had ever been at, the music was never better; his health is good because his uncle and the Ursulines are treating him well; he's off for a fortnight to Le Peuch, and then back to Saint-Flour; he ends by speculating on the probable appointments of various confrères. (Letter 8)

His uncle still had hopes of getting him to Montauban. On September 2 he added a PS to a letter he sent to Jean-Baptiste Etienne, Procurator General:

My nephew was here to see me. Would there be any chance of getting him as professor of Philosophy? I think he'd be good at it.²¹

He was not successful in his appeal and John Gabriel returned for the start of the new academic year in Saint-Flour, but not to the major seminary.

By 1827 all the Church organisation disrupted by the French Revolution had not been fully re-established. The laws restricted the number of minor seminaries and the number of pupils who could attend them. If a state college existed in the vicinity of a minor seminary, all the pupils

²⁰CMAF.

²¹CMAF.

had to take their courses there, from first year right up to philosophy. In 1825 Jean-François Trippier, C.M., at that time Superior of the major seminary in Saint-Flour, had tried to remedy this situation by establishing in the town a boarding house for secondary schoolboys who wanted to become priests and were attending the state college; they lived in this hostel outside class hours. During the year 1826-1827, Trippier had been rather unsettled and at the end of the year he told the Bishop he was leaving, and suggested as a replacement a priest whom the Bishop thought too young. There was also the withdrawal by the Superior General of another confrère from the major seminary very close to the start of the new school year without prior warning. All this caused a major row between Trippier, the Bishop, and the Superior General. The confrère who had to deal with this was the man on the spot, Jean Grappin, Superior of the major seminary. On October 2 he wrote to de Wailly, Superior General, that he had come back early as he had foreseen “a great storm brewing.” He explained the situation and described a meeting with the Bishop, one outcome of which was that the Bishop accepted that Trippier was almost entirely to blame. He adds that John Gabriel had not yet returned from his holidays. (The new term was due to start on October 18.) On October 4 he wrote again to de Wailly “*in angustiis extremis*” after a very stormy meeting with the Bishop which ended in “partial rupture” and could lead to “complete rupture” and get into the papers, with the Congregation, the Bishop, and religion itself all being ridiculed. To prevent all that, Grappin “had an idea”:

I thought I should send Fr. Perboyre there (the boarding house) on a temporary basis and let people think that that is how things will remain, and let the bishop presume that you will be agreeable to this...²²

²²These letters from Grappin, and some from the Bishop of Saint-Flour, are in CMAP.

John Gabriel returned in time for the new term, and on October 31 he wrote to Louis in Paris, congratulating him on having taken his vows in September, and also congratulating a cousin who had entered the *seminaire*.²³ He gives an account of his summer travels: twelve days in Le Puech, three in Cahors, twelve in Montauban, one in Toulouse, four or five in Carcassonne or Montolieu, saying that the trip was long in distance but short in time, useful, pleasant and not too expensive. He then goes on:

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 mention 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's nearly eleven o'clock at night. (Letter 9)

He held this appointment for five years, until August 1832 and "it was certainly he who put this minor seminary on a stable footing."²⁴ Twenty-three of his letters from this period have survived: one to his father, one to his parents, one to his uncle, one each to two cousins, two to an education official, two to Jacou, one to his youngest brother, Antoine, and thirteen to Louis.

Towards the end of his first term, on December 5, 1827, he wrote to the Rector of the Clermont-Ferrand Academy, starting off with an apology for any deficiencies in his previous letter. He explains how his appointment was made by the Congregation and says he is willing to

²³The cousin referred to is Gabriel Perboyre, born 1808. He entered the CM on June 23, 1827. He wrote extensively in the *Annales* on Community history, especially about the period of the French Revolution; he died in 1880.

²⁴Pierre Peschaud, C.M. to JB Etienne, from Kiang-si July 30, 1844 (CMAP).

fulfill any necessary formalities. The main point of the letter is money. There had been an agreement between Trippier, the Bishop, and the education authorities that students in the hostel who were going on for the priesthood were exempt from certain fees paid by the others. The first year of the agreement there were eighteen such students, and apparently the authorities then took that as the agreed number for each year. John Gabriel points this out, and adds:

Apart from the stated fact itself please note the absurdity of your hypothesis,

which he then goes on to expand, asking that if in future the numbers went up considerably and only eighteen were exempt what good would that sort of exemption be? He ends by asking to be numbered among the Rector's most devoted and respectful servants (Letter 10). The following year the same Rector petitioned successfully for the conferring on John Gabriel of the degree of *Bachelier-ès-Lettres de l'Université de France* in view of his pre-ordination theological studies.²⁵

During the first two terms John Gabriel was in correspondence with Trippier, his predecessor, largely about financial matters to judge from the replies, four of which have survived; his letters have not. Trippier also asks for some enquiries to be made about his baggage, which was lost en route, and in one reply mentions that he is writing from Carcassonne where he is "giving a retreat to the cornettes."²⁶

The thirteen letters to Louis from this period give much information about the two brothers and about the

²⁵CMAP.

²⁶CMAP.

Congregation at the time. Louis, who had started his philosophy that autumn, complained that John Gabriel did not write sufficiently frequently. In May 1828 he had his reply, that John Gabriel is much busier than Louis realises, with class every day and also acting as “bursar, etc.,” and being wanted by everyone, for everything, at every moment. The letter in question got written only because he had neglected a cold and as a result was laid up for a week. Louis apparently had suggested a philosophical debate by correspondence, so John Gabriel reminds him that he no longer teaches philosophy, but that if a debate on grammar would do he will give one, and then proceeds to point out all the grammatical errors in Louis’ letter. Louis thought that he might be appointed to teach philosophy and he didn’t like the idea; John Gabriel sympathises with him but says that in case he is appointed he should be prepared beforehand as *nemo dat quod non habet*. (Letter 11)

Just like the previous cold, another fortuitous circumstance provides an opportunity for the next letter to Louis, on July 11, 1828. It was written after ten o’clock at night as John Gabriel had caught two boys disturbing the others and had them standing in his room. Jacou, the younger brother, was eighteen at the time and first in his class in the uncle’s school in Montauban and thinking of following the other two into the seminaire; as John Gabriel has been more or less out of touch with Jacou, he passes this question to Louis. (Letter 12) The next letter is on August 16; Jacou is to complete his studies in Montdidier, and John Gabriel will bear part of the expense. He says he is spending the holiday in Saint-Flour, and having worked so much for others, he is entitled to do so for himself now. (Letter 14)

The next day he wrote to Jacou himself suggesting that he go to Montdidier via Saint-Flour, and continues:

The courses in Montdidier are very stiff and it would be as well for you to repeat fifth year. I was very pleased with your report. The only thing I'd suggest is that you make some effort to be less gloomy, more outgoing; if you don't get down early on to trying to train your character in this matter you'll later on find yourself up against insurmountable problems in trying to be sociable and pleasant company. I know myself what an effort it takes.

He ends by advice about care of health which Jacou has weakened by overwork. (Letter 15)

In September he tells Louis he has spent a fortnight in Cahors, including his retreat, and that Jacou will be passing through Paris and Louis is to keep an eye on him and see him safely on his journey to Montdidier, adding that there are rumors in the Congregation that Louis himself might be sent to teach philosophy in Montdidier. (Letter 16)

Louis next received a letter the following April 1829, which started off in very artificial and stilted language in which the elder brother poked fun at him for his opinions of himself as a writer and chiding him for not having mentioned that he had been ordained Sub-deacon:

...but that would be too many complaints. It is better for me to grant you a plenary indulgence; all circumstances are favourable for me to forward you my brief....

On re-reading your October letter (I have to read your old ones since I received no recent ones), I've noticed some mistakes which I must point out to you. I know it's not very flattering for a writer in the capital to be given lessons by a small-time country teacher....(Letter 17)

In July he writes to his father that he is quite willing to look around in Saint-Flour for a horse for him provided he is told what age and so on, and also that his father doesn't expect him to pay for it out of his own pocket. (Letter 18)

November finds him writing again to Louis and for

the first time there is reference to Louis' wanting to go to China. John Gabriel's advice is that he should take some courses in physics in a state college as such qualifications would be useful there. He also mentions that he himself had formerly hoped to go to China and that maybe even still he would go. He encloses the bill for Jacou's education in Montdidier saying that he had agreed to pay the pension but not extras like laundry and some others; as Louis had made these arrangements he could deal with them. Towards the end 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 have still 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)

In February 1830 China is mentioned again and Louis is advised to get all the theological learning he can while he has the chance:

...for you won't have the means to do so if you go on the foreign missions, and you won't have the time if you ever happen to get an appointment like mine. (Letter 20)

At Easter he is writing again of his tiredness:

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. (Letter 21)

In 1830 there was a revolution in Paris and John Gabriel was so worried that he mentioned Louis in the *Memento for the Dead* during Mass, as he tells him in a letter in August. He also says he is glad that the rumors that St. Vincent's body had been thrown into the Seine

arc untruc, and adds:

There's not much chance I'll see you these holidays. *Circumstances are critical. My funds are low. My presence is needed in Saint-Flour. However, I very much want the chance of seeing you before you leave for China. Although I'm not far from taking the same course as yourself, I'm neither sufficiently ready nor sure enough of myself to do so this year.* (Letter 22)

However, they did not meet and Louis was ordained on October 3 and left for Le Havre on November 2. In mid-October John Gabriel wrote a very emotional farewell letter to him and a further letter on the 27th in which he said:

When I get the chance to write to you I'll let you know everything likely to interest you about family matters, the Congregation, and our country. (Letter 24)

At the French island colony of Réunion, Louis changed ships and started on the second leg of his journey. Between Réunion and Java he caught a cold which developed into a fever, and on May 2, 1831 he died and was buried at sea. News of this did not reach Paris for some time, and in July John Gabriel kept his promise about sending news, in a letter addressed to Louis in Macao. He hopes to get to both Le Puech and Montauban during the holidays; Jacou is to stay on in Montdidier and start philosophy. Then comes a detailed outline of political developments in France since Louis left, as well as those in Italy, Poland, Belgium, Holland, and Ireland; in the latter the poor Catholics are dying of hunger and the French Catholics are sending them great help. (Letter 26)

One of the things which worried John Gabriel in his work was that the boys under his care were exposed to the anti-religious atmosphere of the state educational system. In a letter to his cousin, Fr. Cavirole, parish priest of

Jussies, he exclaims:

My God, have pity on us and grant us freedom to teach.
(Letter 28)

Around that time a priest-philosopher, Hugues Felicité Robert de Lamennais, was much in the news because of his efforts to reverse the anti-religious trends which had persisted after the Revolution. Part of his campaign was for the Church to be allowed to run educational establishments. There was some opposition to his ideas, and his expression of them, in certain Church quarters and he was denounced to Rome. Gregory XVI set up a commission of enquiry and Lamennais' ideas and his campaign were censured in certain aspects, and he was reprimanded for meddling in delicate matters which should have been left to leaders of Church and State. The matter was handled rather badly by two French bishops and Lamennais became embittered and left the Church and died without ever being reconciled.

When John Gabriel was appointed Superior in Saint-Flour, he adopted the educational ideas of Lamennais and put them into practice with the knowledge and approval of the Bishop, with whom he often discussed them.²⁷ The letter to his cousin referred to already was written in January 1832, and later on in it he said:

My uncle in Montauban has written to me that a big storm has just blown up against our confrères in Cahors because of the opinions of Lamennais. This I find hard to believe both because his great dislike of Fr. de la Mennais could easily have led him to exaggerate and because our confrères are very cautious in this matter. And how could there be protest against men who claim they hold only the views of the Holy See, and who hold on to them until the Holy See declares them wrong? You're well placed to know the truth, going often to Cahors as you do. Would you let me know what it is all about? (Letter 28)

²⁷Vauris, *op. cit.* p. 289.

In February 1832 he eventually heard of Louis' death, and wrote rather emotionally to his parents and to his uncle; to the latter he admitted that no one had been closer to him than Louis, and continues:

Why am I not found worthy to go and fill the place he left vacant? Why can't I go and expiate my sins by the martyrdom which his innocent soul longed for so ardently? Alas, I'm already over thirty, years which have passed away like a dream, and I haven't yet learned to live! When, then, will I have learnt to die? Time is passing like a light shadow and we arrive at eternity without noticing. (Letter 30)

He also wrote to Jacou about Louis' death but did not omit other topics:

I've a complaint to make, dear brother: you don't write to me often enough. Maybe you don't want to interrupt your philosophical meditations. Very well, send me dissertations in the form of letters. In that way, without leaving your element, you'll still be in contact with the living. (Letter 31)

He spent part of the summer of 1832 in Le Puech with his parents and returned to Saint-Flour in August and found a letter appointing him to Paris.²⁸

²⁸A persistent rumor has survived that his removal from Saint-Flour had a *ratio poenae* about it. I first heard it from Kevin Murnaghan in Glenart about 1951. Edouard Robert referred to it in the *Annales* in 1939, saying that he first heard it about forty years previously from a confrère "venerable by age and holiness" who said that JGP had not been a success at Saint-Flour and was therefore "recalled to the Maison Mère where the Superior General is supposed to have told him that he didn't know what to do with him for the moment, and that in the meantime he could help the Director by looking after the seminarists' walks. This was never written down and when several years later I spoke of it to other confrères they said that it hardly seemed likely" (*Annales* vol# 104, p. 271). I have heard the added detail that it was because he had advocated the ideas of Lamennais that he was removed. Their condemnation by Gregory XVI came in August 1832, the month in which JGP was recalled to Paris.

Paris 1832-1835

His appointment was to assist the Director of the seminaire, Pierre Le Go, a pre-Revolution confrère who in September 1832 was coming up to his sixty-fifth birthday. There were very few seminarists in September but by the following summer there were over twenty.²⁹ One of those who entered in September was John Gabriel's brother Jacou who had passed his twenty-second birthday some months previously. It would appear that the new Assistant Director was given plenty of work to do and he did not get around to writing his father until mid-January 1833:

I hadn't time to write to you before I left Saint-Flour. My new appointment is better for my health than my old one, and my health is quite good at the moment. Jacques is also quite well and you needn't have any worry at all about either him or myself. (Letter 32)

In June he writes to his uncle in Montauban referring to the fact that the latter had sent him a copy of Collet's *Méditations* which he had found in a bookshop and asking him to forward any further copies he may find, adding:

This work is becoming scarce and we probably won't delay too long in getting it reprinted. (Letter 37)

This is the first reference in John Gabriel's letters to pre-Revolution books connected with the Congregation and he returns to this topic again in August:

If by any chance you have any old books connected with the Congregation, *coutumiers*, rule-books, circulars, etc., I would like to ask you to make me a present of them. (Letter 38)

The 1829 Assembly, the first since 1788, had elected Dominique Salhorgne as twelfth Superior General and

²⁹Letter of Pierre Peschaud, C.M. to Etienne, September 30, 1844 in CMAP.

had expressed a wish that a study be undertaken of pre-Revolution Community decrees. A commission was set up for this purpose by Salhorgne with Charles-François Lamboley, a septuagenarian, as chairman and John Gabriel as secretary. (Letter 44)

He wrote to his uncle in December and included the following news:

Fr. Boullangier was on the point of death. He was given the last sacraments; the surgeon said there wasn't anything more he could do; he embraced him as a sign of final farewell and then took his leave. But in the midst of the most frightful attacks, when nothing more was expected from one moment to the next except to see him die, Fr. Aladel gave him the miraculous medal of the Immaculate Conception which he accepted with the greatest devotion and placed over his heart. From then on his cruel pains disappeared almost completely; the massive hernia, which the skill and prolonged efforts of the surgeons were unable to reduce, softened and receded almost of its own accord. The news of this cure was responsible for the very extraordinary conversion of an elderly sinner.³⁰

The medal I referred to is the one revealed by the Blessed Virgin in 1830 to a seminary sister in the Daughters of Charity. Thousands of these medals have spread through all parts of France and Belgium; they work numberless miracles, cures and conversions. I'll send you some the first chance I get. (Letter 40)

The following month he had a dozen medals ready to send to the uncle but he sent them instead to his youngest brother Antoine at home on the farm when he heard that his father was in a lot of pain with rheumatism. To compensate his uncle for the delay he promises to send him two dozen. (Letters 43 & 44)

Jean-Baptiste Torette was one of the two confrères

³⁰On Boullangier see article on Louis-Joseph François in *Vincentian Heritage*, (1984) Vol. V. No. 2.

ordained with John Gabriel and he was sent immediately to China. On March 10, 1834 the latter wrote to him and said that he had recently been talking with the third of the trio and they decided to send him some books as a gift. He continues:

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. I hope that in that way I'll share to some extent in the good which will be achieved even if I don't have the honor of sharing in your work.

I won't fail to offer my poor prayers to God for you and your missions. For your part, recommend to Him myself and our good Seminarists, the hope of the Congregation. They are angels; the novitiate has never been in such a thriving state. It seems that God plans that the Little Company should reveal his glory. (Letter 45)

During early 1834 he reported two items of family news to his uncle; his sister Antoinette completed her seminaire in the rue du Bac and received her first appointment as a teacher in central Paris, and Jacou received tonsure.³¹ In another letter to him he asks about rumors that in Mountauban they are wanting the confrères to resume direction of that major seminary; this prompts him to reflect:

³¹Jacques-Jean Perboyre was received into the seminaire in Paris on September 18, 1832. Less than two years later he received tonsure. He did not take his vows, though, till nearly eight years later, on March 15, 1840, and then as a lay-brother. On December 23, 1843 he received Minor Orders and in the following year Sub-diaconate and Diaconate; he was ordained Priest on September 20, 1845. He died in 1896. Fr. Joseph Sheehy told me in Blackrock about 1948 that he had done his seminaire in Paris in the 1880's and had known Jacques. He said that the decision to change from lay-brother and resume his clerical studies was made in view of the hoped-for beatification of his brother. He also said that Jacques was the model for all portraits of John Gabriel.

Anyway, as regards ourselves, we've no need to ask for foundations because, apart from that not being in any way the practice of St. Vincent's sons, this year we have been offered several seminaries which have not been accepted because of the pressing needs of our missions which are going to be very much strengthened. The quality of our intern seminaire and the excellent dispositions of the young confrères in formation there promise resources for the Congregation which will enable it to tread a worthwhile path of some use to the Church. (Letter 50)

His uncle Jacques in Montauban had not resumed living in a Community house after the Revolution, apart from the short period when his house in Montauban became a temporary intern seminaire. However, he still regarded himself as a member of the Congregation and was regarded as such by the confrères, old and young, in Paris, as John Gabriel discovered when he moved there. (Letter 44)

In January 1835 John Gabriel sent him a copy of the Superior General's New Year Circular Letter. It must have interested John Gabriel that roughly a quarter of this letter dealt with the missions in China, including this comment:

It is a very welcome consolation for us that in such evil times we can send so many workers for the Gospel to pagan nations, and the successes they achieve are very apt for sustaining our trust and for spurring us on to new efforts to co-operate with God's plans.³²

Three weeks later he tells his uncle that he has forwarded to him part 3 of volume I of the *Annales de la Mission*, the contents of which also dealt with the missions in China. These two documents reflect the thinking of the Maison-Mère at the time and it is not surprising that John Gabriel's old hopes of going to China were re-awakened.

In February 1835 he achieved his ambition and was

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³²*Recueil des Principales Circulaires des Sup. Gen. CM*, vol. II, p. 461.

appointed to China and he passed on the news to his uncle:

I've great news for you. God has just granted me a very precious favor 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. Well, my dear uncle, today my prayers are at last heard. It was on the feast of the Purification that I was notified of my appointment to China which makes me think that in this matter I owe a lot to the Blessed Virgin. (Letter 56)

A year after he had arrived in China he wrote to Jean Grappin who had been Superior of the seminary Saint-Flour in John Gabriel's time and had since become Assistant to the Superior General. The letter is dated August 18, 1836, but it is relevant here because one section of it gives his own account of the development of his vocation to the Chinese mission:

As for myself, here I am launched on a new way of life. There are reasons for thinking that it's the one God was wanting me to follow. It's what he showed me from a distance when he called me to the priesthood, and it's what I was asking from him insistently during a novena which I made to St. Francis Xavier almost twenty years ago; the memory of this has often come back to me to stir my remorse or to re-invigorate my hope, for I had the impression that I had been heard. It's the way of life I more or less always had in view: it's the one which of its own accord revealed itself to me when the moment of Providence arrived. It's true that you yourself and my other directors used to dissuade me from my hope every time I spoke of it. But the main reason you put forward was lack of health, and experience has shown that this had less foundation than it was supposed to have had. (Letter 82)

For the last half of 1834 he had been trying his best to get

sent to China but the Superior General and his council kept insisting that his health would not be up to it; finally they decided to ask the doctor directly whether he could be sent, and the doctor gave his consent.³³

Among the letters of those who knew him when he was Director, written some ten years after his death to Vauris, are the usual generalities:

- After much effort all I can recall is an unforgettable impression of edification without being able to detail anything in particular.³⁴

There were, however, some who could give details. Antoine-François Peyrac, C.M. had been professor of philosophy in Saint-Flour in 1832-33 before he entered the seminaire, and because he was older and had already done his studies, he was better able to appreciate what sort of man his Director was:

He had a particular gift for going back to the truths of theology to seek out in depth the reasons for and 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 M. 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.³⁵

An unsigned, undated and unaddressed letter is on the same lines:

He was genuinely zealous, but his quiet devotion did not bore with endless warnings those whom he wished to form spiritually.

³³Etienne, *Notice*, pp. 26-27. Chatelet, in his *Jean-Gabriel Perboyre*. (Meudon, 1943), p. 135, gives more details but does not indicate his source.

³⁴C.M.A.P.

³⁵C.M.A.P.

He spoke little, but always kindly and charitably. His character was well-balanced and he was never shocked by anything said or done. He relied a lot on the future for a person's improvement and he was never discouraging.³⁶

A much later unsigned letter dated December 8, 1888 is in answer to a request for further details and says that one of his main principles seems to have been never to pester by constantly repeated advice or admonition those whom he was directing.³⁷

To Macao

He left Le Havre on March 20, 1835 with two other confrères, Joseph Gabet and Joseph Perry, the latter being a deacon. On the 28th, Etienne wrote to Jacques Perboyre:

I don't know whether Fr. Perboyre wrote to you from Le Havre to let you know of his sailing. In case he didn't I have the honor of telling you that he set sail last Saturday, the 21st instant. He was in very good health and full of himself with happiness. We are confident that he won't meet his brother's fate and will arrive safely in Macao. He is destined to do a lot of good. He'll be a missionary the like of which is rarely found.³⁸

He arrived in Batavia (now Djarkata) in the Dutch East Indies in June, changed ships and continued on to Surabaya at the other end of the island. He spent three weeks in the Indies before continuing on to arrive in Macao on August 29. He availed of the two stops to write to Salhorgne, Jacou, his uncle, and Jean-Baptiste

³⁶CMAP.

³⁷CMAP.

³⁸CMAP.

Torrette; the latter was stationed in Macao and was Visitor of the French missions in China and John Gabriel, referring to himself as “that J.G. Perboyre who was ordained with you,” says he is at his complete disposal and is willing to go to Tartary or even beyond. (Letters 58-62)

In these letters he describes the boredom of sea travel and the attempts to relieve it by sing-songs, chess, discussions and arguments with the officers and crew. These latter were often on religious topics and he says that most of those on board went to confession; the missionaries celebrated Mass on Sundays when possible. One of the letters to the Superior General has this to say about colonial life in Java:

Here unfortunately, as happens in other colonies, the behavior of the Europeans has given a very false idea of Christianity to the natives. Mention to a Malay about becoming a Christian and he'll say he's not rich enough to live like a Lord.

In fact pride and the desire to dominate have created such an empire of prejudice that a European can't go on foot or do servile work without losing face. Each European has in his house a more or less large group of Malays who serve him and whom he treats as if they were of a different species of man than himself. Never before have I understood so well the distinction between the pagan *servus* and the Christian *domesticus*. As long as they remain slaves, the Dutch government couldn't care less whether they become Catholics or Protestants. (Letter 62)

His first letter from Macao was to Le Go in Paris and he covered much the same matter as in the others, but with additions. Although they spent much time at prayer and study during their three weeks in Java, they also went on excursions along the coast:

On one occasion some of my confrères who had already been in swimming urged me to go in. I recalled your advice and the doctor's about this and decided to go for a swim; this was two days before we left. I stayed an hour in the water, came out to dress, and had gone on board the boat to put on my socks when stepping carelessly I rocked it and an involuntary somersault gave me

another dip. Luckily the water wasn't deep; I had been having fun in it and it found me accustomed to it and I soon reappeared on the horizon without either damage or fear. When I recovered my hat which the current was sweeping away, I joined my friends on the beach, where they were waiting for me, for a meal of bananas and biscuits.

Towards the end of the letter he says he has begun to study Chinese:

I think it will take me a long time to learn this language; going by the first indications I won't be as successful as Frs. Gabet and Perry.³⁹ It's said that Fr. Clet spoke it only with difficulty. May I, right to the end, be like that venerable confrère whose long apostolic life was crowned with the glorious palm of martyrdom....

He ends the letter with details about his improved health and that of the other two. Those two read a lot of Scripture and the Catechism of the Council of Trent, while he read the life of St. Vincent. (Letter 63)

In Macao, which was a Portuguese colony on the Chinese mainland, there were two intern seminaires of the Congregation, one French and the other Portuguese. The latter had been asking for some time for a French confrère to be lent to them, and John Gabriel was sent. He gave lessons in French in return for receiving some in Chinese. As a result of his experience, he passes on some suggestions of practical politics to the new Superior General, Jean-Baptiste Nozo, on December 19, 1835:

The Portuguese are still asking for more men for their missions and the needs are in fact rather grave. We already help them a bit in Peking and in Ho-nan province, and we'll try to do so more and more. They are impatiently waiting for us in Kian-Nan. As our missions border theirs we can work inside their territory without leaving ours, so to speak, for the moment. It seems that

³⁹Pery was ordained priest in Macao on October 11, 1840.

the best thing is to infiltrate little by little without attracting attention, so that when Propaganda (whose good graces Providence seems to want us to purchase dearly) would have to see to these missions it would acknowledge among our titles that of possession justified by works. (Letter 70)

China

Two days later he departed for his mission in the interior of China and before leaving he wrote to Jacou to explain the sort of journey he was starting:

At first, although I have only about 600 miles to go by sea, I'll need perhaps more than two months for it because the monsoon is blowing contrarywise and anyway Chinese boats move very slowly. Then, to cover six or eight hundred miles overland I won't do it all in one go by the mail-route. I'll go on foot, or upstream by boat. I'll make a stop in Fo-kien with the Vicar Apostolic, then another in Kiang-si with our confrère Fr. Laribe, then another in Ho-nan with Fr. de Besi, so that I won't arrive at my destination until near Easter....

If you could see me for a moment now, I'd present an interesting sight with my Chinese garb, my shaved head, my long pigtail and my moustaches, stuttering in my new language, eating with chopsticks which do for knife, spoon and fork. I'm told I don't make too bad a Chinaman. (Letter 71)

At various stages on this long journey he sent off letters to different correspondents; Torrette received one, the printed version of which takes up 10½ pages and his uncle got one which runs to 22 pages of print. He told Torrette that he had left both his pipe and his fan behind in the rush of departure, but also dealt with more serious matters:

As regards the Fr. Clet business, I think we'd do well to push it, that is, to work towards having him declared Venerable, and if Fr. Rameaux shares my opinion, he'll ask you by the next post from Hou-pe to get the authorization and documents *ad hoc*. After gathering information on the spot, it will be necessary for someone to make the journey to Paris and Rome for the formal process. (Letter 74)

A few days after his arrival at his destination in Honan province, he wrote back to Torrette and asked for a large quantity of Miraculous Medals and

...a large number of pictures of O L and the Bl Virgin, of the mysteries; small ones of the apostles. More or less pointless in sending other types. As regards ones of St. Vincent, they'll take them only if forced to, so to speak. (Letter 78)

The next letter to Torrette has this intriguing paragraph:

You will perhaps have heard that the parish priest of Batavia was not pleased with the group of us seven or eight missionaries who spent some time with him. Someone has had the charity to blame me in part for this sort of discontent. I've no comment to make on that since we should be very glad that we are made to obey the law *alter alterius*, etc.... I'll just say this, that you need neither worry about this nor attach any importance to it.⁴⁰ (Letter 79)

On August 18 he wrote to Grappin the letter already referred to in which he gave a summary of the development of his vocation to China. In a PS he asks him, a fellow-sufferer, for "two or three trusses for an inguinal hernia of the right side," saying he can't get on without one.

Within a week of his arrival he wrote twelve letters, the final one being to his father; this was the first in 2½ years, though all letters to other relatives had messages for his parents. This letter contains a reference to possible martyrdom:

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. (Letter 83)

⁴⁰As well as the three Vincentians, there were some priests of the Paris Foreign Missions. The passage alluded to at the end of the letter is *Alter alterius onera portate et sic adimplebitis legem Christi* (Gal. 6:2).

There are no letters between late August and December 28, 1836 when he again wrote to Torrette and reported that his health had again been giving trouble. He had contracted some sort of fever and had received the Last Sacraments. He got over this but was unable to resume his language study until mid-November. (Letter 84)

In spite of his own protestations to the contrary, obviously his health was a continuing problem. Eight years after John Gabriel's death, Jean-Henri Baldus, C.M., by then a bishop, wrote to Vauris and took issue with the statement on page 164 of Etienne's *Notice* that John Gabriel got up regularly at four o'clock each morning:

I simply want to get the point across that our dear confrère 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 to cast doubt on the whole thing and reduce the value of reading them.⁴¹

In December 1836 John Gabriel preached for the first time in Chinese and within a week was giving his first mission. (Letter 84) From then until August 1837 there are no surviving letters. In that month he tells Torrette that he has come to realise after more than a year in the interior of China that a confrère who has not personally experienced life there can't really understand the problems missionaries have to face. For this reason he suggested that there should always be in Macao a confrère

⁴¹CMAP.

who had actually worked in China, and that the same should also hold for Paris:

This China is so different from other countries that if you haven't been there on the spot you can never fully understand anything connected with it. (Letter 87)

In the following month he describes in detail, for Pierre Martin in Paris, exactly what missionary life was like. On arriving at a mission station the first thing they did was to draw up a list of all Christians, old and young, good and bad. Then, like an examination board in a seminary, they questioned all of them on the catechism. They started with the children in order to judge how good the parents were. Then there would be baptism of children and confessions; there was Mass every day, with many receiving Communion. Towards the end of their stay there would be baptism of adults, confirmation, and marriages. This sort of mission lasted eight, ten, fifteen or even more days. (Letter 89)

News of the serious illness he had in the autumn of 1836 took over a year to reach Paris, and as soon as it did Etienne wrote to Jacques Perboyre in Montauban on December 12, 1837:

I've just received very satisfactory news from China telling me that your nephew was in a very serious way and had even received the Last Sacraments but that God didn't want to deprive our mission just yet of someone so capable of doing good. He has completely recovered and is working with plenty of zeal and success.⁴²

Once again there is unfortunately a long period without any surviving letters, until September 1838, when he wrote to Martin in Paris, to his cousin the parish priest of Catus, and to Jacou. Apparently the latter had

⁴²CMAF.

said in a letter something about praying that John Gabriel might become a second Francis Xavier, to which he replied that that would take two miracles, one in his body and one in his soul:

No, I'm no more a wonder-worker in China than I was in France; it's enough, my dear brother, if I can be a good potterer-around, like you in your sacristy. (Letter 94)

In the same month he also wrote to Lamboley in Paris and says he heard that there is a project for writing a life of St. Vincent in Latin for the use of Chinese confrères. He thinks this a great idea, but as usual he has several suggestions to make as to how it should be done, including the sensible one that after it has been written, but before it gets printed, it should be sent to Macao so that a judgement could be made as to whether it would meet the needs of the Chinese confrères, many of whom had difficulty in reading the *Imitation* in Latin. (Letter 95)

The same month he sent off a second letter to Torrette criticising, among other things, an article in the *Annales de la Propagation de la Foi* in which he noted six geographical, historical, and other factual errors. What he really objected to, though, was the fact that the Vincentian missions were called Chinese while those of the Paris Foreign Missions Society were called French. He thought that the Vincentian mission had equal right to be called French and suggested that Etienne should do something about this; however, he said all this "without any spirit of jealousy or bias." (Letter 96) The long-awaited trusses were also mentioned; they had arrived but were of no use as they were all for the left side while the hernia was on the right.

Sometime after this Torrette apparently told him that many of the points he made in his letters were trivial because in a letter in November he admits this and

apologises, but he will not back down on the point he made about the necessity of having a confrère who had actually worked in China stationed in Macao and/or in Paris, adding that Torrette himself had never worked in the interior. (Letter 98)

There are no further letters until August 1839 when the famous trusses had eventually arrived. This time they were the correct ones and he received twice the requested number as both Torrette in Macao and Grappin in Paris had ordered them separately. One of them, though, lasted only a week as "it suddenly broke of its own accord when I was sitting motionless in my chair." Torrette seems to have complained about the expenses John Gabriel was incurring in all this because the latter admits as much as apologises for them, adding that all expenditure on him for the past twenty years has been a waste of money. (Letters 100 & 101)

From September 1838 until Pentecost 1839 John Gabriel gave seventeen missions, and even since then had not really had any free time. (Letter 99, of August 10, 1839) He was supposed to go on a further round of visits to mission stations in Hou-Pé, but François-Alexis Rameaux decided to take on this journey himself "out of pity for his poor legs."⁴³ This meant that during August and September John Gabriel was in the Community residence in Kou-tchen. The feast of the Most Holy Name of Mary, September 15, coincided with the visit of a Franciscan, Guiscppc Rizzolati, also known as Giuscpcpe da Clauzcto, who later became a bishop. John Gabriel asked him to be celebrant and preacher at the High Mass, at which about 1,500 people were present. After Mass Rizzolati, Baldus and John Gabriel were having breakfast when they were

⁴³*Annales de la CM*, Vol 6 (1840), p. 354.

warned that a band of soldiers was approaching and that they should leave quickly. They had just enough time to escape, without enough to take anything beyond the clothes they wore. Rizzolati and Baldus went in one direction and John Gabriel in the opposite. The soldiers looted the premises and the course of burning books and other objects which they did not want they set the whole house on fire.⁴⁴

Two letters to Torrette, one from Rameaux on December 6, 1839 and one, in Latin, from André Yang, C.M. on January, 8, 1840, mention that the reason for the anti-Christian persecution was not clearly established, though it was known to have started in a certain Christian family. According to Rameaux it was a persecution so terrible

that it will give us a martyr. You know who is the holiest among us; it's only right that he should be the first to receive his reward.⁴⁵

The day after their escape from the house Rizzolati and Baldus separated. John Gabriel had taken the opposite direction to them and was hiding in a wood, where he was found and arrested. Etienne in his *Notice* quoted a long

⁴⁴The events of September 15 are given in three letters to Torrette, from Rameaux (06-12-39), Yang (08-01-40), and Rizzolati (15-01-40). These and other letters from around the same time were published by Fernand Combaluzier, C.M. in 1953 in the Swiss periodical *Nouvelle Revue de Science Missionnaire* (NRSM), pp. 201-268. In CMAP there is a typewritten copy of the same collection with a covering note saying that they were copied from the originals in the CM Procure in Shanghai by Henri Crapez, C.M. in 1940. Some of these letters, in whole or in part, are incorporated into the printed documentation of the beatification process. The typewritten collection also contains one letter not published by Combaluzier in NRSM (See below). Apart from the letters of Rizzolati (15-01-40) and Maresca, I have not found the originals in CMAP.

⁴⁵NRSM, p. 204.

letter written from Macao on January 27, 1841 by Evariste Huc, C.M. which includes an account of John Gabriel's arrest. When Baldus read this, he described his reaction in a subsequent letter to Vauris:

After reading the *Notice* on the life and death of this dear confrère at the end of which Fr. Huc's letter was inserted as an account of his precious death, I wrote into the book itself notes correcting where necessary the numerous inaccuracies of his narrative.

He tore these pages out and forwarded them to Paris later on.⁴⁶ In the covering letter he points out that Huc was nowhere near the area in question and composed his narrative from hearsay. One of the corrected errors of fact is that the burning of the Community residence was not deliberate but accidental.

A much more serious error is the account given by Huc of what led to John Gabriel's being caught in the woods where he was hiding. Huc says that John Gabriel had a catechumen with him acting as guide and that the soldiers who were searching for him came upon the pair unexpectedly and did not recognise their quarry. They got into conversation with them and explained that they were searching for a fugitive European. The catechumen asked what would be paid to someone who would reveal where the person in question was, and was told "Thirty Taëls," whereupon the catechumen pointed to John Gabriel and said he was the man they were looking for. Baldus says that John Gabriel's arrest came about because the soldiers met a catechumen by chance and threatened him, and as a

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⁴⁶His letter and the annotated pages from Etienne's book are in CMAP.

result he betrayed where he was, and that the Huc version of a conversation and agreement about a price is “romantic, and at a minimum very exaggerated.”

The Baldus version is also in another letter of which unfortunately the last pages are missing but which seems to be a comment on Etienne’s *Notice*:

Secondly, the handing over, or betrayal, was brought about not by money but by fear, for Fr. Perboyre’s supposed guide had been beaten up, according to the messengers from Hou-pé.⁴⁷

Rizzolati, in his subsequent evidence for the beatification process, says he wants to distinguish clearly between what he knows from personal knowledge and what he has heard; he says he heard that a catechumen was offered 30 taëls to betray John Gabriel. In another place, though, he mentions this without saying that it was hearsay.⁴⁸

Andrè Yang, C.M., in a letter to Torrette in November 1840, gives the most complete account of the arrest:

The day after the destruction of our chapel Fr. Perboyre was found in a grove of trees on a hill near our school by a catechumen who had earlier been captured by the soldiers. The soldiers used force and beat the catechumen to make him betray the missionaries. The catechumen himself was forced to lead the soldiers for the arrest of Fr. Perboyre, so he arrived at the place

⁴⁷The original letter is in CMAP. At the top of the page, in handwriting different from that of the letter, is written “M. Lavissière.” Pierre Lavissière, C.M. was from Saint-Flour; he entered the seminaire in Paris in October 1835, was ordained in December 1837, and went to China the following year; he became a bishop in 1846 and died in 1849.

⁴⁸Printed documents of the beatification process have been bound together into an “omnibus volume” and the pages re-numbered. Two copies of this, one incomplete, are in CMAP. Page references are to the re-numbering in the complete volume. The Rizzolati material referred to is on pp. 288 ff and 393.

which he knew, with the soldiers, and they arrested Fr. Perboyre; and later on two Christians and a virgin named Anna Kou were captured.

Fr. Perboyre was bound and taken by the soldiers to Kou Tchong Syen. Before being bound, he received a blow with an iron bar. When Fr. Perboyre saw the mandarin, he at once went down on his knees in front of him. The mandarin told Fr. Perboyre to get up and be seated, which the Father did not want to do. Then the mandarin ordered him to be seated and told the mandarin of Syen that Fr. Perboyre was to be well treated. For this reason he was well treated all the time until he arrived in Siang Yang Fou.⁴⁹

Rameaux, in a letter to Torrette in March of the same year, had also said that the prisoner was well treated up to the time he was taken to Siang Yang Fou.⁵⁰

When he was brought before the mandarin in Siang Yang Fou, Rameaux says in the same 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.

André Yang confirms these details and adds that John Gabriel was made to put on Mass vestments and read in Latin from the missal.

Rizzolati wrote to Torrette, in Latin, on January 15, 1840 and included an account of what John Gabriel went through in Ou Tchong Fou. He says he heard the details from a Chinese Vincentian who had been able to pass himself off as a layman and visit him in prison. This was André Yang who, in his evidence at the beatification

⁴⁹The original letter is in Latin, NRSM, pp. 264-268. In this and in other letters Yang spells the surname either Belboyre or Berboyre.

⁵⁰"Omnibus volume," p. 356.

process, said he presented himself at the prison as a merchant, Mr. Y, who was interested in learning more about his country, particularly its prison system.⁵¹ Rizzolati himself was able to remain in the general area as he spoke Chinese fluently, did not look like a European, and could pass for a native Chinese, according to himself. The interrogators were primarily interested in getting John Gabriel to betray other priests, particularly Rameaux. In the Viceroy's court he was very badly treated *novisque excogitatis tormentis quod neque Neronis persecutionis tempore factitatum fuisse audivimus*. They also tried to get him to trample on a crucifix and abjure his faith. He was made to kneel bare-kneed on the floor with his pigtail pulled upwards and tightly attached to a beam; his arms were tied to a plank and another plank was placed across his calves, with two soldiers standing or jumping on the ends of it; his bones were visible in places and his skin and flesh hung off him in strips.⁵²

Yang himself had written to Torrette a week previously saying that from the date of John Gabriel's capture in September 1839 up to the end of the year it was not possible to visit him, but

Now after more than three months... we have found some friends of a Christian who by means of our money have worked out a way of getting us in to visit Fr. Perboyre; on the first and second days some Christians went to see him and on the third day I went with two Christians.

Yang was able to hear the prisoner's confession. One of the guards told him that he need not worry as they would take good care of John Gabriel. Yang was allowed to bring bread, wine, clothing, blankets and money. Another

⁵¹Yang in evidence at the beatification process, "Omnibus volume," p. 299.

⁵²NRSM, pp. 208-213.

guard refused to accept money, saying he had already been given some by someone else; he said that when John Gabriel was somewhat better he would get him whatever food he like, saying he had pity for him in view of what he had suffered.

At this time it was known that the mandarin, who had originally arrested John Gabriel, had been deposed from office and in despair had hanged himself.⁵³

In a letter to Rameaux in March 1840 Yang says that John Gabriel had received 100 strokes of a bamboo stick on the body and 70 on the mouth, and had made more than twenty appearances in court. He says that at the time of writing John Gabriel has recovered fairly well and can again walk a bit. Yang cannot visit as frequently as before, and the prisoner himself has advised against it because of the danger to Yang. However, the prison governor has allowed a catechist named Fong to make weekly visits and bring anything needed.⁵⁴

In May, an Italian Franciscan, Filippo Grosso a Sant' Agata, wrote to Torrette and covered most of the already known facts but added that the case had been referred by the Viceroy to the Emperor.⁵⁵ Later on, the court records and the Viceroy's report were copied out by a Christian civil servant and from them it is clear that the charges against John Gabriel were that he entered China illegally to preach Christianity "and to deceive and seduce the people."⁵⁶

In a letter written two and a half months after John Gabriel's death, Yang told Torrette some further details of the martyr's sufferings. Dog's blood was poured over his

⁵³NRSM, p. 213.

⁵⁴NRSM, pp. 253-254.

⁵⁵NRSM, p. 256.

⁵⁶NRSM, p.. 267.

head and he was made to drink it to counteract the supposed magic which made him hold out against the interrogations and torture. The Viceroy ordered some Chinese characters to be incised on John Gabriel's left cheek to indicate that he had seduced men by an evil religion; his beard later obscured these.⁵⁷

On September 15, 1840, Rameaux wrote to François-Xavier Danicourt, C.M. in Macao:

Our dear prisoner is still alive and patiently putting up with his chains. His wounds are almost healed and he is in fairly good health, although the mandarin took his truss believing it to be something magic.⁵⁸

He then says that there is a rumor that John Gabriel will be exiled to Macao, but he does not think it likely. The new Vicar Apostolic believes his release could be purchased. What Rameaux didn't know, of course, was that John Gabriel had been executed four days earlier.

On September 22 an Italian Holy Family Missioner, Francesco Saverio Maresca, wrote to Rameaux to announce the death, saying that only one Christian was present as no others knew about it. Maresca learned about it a few hours later and sent some people to retrieve the body, the cord which strangled him, and other relics.⁵⁹ By October 15 Rameaux was able to send some details to Torrette:

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

⁵⁷NRSM, p. 267. ε

⁵⁸NRSM, p. 258.

⁵⁹Original in CMAP.

Although I have done my utmost to get detailed information on the different circumstances of his trial, his interrogations and his replies, I have been unable to get very much.⁶⁰

A week after John Gabriel's death, Maresca wrote to Rameaux that several witnesses said that in death his face did not have the distortion normal after such a mode of execution.⁶¹ A year later, from Mongolia, Iluc wrote to Nozo that at the time of John Gabriel's death a luminous cross appeared in the sky and was seen by many Chinese and resulted in many conversions to Christianity. He said that Rizzolati, by then a bishop, was at first sceptical but later held an enquiry into it and stated that according to many people the cross was quite distinct and seen from places far apart.⁶² In 1851 Baldus wrote to an unnamed correspondent that he was doubtful about this story of the cross in view of the credulity of the Chinese, adding:

In most *Lives* of this sort or in letters on this subject both in France and in Italy, and perhaps even more so in letters from the mission, it would seem that a taste for the wonderful and miraculous leads to exaggeration.⁶³

A fortnight after John Gabriel's death Baldus had written to Torrette:

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 confrères? Speaking only of Fr. 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've seen in China I haven't seen one who was less to their liking. His

⁶⁰"Omnibus volume", pp. 377-378.

⁶¹"Omnibus volume," p. 381. [£]

⁶²There is a typewritten transcript of Huc's letter in CMAP.

⁶³Original letter in CMAP.

great merit would not have been appreciated here; he would have ended up not making a go of it. These are Fr. 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 confrères, both European and Chinese, the reason for the persecution being so violent was because Fr. 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 slick. Everyone agrees on this; the Christians are well able to repeat it; in a similar situation Fr. Rameaux would not have been caught. Our belongings, our vestments, would not have been destroyed. The other confrères counted on Fr. Perboyre who had recently been appointed vice-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 Fr. 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....⁶⁴



We should never abandon, on account of difficulties, any enterprise that we have commenced after due reflection.

St. Vincent de Paul

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⁶⁴This is the letter referred to in note 44 which was not printed by Combaluzier in NRSM. All that appears in the typescript is given here.