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The Elements of a Discourse: The Correspondence of John Gabriel Perboyre

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Introduction

In *La vie du bienheureux Jean-Gabriel Perboyre*, the author writes:

In our Blessed, the soul itself reigned above all. His whole body served it with an edifying fidelity; all his senses obeyed it or, what is more, it kept them under a hard and severe slavery. This was a soul which, one might say, did not touch earth and which lived amidst the weaknesses of humanity as an angel which borrows its forms, when it comes here below to accomplish a celestial mission.¹

In the same way, we could also cite as typical of this type of hagiography, this other relevant passage:

“He studied deeply Jesus crucified; at his feet he sought light and strength, wept for his sins and those of others, forgot everything, forgot even himself and found himself, one might say, in another world.”²

How can we, as historians, reckon the profound motivations of a man who, situated in a particular context, gave his entire life in following Christ, while we still avoid the traps of this teleological history, so well characterised by these quotations? In trying to circumvent these human conditionings, and thereby reducing a man’s life to a laconic “he was a man of his times” we risk casting aside the very thing that constitutes the originality of a meeting. Can we avoid reducing the things that might irk us, seeking to integrate them into our familiar categories, so that we can agree to enter into dialogue with this representative of a past epoch who, however, recalls for us the actuality of the Christian message?

For this reason, we propose, within the limits of this article, to take account, in a precise and concise manner, of the *weltanschauung* (metaphysical view of the world, underlying an understanding of life³) of John Gabriel Perboyre and, to that end, to start with what he himself explicitly stated. The correspondence of the saint is a precious source for this discourse since, in the variety of recipients, it allows us access to this representation. In touching on

¹ *La vie du bienheureux Jean-Gabriel Perboyre*, Paris, Gaume et compagnie, 1889, p. 53.

² *Ibid.* p.79.

³ Translation of the definition in the *Petit Larousse*, 2001.

this, we refuse to separate heavenly from earthly realities, in order that we may dialogue with this presupposed unity of thought and action.

The grandeur of God; the unworthiness of man

In the letters of John-Gabriel Perboyre one finds, first and massively, a vital consciousness of the grandeur of God. It is concerned with a “severe religion”⁴ which takes account of the unity of God, such as was the case in the 19th century. God is the one who is at the centre of this *weltanschauung*, and all things converge on God. It is characterised firstly by a providentialist reading of the history of the world,⁵ of the mission in China,⁶ of the Congregation⁷ and even of individual and personal history.⁸

The justice and mercy of God characterise this providence which ordains everything in the world. In order to illustrate this fundamental conception, we can cite this passage from a letter of 27 October 1830 to his brother, Louis, who, at Le Havre, is on the verge of embarking for China. Referring to “a prophesy which is current in our country” and which foretold the conquest of Paris by the Arabs, John Gabriel sets out what can be understood as the basic presupposition of his view of his history:

While there may be all these predictions, true or false, we remain content, in the midst of vicissitudes and temporal calamities, having as Father a God who only chastises us that we might become wise, who allows evil only to draw good from it. May he who has brought disorder into the world upturn and reverse it all, God knows how to bring all to its end and how to procure from it, by his adorable providence, his greater glory and the sanctification

⁴ Cf. Cholvy G. and Hilaire Y-M., *Histoire de la France contemporaine 1800-1880*, Toulouse, Privat, 1985, pp. 58-65.

⁵ By way of example, we can take what Perboyre wrote on 8 November 1838 to the procurator of Macao; “One must abandon oneself to the care of this providence, which governs all in this world with or without or even contrary to human industry” (Saint Jean-Gabriel Perboyre, *Correspondance*, Rome, Congregation of the Mission, 1996 (new edition, revised and corrected) p. 192).

⁶ In his letter of 16 August 1836: “When will this little leaven have penetrated this great mass? That is the secret of the One who holds all time in his power” (*ibid.* p. 203).

⁷ At the end of 1837 he writes; “It is not without particular design that she [Providence] has allowed them to go in first [Laribe and Rameaux whom Perboyre suggests as Vicars General] in our mission in China, that she has used them to renew them and put them in a state that one can now call prosperous despite the sad dilapidation in which they found them” (*ibid.* pp. 262-263).

⁸ During his voyage to China, the boat went through a storm and Perboyre suggests this reading of it in a letter of 29 June 1835: “However, we kept our souls at peace, delighting in abandoning ourselves to the good pleasure of the One who leads to the gates of the tomb and draws us back from them. He happily desired to lead us out of this crisis completely safe and sound” (*ibid.* p. 104, cf. p. 122. He further states to his uncle on 10 August 1836: “We always placed so much more of our confidence in the Providence of God that we counted less on our own and that of our guides.”

*of his elect. In him alone is our hope, our sole resource. He is our all; may he eternally be so.*⁹

Here is the essential key for understanding the thought and action of the saint and, equally certainly, of the Church in France emerging from the Revolution which had overthrown the order of the “Ancien Regime.”

If God is at the centre, consequently time is understood as orientated to permitting the realisation of the divine plan. Man is invited to enter this dynamic, all the more so when he is a missionary. John Gabriel, in a letter of 25 September 1837, expresses this dynamism to Fr. Martin, director of the Internal Seminaire:

*I cannot refrain from expressing often before God the great desire that I have that he may cause the day to come when this vast empire may become his heritage, sharing in the graces which are reserved for it in the treasures of his mercies....*¹⁰

Opposed to God, there is the world. One is struck today by this essentially pessimistic perspective, but to the degree that the ultimate end of man is to turn towards God and to work for his glory, the world represents the opposite track or, at least, the option of turning against the One God. The desolation of our world stands in the way of the mercy of God. John Gabriel Perboyre writes as follows to one of the Assistants of the Congregation, Jean Grappin, on 18 August 1836:

*The more one travels the world, the more is one struck by the truth of these words: “misericordia Domini plena est terra”; but one also sees the truth of: “desolatione desolata est terra.” Yes, whichever way one turns, one finds it to be infested with vice and soiled with iniquity. There are saints who have died in sorrow to see God so offended by men.*¹¹

Man, therefore, must choose: God or the world. Salvation is “this great undertaking”¹² and one prepares for it here below. The devaluing of ethical values is a consequence of this choice. This is what he expresses to his youngest brother, Antoine, in direct fashion:

*Do not forget, my dear brother, that our life passes like a shadow, and that, at death, we will be treated as we have merited by our vices or our virtues. Have a horror of the pleasures of the world. Seek always above the eternal rewards; all the rest is only vanity.*¹³

⁹ *Ibid.* p. 44.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p. 251.

¹¹ *Ibid.* pp.222-223.

¹² Cholvy and Hilaire, *op.cit.* pp. 59-60.

¹³ Perboyre, *Correspondance, op. cit.*, 20 January 1835, p. 97.

This is expressed again in even more direct fashion when he announces, in the letter of 15 February 1832, to his parents the death of his brother, Louis:

*Let us shun the world, detach ourselves from all things of the earth, and attach ourselves only to God and to his service; we will receive at death only what we have sown during life.*¹⁴

In the same way, when he learns that his father is sick, he writes, in a letter to his brother, Antoine, on 14 January 1834:

The Good God only afflicts him for his own good, he must be assured of that. In his suffering, he expiates the pains which he would have to undergo in Purgatory and he merits a greater glory for heaven. Thus, I pray him to profit from the graces of the illness by holy resignation and perfect patience. I strongly advise him during his convalescence to make a general confession of his whole life.

And John Gabriel avails of the opportunity to develop this traditional spirituality of the Christian way of the ‘art of dying’:

*At whatever moment the Celestial Father judges it right to call us to him, we must find ourselves completely ready. It is too late to wait until old age, violent illness or sudden death. Each illness must be a continual preparation for a holy death; it has been allotted to us only to obtain a precious eternity. As for you, my dear brother, even though you are still young, reflect that you may die any day. Live as if each day was to be the last of your life. Moreover, one cannot amass treasures in heaven too soon or too carefully. Instead of imitating those who waste the time of their youth in vain pleasures, apply yourself all the more to observing the Law of God.*¹⁵

Suffering is integral to this spirituality and John Gabriel takes this up again with his cousin in Montgesty in 1833:

*The Good Lord chastises those he loves; see suffering as gifts from heaven and as an excellent means to sanctification and salvation.*¹⁶

This impossibility of man’s saving himself in the world is also what he experiences himself at the level of his own journey. Before entering the seminary

¹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 56.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* pp. 78-80.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* p.3.

at Montauban, in a letter to his father on 16 June 1817 — the first letter we have — he writes:

*I have consulted God in order to know the state that I must embrace in order to move more surely towards heaven. After many prayers, I believe that the Lord wished me to enter the ecclesiastical state.*¹⁷

When he was less than two years a priest, he shared with his brother, Louis, on 11 July 1828:

*Here I see myself in my 27th year; alas! in my past life, what a terrible emptiness for eternity.*¹⁸

Finally, in his last letter to Jean-Baptiste Torette, procurator in Macao, dated 16 August 1839, he bore witness to the same sentiment with regard to the expenses incurred in getting hernia supports for him:

*As to the suggestion that the expenses paid out for me in this matter might be useless, this I acknowledge and avow, with far less difficulty than I acknowledge more and more the uselessness of all those costs which I have incurred for the Congregation in the 20 years that I have been in its care, and I assure you that this is one of my greatest sorrows, which will remain with me no doubt as long as the Good Lord endures me in this world.*¹⁹

This consciousness of the emptiness of human life — the sentiment of the creature in face of its creator, since it owes all things to him — is increased by pastoral duty. In order to announce the date of his priestly ordination, he writes to his father on 24 August 1826:

*It is, therefore, decided, my most dear father, and the day is not far off when the Lord will place on my head forever the yoke of priesthood; this will be the greatest day of my life. What happiness for me, if I can receive priesthood with all the necessary dispositions! What a source of grace for me and others! The mercy of God must be great since it chooses such unworthy ministers; you know how little I have merited this great favour. Beseech Our Lord, I pray you, that he may not allow me to abuse the graces that he deigns to accord me.*²⁰

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.* from St Flour, p. 22.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 303.

²⁰ *Ibid.* p.7.

The majesty of God is the measure of the insignificance of man to the degree that it recalls also the grandeur and beauty of God's plan for man.

History

One finds the same pessimistic perspective with regard to the present times. To his brother, Louis, who had told him that he was going to teach philosophy, John Gabriel answers in his letter of 24 May 1828:

*It is no small thing to be a professor of philosophy in a time when each person is imposing on this science the ideas that please him, where each has his system, his opinions, where there are more schools than masters.*²¹

The rupture was introduced by the French Revolution and the saint repeats the same alarmist diagnosis as the opponents of the Revolution and the defenders of Ultramontane Catholicism. To his brother, Louis, in Macao, he writes in July 1831:

*His Lordship the Count de Maistre*²² *said in 1820 that Europe, like him, was heading for the tomb; you, who in order not to be sucked in with her, have hastened to distance yourself from her, you must be curious to know if there is still left in her any breath of life. Here is her report: you will see that the patient is still in a state of suffering; and, in the crises that she has had to undergo, you will see that there is still some life left in her ailing limbs.*²³

The world is as though held by this rule of decline which leads it inexorably towards disorder. This letter of July 1831 to his brother, Louis,²⁴ is certainly the most important for us in order to grasp the political understanding of this missionary. In effect, he develops in it a defence of legitimacy and legality:

Since the Revolution of July, ministers have succeeded one another with the rapidity of lightning. The government has often had to struggle with the anarchists for the streets of the capital and keep

²¹ *Ibid.* p.20. Philosophy, too worldly, risked losing from sight "the idea of this adorable Majesty" (*Ibid.* p. 59).

²² Joseph de Maistre (1753-1821) played an essential role in the evolution of Catholicism after the tragic period of the French Revolution. Only the Church could permit a true restoration since what was in question was the very foundation of society.

²³ Perboyre, *Correspondance, op. cit.*, p. 47.

²⁴ Louis had died a little while after his departure from France, on 2 May 1831. John Gabriel learnt this only in February 1832, as he indicates in a letter to his uncle: *ibid.* p. 57, and also that to his parents, 15 February 1832, *ibid.* p. 56.

*watch on the machinations, both true and suspected, of the partisans of the Ancien Régime.*²⁵

In the same movement he rejects the “populace of Paris” and the “schismatic Grégoire.”²⁶ On this subject, he reported to his brother:

*On the occasion of the funeral service which was held, imprudently, on the anniversary of the death of the Duc de Berry, the populace of Paris horribly sacked the church of Saint Germain l’Auxerrois and the palace and country-house of the Archbishop. The Abbey Church at Bois has been unworthily and legally profaned. The minister of police brought in, by means of force, the body of the schismatic Grégoire, former constitutional bishop, who persisted in his error even unto death.*²⁷

What is primary for him is respect for order and tranquillity. In fact, all forms of disorder are contrary to holy endeavours. What is essential is found only at this level. In a significant way, he draws out the moral lessons of this political situation for his brother, Antoine, in the letter of 14 April 1834:

*There have been some troubles in Paris these past days; it is now over. There have been men killed and others wounded ... Our district remains very calm; moreover, we are under the protection of St. Vincent de Paul, our good father, whose body is exposed for public veneration in our church. A great crowd of people come here each day this week because of the novena being offered in his honour. This proves to you that, while some work to their own perdition, others focus on their salvation. Strive, my dear brother, seriously to imitate these latter.*²⁸

Revolution, which seemed a loss of time and a waste of energy, is feared. In the letter to his brother, Louis, on 24 August 1830 — just after the July Revolution which overthrew the Bourbons in order to put in a constitutional monarchy under Philip of Orleans — he writes, not without some exaggeration:

I have been in mortal fear since the first news of the Revolution, right up to the moment when we learned that you were safe!

He continues, passing on a rumour:

²⁵ *Ibid.* p. 48.

²⁶ Henri Grégoire (1750-1831) deputy of the Constitutional Assembly, fought for the unity of the Three Orders (Nobility, Clergy and People). He voted for the declaration of the Rights of Man and also the Civil Constitution of the Clergy. He was consecrated as Constitutional Bishop of the Diocese of Blois. Unbending, he refused, even on his deathbed, to recant his constitutional allegiance.

²⁷ Perboyre, *Correspondance, op. cit.*, p. 48.

²⁸ *Ibid.* p. 88.

*I wept torrents of tears, when I was told that the body of St. Vincent had been thrown into the Seine, and I could only be consoled when I learned that I was completely misled. May the Lord continue to favour with his divine protection both you and all the children of St. Vincent!*²⁹

If there is never any question, in the correspondence of John Gabriel Perboyre, of what was fundamentally at stake in the French Revolution, it had still been the cause of a “grievous lacuna,”³⁰ prejudicial to the plan of God himself. Happily, in the end

*God, having reestablished in France the family of St. Vincent, and having put it in the position of fulfilling all its commitments, it has hastened anew to the aid of the Chinese.*³¹

Politics holds no interest for him; the only thing that matters is the supernatural and for man actively to strive for his salvation.

***L’Avenir*, the “system” of M. de Lamennais**

In this context, the sole favourable attitude in which basic issues may be touched on is found in relation to the paper *L’Avenir (The Future)* of Félicité de Lamennais³² whose motto was “God and Liberty,” which came out after the revolution of July, from 16 October 1830 to 15 November 1831. It was characteristic of the attitude of the French Clergy who showed great interest in the paper. It is in the letter to Louis at Macao, written towards July 1831, that John Gabriel Perboyre is most explicit on this question³³:

²⁹ *Ibid.* p.39.

³⁰ *Ibid.* p. 200.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Lamennais (1782-1854), along with Montalembert, is one of the principal representatives of liberal Catholicism. The paper attempts to get closer to the revolutionary principles, the first of which was certainly liberty: the paper reclaimed liberty of conscience with, as a corollary, the separation of Church and State, freedom of education, of the press and of association.... From December 1831 to July 1832, the “pilgrims of liberty” were in Rome in order to win the support of the Pope. After an interview, in which no reference was made to the paper, on their return from Rome, they learned of the publication of the Bull *Mirari Vos* on 15 August 1832. Gregory XVI, without ever directly referring to the paper, condemned the doctrines of *L’Avenir* and, in particular, that of liberalism: “this false and absurd maxim, or rather this delirium, according to which one can procure and guarantee liberty of conscience for all.”

³³ The attitude of the biographers of John Gabriel Perboyre is noteworthy: for example, *La vie du bienheureux Jean-Gabriel Perboyre*, *op.cit.*, remains entirely silent on this question about the influence of Lamennais and the paper *L’Avenir*, whereas, taking up the commentary of François Vauris, *Le disciple de Jésus, ou vie du Vénérable Perboyre*, Paris, 1853, the note on page 53 of the *Correspondance*, *op. cit.*, comments: “While superior of Saint-Flour, the saint had adopted the system of Fr. de Lamennais because he thought it a suitable contribution to the good of the Church,” then cites the first biography setting forth in evidence the fidelity of John Gabriel Perboyre to the decision of the Pope.

Just a word on the paper L'Avenir. As your know, it is edited by an intrepid army of ultramontanists with M. de Lamennais as their captain. The doctrines which are defended therein are only those best developed principles which M. de Lamennais has already unveiled in his work on the progress of the Revolution. You cannot imagine how much this paper has stirred up reactions. In general, the bishops of France do not like it. However, it is more or less in every diocese. Everywhere there are hot partisans and numerous opponents. It has succeeded very well in Belgium. In Rome, there are those for and those against. The editors have addressed a declaration to the Holy See in which they set out their philosophical, theological and political principles, begging the Holy Father to decide on the delicate issues which they submit to him. But Rome has said nothing these past four or five months since the declaration was sent there.³⁴

Since 1828, in his letter of 24 May, “the system of M. de Lamennais” was a topic of discussion with his brother Louis and John Gabriel, being up-to-date with current writings, sums up:

As for the doctrine of the latter [...] there are a good number of works which can perfectly well satisfy you on the above.³⁵

Finally, in a letter to his cousin, parish priest of Jussies in the canton of Catus, we find another important reference that allows us to appreciate his attitude:

Our uncle in Montauban has just written to me that a huge storm has arisen against our Gentlemen (of the Mission) in Cahors, because of “Lamennaisian” opinions. I find it difficult to believe, partly because his huge distaste for M. de Lamennais may have caused him to fall into exaggeration, partly because our confreres are very circumspect in this regard. And how could one pursue men who only wish to have the opinions of the Holy See and who keep it in their heart until the Holy See has pronounced that they are mistaken. You are well-placed to find out the truth, since you go often to Cahors. Could you please pass it on to me?

I have read the first two issues of the Gazette du Clergé. It is often close in tone to L'Avenir in its basic doctrines, but it is more moderate and gentle in its format, and is inferior to the other in terms of editing talent. I can inform you that the famous pilgrims

³⁴ Perboyre, *Correspondance*, op. cit., pp. 48-49.

³⁵ *Ibid.* p. 21.

have arrived in Rome. They will spend a month there before being presented to the Pope, in order to see, while they are waiting, what the atmosphere of the office is like. M. de Lamennais was very tired after the voyage. As soon as the Legate from Florence knew that he had arrived in town, he hurried to invite him to dinner, and received him in most brilliant fashion in most distinguished company. You will learn with great pleasure that the author of the Essay on Indifference³⁶ has written an essay on Catholic philosophy which, they say, eclipses all his other works. But before releasing it, he wishes to resolve the issue about L'Avenir.³⁷

It is only in this context that John Gabriel Perboyre shows and expresses an interest in socio-political questions but, like the young clergy, to soften them after the condemnation from Rome.

Missioner

This attitude of breaking with the world shows itself concretely in the departure of the missioner for another country. In order to understand this missionary spirituality well, we have to refer to two significant passages in the letters of John Gabriel. There is, firstly, the letter to his brother, Louis, of 8 October 1830, where he responds to the news of the latter's departure for China:

Nature is grieved but faith comes to console. In order to endure my weakness and ease my pain, I see before me the glory which you will offer to God and the salvation of the souls that you will have the happiness of wresting away from the slavery of the demon. The hope of seeing you again, if not here below at least in the heavenly fatherland, eases the bitterness of my sorrow. Go, therefore, my beloved brother, go where the voice of God calls you. You take my sorrow with you but my best wishes will follow you everywhere.

[...] May the guardian angels of the pagan countries which you are destined to evangelise greet you on your arrival, aid you in all your undertakings and obtain for you immense success in establishing the reign of God! May we both live the life of the saints and die the death of the elect!

I fear that I have not been faithful to the vocation that the Lord has given you. Pray God to make me know his holy will and to conform me to it. Obtain for me, of his merciful goodness, forgiveness for

³⁶ This consists of two volumes, published in 1817 and 1820, in which Lamennais attacks the philosophy developed by the encyclopedists.

³⁷ Perboyre, *Correspondance*, *op. cit.*, pp. 53-54.

*my sinfulness and the spirit of our holy state in order that I may become a good Christian, a good priest and a good missionary.*³⁸

Later, there is the announcement to his uncle of his own departure for this same mission, in a letter dated February 1835:

I have great news to tell you. The good God has favoured me with a very special grace of which I am wholly unworthy. When he deigned to bestow on me a vocation for the ecclesiastical state, the principal motive which decided me to respond to his voice was the hope of being able to preach to the infidels the good news of salvation. Since then, I have never altogether lost sight of this view and the idea of the missions in China especially made my heart beat faster. And now! my dear uncle, my desires have today finally been heard. It was on the feast of the Purification that I was named to the mission in China, which makes me think that, in this, I owe a great deal to the Blessed Virgin. Help me, please, to thank her and to beseech her to thank Our Lord for me. I am to leave with two of our young priests and several priests from the “Missions Etrangères.”

*[...] May God grant me the graces I need for a good crossing, to live and die as a true missionary.*³⁹

God is the beginning and end of all involvement. Into this space the missionary's task is inserted, which consists of establishing the reign of God. There is no autonomy at all since, in all human initiative, one must recognise the action of God.

With his departure for China on 21 March 1835, the division (between spirit and world) which he had never ceased to live, became concrete. He writes to his uncle some days before embarking (18 March):

*I hasten to send you my farewells once again before I leave this fatherland which will now cease to be mine.*⁴⁰

He is making solid this separation which suffuses all the spiritual life in a radical way.⁴¹

³⁸ *Ibid.* p.41.

³⁹ *Ibid.* p.100.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* pp. 100-101.

⁴¹ Even at the time of Louis' departure, he had written to his uncle, on 23 August 1833: "Those who leave are filled with joy. Those who remain can only console themselves with the hope of following on later." *Ibid.* p. 69.

Life, for John Gabriel, is envisaged as a combat for Christ. The absolutely military obedience of the missionary is understood in this way. To M. Torrette, he writes on 15 July 1835:

*Happy to fight under your flag, I give myself to you without reservation. I will work under whichever confrere you wish, I will go where you wish, even into Tartary and beyond. It will be enough that you may be able to get some use of me.*⁴²

To the Superior General, Jean-Baptiste Nozo, in a letter of 19 December 1835, he declares:

*A soldier in whom temerity takes the place of courage, I have felt my heart tremble at the approach of battle. I have never been happier than in this situation. I do not know what is in store for me in the employment which opens before me; doubtless many crosses, for that is the daily bread of the missionary. And what better could one wish for, than to go and preach Christ crucified? May he allow me to taste the sweetness of his bitter chalice! May he make me worthy of the scouts who have gone before me! May he permit none of us to belittle the fine examples which our Congregation offers us in these far-off countries.*⁴³

Learning the subtleties of the Chinese language, the missionary adds, in a letter to his sister, Antoinette, in November 1835:

*When we know it fairly fluently, we can use it to wage war on Satan in the vast empire of China, where there are still millions of pagans.*⁴⁴

The missionary who risks his life “in enemy territory”⁴⁵ must persevere:

*It would not be useless to recall that suffering is the lot of the missionary.*⁴⁶

Taking up the image of St. Paul, and making the link with his long and painful journeys, he writes to his uncle on 10 October 1836:

⁴² *Ibid.* p. 110.

⁴³ *Ibid.* p.148.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* p.145.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* p. 176.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* p.103. Suffering possesses curative properties with regard to health: *ibid.* p. 79. Cf. the letter to his cousin in Montgesty, *ibid.* p. 65. Cf. above.

*If I have come so far it is doubtless in order to run still further in this arena. God grant that I may run in such a way as to gain my everlasting crown.*⁴⁷

The missionary, familiar with suffering, thus cooperates with the plan of God. If, for himself, John Gabriel Perboyre, takes care not to inflate his “little efforts” — he is nothing of himself: “a little runt,”⁴⁸ it was enough for him “to be a good little mouse”⁴⁹ — he delighted in recording the qualities and virtues he found in his confreres (especially Frs. Laribe and Rameaux⁵⁰) and sets out a demanding image for the missionary. To M. Martin, director of the Internal Seminary, he describes the demands of formation in a letter of 4 November 1835:

*You see what devotion you must inspire in those whom you are forming for us. They must be filled with sanctity and prudence. Show me a saint and I will show you a man who possesses all the virtues to a high degree of perfection. Prudence presupposes great rectitude and a certain breath of judgement, it embraces the spirit of discernment and of good conduct and, that good may be achieved, it demands strength of soul and unconquerable constancy. This prudence cannot be simply a natural quality, but is, still more, a supernatural gift, and must be a truly heavenly wisdom. After all, if the mission gives authority to the apostles, it is only the communication of the Spirit of God that gives them the power to convert the world.*⁵¹

In all things, he is concerned with recognising the initiative and work of God.

Two things are inseparable for the missionary: to work for his own sanctification and to strive for the salvation of his neighbour. To his parents, he writes on 22 August 1836:

*My very dear parents, have no other concern for me except to pray that I may save myself and that I may contribute to saving others.*⁵²

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* p. 197.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* Letter to his uncle, 24 July 1835, p. 112.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* To his brother, Jacques, 18 September 1838, p. 274.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* Letter to his uncle, 10 August 1836, p. 182. “Rameaux, who really is the father of the Christians” (*Ibid.* p. 195). To the Superior General, letter of 18 August 1836, *ibid.* p. 217. Describing the apostolic work of his confreres, John Gabriel adds: “I would especially like to glean some ears in order to be able to place them beside the great sheaves of my confreres in the fields of the Great Father, in order that I might have some share in their reward.” *Ibid.* p. 223.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* p. 138.

⁵² *Ibid.* p. 225.

Asking a priest to continue to pray that he might obtain the protection of the Lord, John Gabriel adds, in a letter of 22 August 1837:

*In order that I may have the happiness of contributing a little to his glory, by working for my salvation and cooperating in the salvation of my neighbour.*⁵³

From this point of view, prayer is every whit as important as action, for he is utterly concerned with living out this availability to God. In the letter to his uncle, referring to the work of The Society for the Propagation of the Faith,⁵⁴ he insisted on this double dimension of prayer: on the one hand supplication for the conversion of China:

*If you see prayers rise up to heaven from all parts, ever more increased, ever more fervent, you could judge from afar better than we who are so near if the Kingdom is close to this great nation*⁵⁵;

yet, on the other hand, as a struggle against Satan, he formulates this vow:

*May all their brothers in Jesus Christ be enflamed with the same zeal for the cause of our Heavenly King, be part of the same spiritual army and take up the arms of prayer in order that they may bring about the fall of the Empire of Satan!*⁵⁶

Mission

The tendency which consists in idealising the past seems characteristic of the post-revolutionary period. The present was all degradation and the entire focus was on reaching the heights of this prestigious past. With regard to mission, John Gabriel Perboyre misses the situation at the beginning of the 18th century: to the Vicar General in Saint-Flour, he writes on 16 August 1836:

⁵³ Not without some humour, he renews, in a very beautiful passage, this same invitation to his sister, Antoinette, which we cannot fail to quote, at least in this footnote: "Do not think that the Chinese are always hot on my heels and that they dream of nothing but being rid of me. These are people whom I love more than I fear. I assure you, I do not fear even the Emperor, the Mandarins or their flunkies. I have, however, one particular enemy in this country, whose challenges I must meet. This one is to be feared: he is the most wicked that I have known; and he is not Chinese, he is a European. He was baptised at birth; and has since been ordained priest. He came from France to China with us and on the same ship. I have no doubt that he will pursue me everywhere and will, most certainly, cause my ruin if I have the misfortune to fall alone into his hands. I will not give you his name for you already know him; if you can obtain his conversion, you will do him great service and your brother will owe you his happiness." *Ibid.* November 1835, pp. 145-146.

⁵⁴ The Society for the Propagation of the Faith was founded in Lyons in 1819 and in 1822 the *Annales* were published in order to make this missionary undertaking known. It was a means of stirring up both prayers and donations from Catholics for the missions.

⁵⁵ Perboyre, *Correspondance, op. cit.*, Letter to his uncle, 16 August 1836, pp. 203-204.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

The missionaries are now, in the mission in Peking, in a position that is very different from that which they knew previously. Then, even though they had only been admitted to Peking as European experts, called there to set up an academy of science and arts, they were able, under this guise, to exercise, right in the heart of the capital, all the functions of a missionary: to direct a seminary, preach religion continually in their church, receive more than two hundred retreatants in their house each year, form catechists, explain cases of conscience each day to the Chinese priests during two months of holiday which they took amongst them on returning from mission, take care of the Christians in the various areas of the town, from which they knew how to escape secretly, in spite of the Emperor's restrictions, in order to go on mission in the countryside, etc.⁵⁷

With regard to missions, John Gabriel emphasised, on one hand, the misery of the Christians in China: from Macao, he writes, without actually seeing it himself: "Our Christians are generally in great misery."⁵⁸ To his uncle, from Honan, on 10 August 1836, he writes: "Those who do not die live on practically nothing."⁵⁹ He recalls "the extreme misery"⁶⁰ for his cousin Caviolo, parish priest of Catus, in a letter of 12 September 1838. On the other hand, linked with this material misery, is the small number of Christians:

Scattered over the surface of the empire they [the Christians] are among the hoard of pagans as small fish are in the sea; calculating the total number of Chinese at 300 million: in 13 or 14 hundred one will scarcely find one Christian.⁶¹

Describing the Chinese mission, he writes in a letter of 22 August 1837 to a priest in the parish of St. Eustache:

There are in China some 40 European priests and about 80 Chinese priests. The number of workers is not yet sufficient to care for the lone Christians who, however, amid the vast population of Chinese who serve the demon, seem merely as the scattered ears that escape the scythe of the harvester. In the various provinces, occasionally pagans will convert but, in such a vast mass, it is hardly significant. One must hope that God, whose judgements are impenetrable, will one day cause this great nation to enter into the heart of the Church. The life of the missionaries in China is

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* p.201.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* Letter of 6 November 1835, p. 143.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* p. 195.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* pp. 269-270.

⁶¹ *Ibid.* Letter of 16 August 1856, p. 203.

*completely apostolic; it is spent amid tiredness and dangers; three-quarters of the year, they must cover great distances in order to direct the Christian communities, preach, administer the sacraments etc., living frugally in a country where the rich, as everywhere, live well but where the poor do not always have even a little rice to feed themselves....*⁶²

A year later, in a letter to his cousin Caviolo, parish priest of Catus, he writes, on 12 September 1838:

*It is, as you know, a great field covered with a huge harvest; but its gospel workers are, in proportion, very few in number. Although belonging to different bodies and different countries, they all work together, with a unity of views and doctrines, united by links of the same spirit, equally zealous and indefatigable in taking up the same works and bearing the same cross, equally convinced that, if the hand of God is not in it, the hand of man can do nothing. These attitudes, supported by the continual and fervent prayers which are offered in the whole Church for the conversion of China, may be the best intimation one can have today, that the days of mercy are being prepared for this immense population which has, until now, been estranged from the life of God. If it is not given to us to see the dawn of these happy days, let us, at least, never cease to invoke them with all the ardour of our desires.*⁶³

In these descriptions, which emphasise the small number, one finds an ideally apostolic description of the missionary work. With the entire Church, it is reaching out toward the realization of God's design.

By way of conclusion

The mission which the missionaries lived in China in the 19th century existed in a very precise context, as much at the interior level — Catholicism in France must find its feet again after the turmoil of the Revolution — as at the exterior level: the call to convert this vast empire where “Satan reigns.” In either case, “Almighty God” is the principal actor. In the West, the signs of the times seem always to lead to death, even as, on the other side, they announce “happy days.” The missionary finds himself involved in this struggle against the dimensions of the world.

One must take account also the unity of the *weltanschauung* of John Gabriel Perboyre, which we may characterise as a spirituality of suffering and of rupture, of battle and glory. In fact, the determining factor is salvation; that is to

⁶² *Ibid.* p. 235.

⁶³ *Ibid.* p. 266.

say, the definitive choice of God. The world then holds no further interest save as a place of passage, the arena where one prepares for eternity. It holds no interest in itself and poses the considerable risk of encouraging one to forget the ultimate goal of man.

To use the words of Paul Ricoeur:

*What we must honour from the past is not that it no longer is but that it once was. Therefore, the message of history to memory, of history to the man who remembers, is to add to the task of remembering not solely a mourning for that which no longer is but a debt to that which once was.*⁶⁴

We may, finally, recognise the importance of this study with regard to the correspondence of John Gabriel Perboyre. This work of history allows us to take account of the gap between a witness to the faith — John Gabriel Perboyre — and our contemporary era. And, at the same time, it makes us recognise the debt which we owe. To undertake this task, is to hear another invitation and to let it resonate in us — in our daily life, in what is closest to us — in other words which are no longer familiar to our culture, a Good News.

(EUGENE CURRAN, C.M., translator)

⁶⁴ Paul Ricoeur, “Définition de la mémoire d’un point de vue philosophique” in *Pourquoi se souvenir?*, Académie Universelle des Cultures, Paris, Grasset, 1999, p. 32.