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The Influence of His Family and Friends on the Development of St. John Gabriel Perboyre

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On 2 June 1996, in St. Peter's Square, the Holy Father proclaimed John Gabriel Perboyre a saint.

But John Gabriel did not become a saint from one day to the next by some magic wand. We had been waiting for a long time, more than 150 years, for this official decision by the Church, and we thought that it was very late in coming. However, that is the customary prudence of Roman decisions.

Nevertheless, we already had clear testimony from people who knew him at different points in his life.

When he was a boy in Montgesty, his pastor put complete confidence in him, and regarded him as a model, so much so that he asked him to teach catechism once when he had to be away.

During his secondary studies in Montauban, he seemed to his classmates and teachers so perfect that people talked about him as "the little saint of Montauban." In Montdidier and later in Saint-Flour, he had an extraordinary influence on his students. When he took over the seminary at the beginning of the school year of 1827, he had a mere 34 pupils, but the next year there were 63, and the year after, more than 100.

His superior, Fr. Grappin, superior of the major seminary, would later say of him: "Fr. Perboyre is the most accomplished person I know; he is a man of God." When he was assigned to Paris as assistant director of the novitiate, he met there a candidate who was already 40 years old, Mr. Girard. He would subsequently become superior of the major seminary in Algiers, and he had always wanted to meet a saint. "When I met Fr. Perboyre, it seemed to me that God had answered my prayer. He was so holy, in fact, that I never saw in him a single fault in word or action during the six months that I spent with him in the closest intimacy."

When it was time to bid farewell to the crew on the ship when he arrived in China after months of travel, they said among themselves about him: "That one is a real saint!"

If the holiness of our martyr was evident in China especially in this period of his missionary work and even more during his long sufferings, it was not the result of some sudden conversion, but the accomplishment of his entire life.

This holiness had been prepared by the intense Christian life in the families of his father and mother, the Perboyres and the Rigals.

Even in the preceding generation, Jacques Perboyre, brother of Pierre, John Gabriel's father, had become a priest and chose the missionary life. He had taught in the major seminary of Albi confided in 1762 to the Congregation of the Mission by Cardinal de Bernis, at the time Archbishop of Albi.

At the outbreak of the Revolution, John Gabriel's uncle Jacques went into hiding. He then led a dangerous and at times heroic life, exercising his ministry while endangering his life. Once religious peace returned, he came back to the Diocese of Cahors, and founded there, with another Vincentian, a preparatory seminary. This took place in Montauban, at the time in the Diocese of Cahors. It was there that his nephews would come for their secondary studies, among whom were John Gabriel and several of his brothers and cousins.

In the Perboyre home, a solid piety was inculcated in everyone. They had evening prayers as a family; they never missed Sunday Mass, and after reaching home they would discuss the pastor's sermon. More than once when Pierre Perboyre was unable to go to Mass, he would ask his son John Gabriel to repeat the pastor's sermon. The young boy did it so well that his father once told him: "Since you speak so well, you should go on to become a priest."

In this pious atmosphere, several vocations were sown and germinated among the brothers and sisters of the martyr. Besides John Gabriel, two of his brothers entered the Congregation of the Mission, and one of his sisters was attracted to the contemplative life of the Carmel but died just before her admission. Two others, wanting to serve the poor, became Daughters of Charity. One of them would go to China like her brother, while the other would remain in Europe. She died at the hospital in Naples in the service of the sick.

John Gabriel had been marked by his childhood in the country, and he would always remain attentive to matters of the earth. He appreciated the quiet that enveloped the central mission house. In the vast territory confided to him, he was sensitive to the misery of the poor peasants who were finding it so hard just to survive. One year, grasshoppers destroyed the entire harvest.

John Gabriel came to their help with the limited resources of the mission. Recalling the methods he learned in his father's vineyard, he taught several Chinese how to trim the vines.

During his novitiate in the seminary of Montauban, John Gabriel became aware, thanks to his director, Fr. Maisonneuve, and his uncle Jacques, of the pious practices in use in the Congregation. Before entering the seminary, he already had an intense interior life, but in the seminary he was initiated into the methods of meditation, silent prayer in the presence of God. He had also begun to pray with the breviary. In his missionary journeys on the roads of China, he would be in dialogue with God continually. In prison, his guards were impressed by the power of his prayer life.

When he reached the place of his execution, but before submitting to the executioners, he knelt and prayed. He knew that in a few minutes he would at last meet him whom he had followed since his childhood and through the different steps of his way of the cross, now to be accomplished at the foot of this rack on which he would consummate his sacrifice.

The region around his mission center was a rural area of poor houses made of bamboo and reeds covered with thatch. The missionaries were lodged, as were their people, in a similar modest place. During his missionary visits, John Gabriel stayed where he could, sometimes in the chapel or the sacristy, if there was one, or sometimes with a Christian family.

Both the Christians and the pagans saw him radiating such an intense interior life that they considered him a man of God and a genuine saint, and they were not mistaken. The holiness appearing before their eyes was not an illusion or simply the expression of an especially strong character, as sometimes happens; the history of evangelization in China presents several examples of this.

If his boyhood friends had been able to see John Gabriel in his prison at Ou Tchang Fou [Wuhan], or at the foot of the rack on which he was to be attached, they would have recognized him as the same person, with the same self-control, the same serene union with God, the same solemn but joyful character. He had not changed; he always had the same radiance.

From the beginning to the end of his life, he had remained faithful to the solid faith that he had received in the bosom of his family, and which had been enriched and developed during his priestly and missionary life.

To express this continuity in a life, an old man from my village once told me: “You know, when you are born a pony, you grow up to be a horse.” This formula may be a little coarse, but it expresses quite well the truth that the virtues and qualities seen in a young person will be strengthened and developed all during his or her life.

(JOHN RYBOLT, C.M., translator)