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The Canonization of John Gabriel Perboyre and the Missionary Commitment of the Congregation

by Corpus Juan Delgado, C.M.

In a letter addressed to all the members of the Congregation of the Mission (April 20, 1995), the Superior General spoke about the decree of Pope John Paul II which finalizes the canonization process of Blessed John Gabriel Perboyre.¹ In the same letter, Fr. Robert P. Maloney, together with the General Council, expressed their desire that we truly live this event.

By this process of canonization, the Pope solemnly declares that John Gabriel, "*enjoys the vision of God; that his intercession before God is efficacious; and that his life models the characteristics of an authentic Christian.*"² This certainty motivated the church, from the beginning of time, to venerate martyrs (and later, other saints), to invoke their intercession and to celebrate their memory in the Eucharist.³

What, then, does the canonization of our missionary John Gabriel Perboyre mean for the Congregation of the Mission and for ourselves as missionaries?

I. John Gabriel Perboyre inspires us with the example of his life

*"The saints make holiness real for us. They enflesh sanctity. I exhort all the members of the Vincentian Family to meditate, during the coming months, on the life of this great man."*⁴

*"The saints inspire us with the example of their lives."*⁵

1. John Gabriel, a missionary...

¹ Robert P. Maloney, *Vincentiana*, (1995), 66-67.

² Molinari, *Canonization*, Sacramentum Mundi.

³ This explains the Church's reasoning concerning canonization. Since 1234, this process, with all of the details that it involves, has been reserved to the Holy Father.

⁴ Robert P. Maloney, *ibidem*.

⁵ Preface of the Saints.

When John Gabriel was sixteen years old, the Vincentians preached a mission in the town of Montauban, the place where John Gabriel was studying. At this early age he clearly expressed his desire: "*I want to be a missionary.*"⁶ Is this simply an expression of youthful enthusiasm?

John Gabriel entered the Novitiate of the Congregation of the Mission at Montauban (December, 1818). Later he continued his theological studies in Paris. At the completion of his studies, he was sent to the school at Montdidier to teach philosophy and, since he was not of age, to await ordination. On September 23, 1826, he was ordained and sent to the major seminary at Saint Flour. In 1835, he became the assistant director at the Novitiate of Saint Lazare.

Commenting on the martyrdom of Father Clet, John Gabriel exclaimed: "*What a beautiful death for Father Clet; I ask God to take my life in the same way.*" Later, when Fr. Clet's relics arrived in Paris, he told the seminarians: "*Here is the robe of a martyr, the robe of Father Clet; here the rope which strangled him. Happy are we if we should share the same lot.*" He then asked one of the seminarians: "*Pray that I may recuperate my health, and be able to go to China and preach the Good News of Jesus Christ and die for Him.*" To another seminarian he said: "*Fourteen years ago I asked to go to China...I came to Saint Lazare for this reason only, to minister in China.*"

The death of John's brother Louis, who died on his way to China, only strengthened his resolve to be a missionary, "*even though I feel unworthy to take his place.*"

On February 2, 1835, John Gabriel's doctor withdrew his objection and the way was opened for him to go to China.

From 1836-1840, John Gabriel centered his missionary activity in the provinces of Ho-nan and Hu-pe. During these four and a half years, he preached and catechized the Christians who were persecuted and poor and separated from one another by great distances.⁷

Like the other missionaries, John Gabriel lived as an outcast, exposed to continual dangers and obliged to travel disguised and hidden. "*Heaven is obtained through the sweat of the brow.*"

2. ...Identified with Christ

⁶ The biographical details of John Gabriel's life and the texts that are cited in this work are taken from: John Gabriel Perboyre, prêtre de la Congrégation de la Mission, Lazariste. Puech-Montgesty. Cf. Vie du Bienheureux John Gabriel Perboyre. Paris, 1889; and J. Herrera, Alter Christus, Vida del Beato Juan Gabriel Perboyre, Madrid, 1942.

⁷ Cf. A. Piras, I martiri crocifissi: Clet e Perboyre, in Annali della Missione (1988), 53-66.

The biographers of John Gabriel Perboyre have highlighted his identification with Christ: *Alter Christus*, with reason he has been called another Christ.

Several writings of John Gabriel have been preserved, writings in which he expressed his identification with Jesus Christ:

"I AM THE WAY: What way? The way of humility, charity, obedience, patience, perfection, happiness and the glory of heaven. If we wish to be perfect, if we wish to obtain the happiness and the glory of heaven, it is necessary to walk in this way. To persevere in this way we need a torch to enlighten the way. Christ serves as this torch because he is the truth. Jesus tells us that those who follow him no longer walk in darkness but rather have the light of life. At the same time we need strength to sustain us on the way; strength that will enable us to continually follow the Master. Again Jesus solves the problem: He is our strength. He wants to be our nourishment and to give himself to us in the Eucharist. For this reason he said: I AM THE LIFE."

"Jesus Christ is the great teacher of knowledge; only Jesus gives the true light. All knowledge comes from him and whatever does not lead us to Jesus is vane, useless and dangerous. Only one thing is important: to know and love Jesus Christ."

"We can only attain salvation through conformity to Jesus Christ. After our death, we will not be asked if we were scholars, if we held prominent positions, if we have had people speak favorably of us in the world. But we will be asked if we busied ourselves with the study and imitation of Jesus Christ."

John Gabriel, in an inspired prayer, writes the following:

"O God, through your power and mercy, may I be totally transformed and converted. May my hands and tongue be like those of Jesus. May my understanding, my memory and heart be identified with the understanding, the memory and the heart of Jesus. May I act as Jesus acted. O heavenly Father, speak to me the same words you spoke to your Son: 'Today I have begotten you; this is my beloved in whom I am well pleased.'"

Jesus Christ is the person who attracts John Gabriel with such strength that he is willing to abandon everything to follow Jesus. Jesus is the central figure in the process of evangelization.⁸

3. Death, death on a cross

John Gabriel lived this identification with Christ unto death, death on the cross.

⁸ John Gabriel chooses martyrdom as a grace from God, even though "in China, where there are few priests, the glory of God would be better served by living rather than by dying."

He wrote to his father: *"If we have to suffer martyrdom, God will give us this special grace; it is something to be desired, not feared."* To the Superior General he wrote: *"I do not know what the future holds for me. Surely many crosses, for the cross is the daily bread of the missionary."*

John Gabriel participated in the cross of Christ from the time of his arrival in China: difficult journeys, persecution, ... and finally, betrayed by one of his catechumens in exchange for thirty taels.⁹ He suffered a long passion as he was taken from one prison to another.

Father Rizzolati had him write a letter to his confreres from prison. The paper, stained with blood, says in latin:

"The present circumstances do not allow me to write with great detail. From the time of my arrival in Kou-tcheng-sien (where I have been treated well by the assistant warden during all this time), I have undergone two interrogations; during one of these I spent half a day kneeling on chains and hung on han-tse.¹⁰ In Ou-tchang-fou I have undergone more than twenty interrogations and various tortures, because I did not say what the Mandrins wanted to hear. If I had spoken, persecution would have broken out throughout the province. My sufferings in Siang-yang-fou have been due to my religious beliefs. In Ou-tchang-fou I received 110 lashes because I would not trample on the cross...."

John spoke the following to a catechist who visited him in prison: *"When you return to your village, greet all the christians in my name. Tell them not to be afraid of persecution and to trust in God. I will not see them again, nor will they see me. I will be condemned to death. But I am happy to die for Christ."*

On September 11, at the age of 38, John Gabriel died, tied to a cross. The words of the young student took on new meaning: *"Ah, how beautiful is the cross planted in the land of non-believers and stained with the blood of the Apostles of Jesus Christ."*

The witness of his life inspires our missionary commitment

The life and death of John Gabriel ought to renew us in our missionary commitment.

1. Love of our missionary vocation:

⁹ A local coin.

¹⁰ A torture instrument.

Saint Vincent de Paul, reviewing the missionary activities entrusted to the Congregation, exclaimed:

*"to make God known to the poor, to announce Jesus Christ, to tell them that the Kingdom of God is near and that this kingdom is for the poor.....what great reason to praise God, my brothers, and to thank God constantly for this grace."*¹¹

The witness of John Gabriel's life enables us to proclaim the excellence of the missionary vocation. His canonization is an opportunity for us to grow in the love of our vocation and to live our vocation with joy.

2. A desire to grow in holiness:

John Paul II writes in his Encyclical *"Redemptoris Missio"*:

*"A missionary is really such only if he commits himself to the way of holiness..... What is needed is the encouragement of a new 'ardor for holiness' among missionaries and throughout the Christian community..... the true missionary is a saint."*¹²

The recognition of the holiness of John Gabriel's life strengthens us as missionaries to advance in the way of holiness.

3. Identified with Christ:

The Common Rules of the Congregation of the Mission remind us:

*"If the Congregation, with the help of God's grace, is to achieve what it sees as its purpose, a genuine effort to put on the spirit of Christ will be needed."*¹³

The General Assembly of 1992 states:

*"As we attempt to identify ourselves with Christ, the evangelizer of the poor, we must clothe ourselves anew in His spirit."*¹⁴

The canonization of John Gabriel, *alter Cristus*, reinforces our decision to live in Christ and to make Christ the rule and the center of our life and ministry.¹⁵

11 SVP, xi, 387.

12 *Redemptoris Missio*, 90.

13 Common Rules, I, 3.

14 Letter of the General Assembly of 1992.

15 Constitutions, 5.

4. Participation in the cross of Christ:

According to Saint Vincent, our identification with Christ ought to be total:

*"Remember, my confreres, we live in Jesus because of the death of Jesus; our life has to be hidden in Jesus and full of Jesus. To die like Jesus, it is necessary to live like Jesus."*¹⁶

The ecclesial recognition of the martyrdom of John Gabriel assures us that he was an authentic disciple of the Master. Identification with the cross of Christ gives authenticity to our missionary commitment.

5. Ready to endure all in love:

Saint Vincent, aware of the demands of the missionary vocation, invites us to be prepared for everything for the sake of the mission:

"To risk one's life, crossing the oceans for the love of God and the salvation of one's neighbor, is a type of martyrdom, even though there is no actual shedding of blood. It is a martyrdom of the will, for one leaves everything and risks everything."

"Is it possible that we are such cowards, and think so little of ourselves that we would abandon the Lord's vineyard, where we have been called by his divine majesty, just because four or five or six people have died?...Let us say 'There is nothing that can make us abandon this resolution.'" ¹⁷

The witness of John Gabriel's martyrdom, his participation in the cross of Christ, sustains our commitment in face of the inherent adversities of the missionary endeavor.

In this way the words of Saint Vincent will become a reality:

"Missionaries ought to feel happy in becoming poor because of their charity to others. They should not fear being poor in this way....what happiness my brothers, to be able to respond: it has been charity that has made us poor."¹⁸

The witness of John Gabriel's martyrdom helps us discover that the commitment of the missionary is measured by charity in following the Master who gives life to all.

16 SVP i, 320.

17 SVP xi, 297-298.

18 SVP xi, 767-768.

II. John Gabriel Perboyre helps us with his intercession

"Today I join with you in asking John Gabriel, our brother, to inspire us to live our missionary vocation with greater generosity."¹⁹

"The saints help us with their intercession."²⁰

The identification of the martyr with the death of Christ is also a participation in self abandonment.²¹ The death of John Gabriel shares in the sacrificial and redemptive character of Christ's death. His canonization is the ecclesial recognition of the importance of his martyrdom for the communion of saints. For this reason John Gabriel helps us with his intercession.

1. Through the intercession of John Gabriel we ask for a generous missionary spirit for each and everyone of the members of the Congregation of the Mission and the members of the Vincentian Family.
2. Through the intercession of John Gabriel, we ask, more concretely, for blessings upon the newly acquired missionary commitments of the Congregation of the Mission as a result of the General Assembly of 1992 and the appeals of the Superior General to the confreres and the provinces.²²
3. Through the intercession of John Gabriel, we ask especially for blessings for our mission in China, *"remembering the sacrifices of those who have worked there in the past and giving thanks for the fidelity of those who continue living there, being witnesses of Christ, and waiting with hope, for a future work of evangelization."²³*

(Charles T. Plock, C.M., translator)

¹⁹ Robert P. Maloney, *ibidem*.

²⁰ Preface of the Saints.

²¹ O. Semmelroth, *Martyrdom*, Sacramentum Mundi.

²² The General Assembly approved the following statute: "The Superior General and his Council have in reality, the power to urge the Provinces to participate in international missionary ministries (works, commitments)." The Superior General wrote to all the priests and brothers of the Congregation (October 9, 1992): "I have decided, with the unanimous support and consent of the General Council, during the six years of my office, to establish each year a new mission *ad gentes*, involving the participation of the international community."

²³ Robert P. Maloney, Letter of April 20, 1995.

