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## The Martyrdom of St. John Gabriel Perboyre

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### **The harvest gathered in**

On 15 September 1839, the feast of the Birth of Mary, all the clergy gathered after Mass for a friendly meal. John Gabriel was there, along with Fr. Jean-Henri Baldus, and Fr. Rizzolati, a Franciscan sent as pro-vicar to visit the Christian communities of Ho-nan (Hunan). Their happiness was short-lived. A platoon sent by the mandarins to arrest the missionaries, as ordered by the viceroy, arrived quickly. Rizzolati and Baldus fled, while John Gabriel lost some time by closing the door of the church. Then he too left to hide in the nearby woods, and the Catholic people fled in panic. Silence descended on the mission. When the soldiers arrived, they went wild and stole everything they could find. Religious objects were taken as evidence. Some laity were seized and mistreated, and a few were killed. The others were led away to prison once the mission was set afire.

John Gabriel found safety in the home of a catechist, but he thought that it was too risky. The two then hid in a cousin's home. John Gabriel shaved off his beard to look a little less European. The next day, a catechist was arrested, named Kouan-Lao-San (Guan Lao-san). Amid blows and threats, he was forced to lead the soldiers to the hiding place of the fugitives. John Gabriel had fled the house, but in vain, and he was stopped at the base of a cliff. His fellow fugitive who tried to help was arrested in turn. The woods then resounded with the happy but cruel and sordid shouts of the soldiers, and these naturally terrified the other faithful within earshot.

John Gabriel, loaded down with chains, was forced to run, although he was exhausted.

The next day, some of the faithful who had managed to escape the soldiers notified Fr. Baldus, who had not been arrested. John Gabriel appeared before a first mandarin, the one from Kou-Tcheng (Gucheng), who was in the village of Kouanintang (Kuan Yin Tang), where the missionary had spent his first night as a prisoner. The priest, when brought before the mandarin, acknowledged his Chinese name, Toung-Wen-Siao (Dong Wen Xue), and the character of his mission. The mandarin then informed him of the basis for his indictment: that Europeans were forbidden to enter the Empire to spread their religion, regarded as a sect.

The following day, the prisoners were then brought to the sub-prefecture of Kou-Tcheng-Hsien (Gucheng), a journey of more than 12 hours of forced march.

On 19 September, John Gabriel appeared before two courts, one military and the other civil, since he was both a prisoner of the soldiers and of the mandarins. He was ordered, unsuccessfully, to deny his faith. He was then pronounced guilty, and clothed with a long red robe, red being the color of guilt. He was chained hand and foot, and a thick chain put around his neck; further, he was forbidden to cut his hair or his beard.

The viceroy, informed of his capture, proclaimed the standard penalty: death for any European arrested in the Empire; death for any Chinese or European preacher of this “impious sect,” as Christianity was called, and exile for any Christian, even if it applied to an entire village. This is why he called for John Gabriel’s transfer for judgment to the prefecture of Siang-Yang-Fou (Xiangyang), since this was a major crime; it was a walk of two-days distance.

When they arrived, the prisoners were thrown into a notorious prison, with their feet locked into a wooden plank. John Gabriel would remain imprisoned there for a month, during which he appeared four times before various courts.

### **The millstone of martyrdom**

His first appearance took place before the city court. John Gabriel declared there: “Our religion should be taught to all the nations and spread even among the Chinese.” Later: “My only concern is for my soul, not for my body. I do not fear at all the punishments that you threaten me with.”

The next day, John Gabriel appeared before a higher court. The aggressive mandarin ordered the missionary to trample on the crucifix. Of course, he refused. Then he ordered that the legs of the poor prisoner be exposed, and he was forced to kneel on chains laid on the ground, not standing up for four long hours.

Two weeks later, John Gabriel was summoned before the Supreme Financial Court. The judge asked him if he knew other European priests. “I came here alone,” he retorted. The mandarin, having caught wind of the presence of foreigners, accused John Gabriel of lying. He was pulled by the hair and made to kneel on chains once again. The judge accused Christian women and priests of immorality. John Gabriel energetically denied it. Then he was presented with items used for worship, and was told that, by using these things, priests made the Chinese worship them. To this, John Gabriel responded: “I have no other purpose

than to offer to God, along with his people, the worship that is his due.” Then he declared: “You can rest assured that I will never renounce my faith.”

A last confrontation between John Gabriel and this mandarin took place at Sang-Yang-Fou (Xiangyang). There, he was hung by his thumbs, which had been tied together, as well as by his hair from a beam erected above his head. This punishment turned the prisoner into a helpless toy for the soldiers. The mandarin then declared to the other prisoners: “The hell and the heaven that he preaches to you do not exist.... Look at his lovely body. Can you still believe in his tricky speeches? ... Is there a heaven for him? Is there not rather a hell for you, kneeling down and mistreated as you are? ... Heaven is being seated on a throne like I am ... Hell? That is being on earth and suffering as you are.” Then he ordered John Gabriel to be whipped. Blood flowed from his mouth under the violent blows. He then ordered all the Christian prisoners to be tortured to make them renounce their Christian faith, and some of them succumbed. John Gabriel remained hanging from the beam until nightfall. He would later say: “What I suffered at Siang-Yang-Fou (Xiangyang) was directly because of religion.”

At the end of November 1839, these poor Christian prisoners were brought to the provincial capital, Ou-Tchang-Fou (Wuchang).

### **The chaff and the good grain**

Having decided to uproot the Christian religion from the Empire, the viceroy ordered a general persecution with exile for Chinese converts and with the death penalty for foreigners. When the faithful warned them, the priests were able to flee. But John Gabriel and the others who had been arrested the viceroy sent by boat to Ou-Tchang-Fou (Wuchang), as had been already decided. The prisoners were huddled together, except for the French missionary on another boat, and they all kept their heavy chains. John Gabriel stood among the soldiers, his eyes lowered but his face peaceful and smiling, as if lost in deep meditation. The cortege arrived in the provincial capital at the beginning of December. The prisoners were disembarked without much care, and were at first kept in an inn. They were held tied together with an iron bar and their chains kept them from making much movement. Together again, they listened to John Gabriel as he strengthened their faith. One of those who had denied his faith under torture received the priest’s blessing.

Following a first appearance before a mandarin, just the time needed to register the names of the “guilty,” John Gabriel was brought to the prison of the Supreme Criminal Court, reserved for major criminals. He was thrown in among the filth. Bugs and even scorpions were running around the stinking ground. The prisoners held there were bound by chains in such a way that they could not move without making their neighbor suffer. Infections were therefore quite

common, and John Gabriel could only watch while one of his toes putrefied and finally fell off.

The arrest of the young priest was no longer unknown to the Congregation of the Mission. Fr. Rameaux wrote to Fr. Etienne, the Superior General: “You have doubtless already the first details of the persecution ravaging Houpé (Hubei) and which has put Fr. Perboyre into irons. I have not yet had the happiness of finding myself exposed to the same fate. At the time, I was in our missions in Ho-Nan (Hunan). Fr. Perboyre was supposed to have gone there, but out of compassion for his poor legs, I took his place in this campaign. The service that I wanted to render him will certainly amount to martyrdom.” Fr. Rameaux was named bishop in Kiang-Si (Jiangxi) and Tchékiang (Zhejiang) while John Gabriel was moving toward his martyrdom. During his imprisonment at Ou-Tchan-Fou (Wuchang), he was summoned before the courts on four occasions.

The first was the Supreme Court of Justice, the Ganzafou (Xianfu). John Gabriel there professed that he was in China to “make God known, and not to make a fortune or to look for human honors.” The mandarin retorted: “But have you seen this God whom you worship?” “Our holy books,” John Gabriel assured him, “reveal the truth more than our eyes do.” A missal was brought in and the mandarin concluded: “Your word is worthless, and you would deserve our pity were you not imbued with this false teaching, and had you not deceived our Chinese people with it.” Then he made the missionary kneel down and forced him to hold a heavy piece of wood in his raised hands, beating him when he lowered his arms.

A few days later, he made a second appearance in company with other Christian prisoners. Fr. Yang, a Chinese Vincentian, later wrote about them: “Among the Christian prisoners, the majority denied their religion ... there were more than 60, of whom only ten kept professing their faith in Jesus Christ.” Some refused, but others gave in through fear. John Gabriel said nothing. He was sent back to his cell for a month.

At the beginning of January 1840, John Gabriel was summoned a third time. Here, before the mandarin of the Criminal Court, who had received the viceroy’s order to inform the condemned that he had entered China illegally to spread a foreign religion that he should have rejected, and was being accused of misconduct. In this way, Christianity would be discredited. And so the mandarin questioned John Gabriel, but he did not answer. The poor man, on his knees, then received 15 blows with a leather strap. The mandarin then tried to find out if any drug had been administered to the Christians to keep them from denying their faith. “None at all,” responded the priest, who then received ten more lashes for his trouble. He was then shown the holy oils. “Tell me, is this not a drug?” “It is

not,” countered the prisoner, who then was suddenly knocked to the ground to receive 20 vicious blows with a bamboo cane on his bare thighs. Then they showed John Gabriel a crucifix and ordered him to trample on it. In a quick motion, the priest broke free of his jailers, and despite his heavy chains, knelt before the crucifix laid on the ground. He then took the cross, brought it to his swollen lips and lovingly kissed it. In punishment, John Gabriel was then suspended by his thumbs from a column, while the soldiers made such obscene gestures with the crucifix that the missionary cried out. They also beat him about the head. Then the mandarin accused John Gabriel of gouging out the eyes of the dying. When he vainly denied this, he received 30 lashes on his legs. Half unconscious, the soldiers held open his eyelids for him to look at the mandarin asking: “Now, do you confess?” His refusal brought ten more lashes. The mandarin then accused him of misconduct with nuns. For keeping silence, John Gabriel suffered another 15 lashes.

The onlookers were amazed at the resistance of their prisoner. When the mandarin came close, he saw that John Gabriel was wearing a truss to protect him from a hernia. “So, there is the source of his magical art,” he exclaimed. The priest was then treated as a magician. For this reason, they made him drink dog’s blood and they sprinkled water on his head to remove the evil. The unfortunate prisoner could no longer resist and allowed himself to be branded with a red-hot iron burning into his legs the mandarin’s seal.

Shortly after, John Gabriel received a visit from his catechist Fong, who reported this confidence: “My physical sufferings are not much, but the terrible insult which the mandarin gave to the crucifix is what caused me unbearable pain.”

Once again, John Gabriel appeared before this terrifying court. In view of his refusal to acknowledge the crimes he was accused of, he received ten blows with a stout rattan cane. The mandarin then wanted to be convinced of the immoral conduct of the priests. Various tests performed by specialists proved his chastity without doubt. Nevertheless, the mandarin tied John Gabriel’s hair to a rope, which he pulled with a pulley. The refinement of his cruelty consisted in raising his body and then letting it fall violently to the ground. John Gabriel, covered in blood, then lost consciousness. “How are you feeling now?” the mandarin sneered. His only answer was dead silence. He then left the courtroom and had the soldiers return the prisoner to his cell in a rattan basket.

Some days later, Fr. Perboyre was once again in the presence of his horrible questioner. He began to ask about priestly vestments. “What are these things for? “They are mine, and I use them on festivals for the sacrifices in honor of the true God.” “This is a joke,” the mandarin retorted, “a way to have the Christians worship you.” Seeing the richness of the embroidery, he continued:

“So, this is the way that you want to take over China.” John Gabriel denied it, but he knew that the mandarin was right to make a mistake, confusing Christians with the White Lotus sect, which was seeking to overthrow the Emperor. Then he forced the priest to put on his priestly vestments, and this amazed some of the onlookers, who cried: “This is the living god Fo!” They thought they were seeing in John Gabriel, in his vestments, a new incarnation of the Buddha. Two Christian prisoners then rushed toward him and, kneeling, asked absolution. The tribunal let him go ahead. Later, Fr. Rizzolati would say of this strange scene: “How beautiful it is to see this priest, a witness to Christ amid tortures, administering the divine sacraments ... Having knelt on chains and been judged by men, he was now freeing souls from their spiritual chains, and exercising the power of the Sovereign Judge.”

When the mandarin could do no more, he closed the trial. The viceroy, who had a certain bias against Europeans and their religion, personally took the matter in hand.

### **The bleeding grain**

Tchow-Thien-Tsio did not like Christians. As viceroy of the emperor Tao Kouang (Dao Guang), and despite some tolerance toward the religion of John Gabriel, he was now using all his effort to eradicate it. That is why he had organized the persecution of foreign priests and the deportation of their Chinese converts. People said he took pleasure in inventing instruments of torture, as for example a chair studded with sharp nails on which he made the accused sit.

Before this cruel man whom he would meet two dozen times in two months, John Gabriel was obliged to kneel down. The first interview began with a question about a painting of Mary. “Is this not painted with eyes gouged out from Chinese?” For each answer that displeased the viceroy, the priest was attached to a post and beaten with bamboo poles. Then this mandarin, in his turn, wanted him to trample on the crucifix. “How could I insult my God, my Creator, and my Savior?” the prisoner replied. “Kill me, since I do not wish, and never will, to lower myself to such an act.” John Gabriel was then thrown to his knees on chains and pieces of broken pottery. To make the punishment worse, a heavy board was laid across his calves. Then they carved into his forehead with an iron point the characters “Kiao-Fei” (Jiao fei), meaning “abominable sect.”

His other appearances were similarly cynical and cruel. Sometimes they hung the prisoner up with a rope and then let him fall. Other times, they would have him sit on a raised stool, with his feet weighed down with heavy stones. The viceroy then finished with John Gabriel: “It is worthless for you to want to die quickly. I will make you endure the most atrocious sufferings for a long time. Every single day you can expect to undergo new punishments, and you will

never taste this death that you so desire until you have exhausted all the worst tortures.” Then he stepped down from his place and set to whipping the prisoner himself.

He was half dead when brought back to prison, one enormous gaping, bleeding wound. Even the jailers were moved at seeing so much suffering, and they sought to comfort the poor man. He remained unconscious for three days. At last, the time for the verdict arrived, and John Gabriel and other prisoners were once again brought before the viceroy. In a firm tone of voice, he declared: “You, Toung-Wen-Siao (Dong Wuen Xue), are to be strangled. You others who have never stopped resisting the orders of your superiors and have not wished to renounce your faith, you are going to be exiled. Nevertheless, I am going to attempt once again to save you. Renounce your faith and you will immediately be freed. If not, you will receive your just punishment. John Gabriel then exclaimed: “I would rather die than renounce my faith!” The others followed his example. As a result, each of the prisoners was shown the document with their verdicts. “Sign your own death warrant by marking a cross on this sheet with your own hand.”

On 15 July 1840, the file reached the imperial authority, which alone had the power to make the punishment effective. On 27 August, the sentence signed by the emperor was made public. “The European Toung-Wen-Siao (Dong Wen Xue), branded with the sign of infamy, must suffer strangulation for having entered China and, as head of religious brotherhoods, has preached the doctrine of the “Lord of Heaven,” thereby seducing and deceiving a great many. The sentence will be executed immediately, without the least delay. The ten other guilty parties, among them the virgin Anna Kao, will be sent into slavery. The 34 others who renounced their error will be exempt from punishment, provided they offer proof.” The document reached the hands of the viceroy on 11 September 1840.

In his prison, while awaiting his inevitable punishment, John Gabriel spent his time in meditation. He received the visit of his confrere, Fr. Yang, who brought him a bit of bread, some wine, some clothing and blankets. The catechist Fong was also allowed to see him. John Gabriel who had recovered a little from his wounds wanted to do penance and did not wish to be favored above the other prisoners. Nonetheless, he had the occasion to write one last letter, in which he described his various interrogations, and lamented the apostasy of certain Christians. He also said to another catechist who had come to see him, Ou-Kiang-Te, (Wu Jiang-de) these few words: “When you return, give my regards to all the Christians of Tchayuenkow (Cha Yuan Gou). Tell them not to fear this persecution. May they have confidence in God. I will never see them again; nor will they see me again since I will certainly be condemned to death. But I am happy to die for Christ.”

## **The hour of the harvest**

That same 11 September 1840, the viceroy accomplished his goal. The French priest would be executed, as the emperor had decided. A messenger was sent to the prison to bring out of their foul cells the five condemned to beheading, and Fr. John Gabriel Perboyre, condemned to strangulation.

Each prisoner was clothed with the red robe of the condemned. Their hands were tied behind their backs. On each was placed a notice giving the reason for their condemnation. John Gabriel's read "Kiao-Fei" (Jiao fei). The prisoners then had to run toward the place of their final punishment, their heads down. A crowd of onlookers joined them.

The group arrived outside the city of Ou-Tchang-Fou (Wuchang). The "Golgotha" of John Gabriel is called "Tcha-Hou," (Shan Hong) "Red Mountain." Four mandarins were already there. Without waiting, they ordered the beheading of the five first prisoners. During this time, John Gabriel knelt down to utter one last prayer to the God of Love. The hour was coming; it was already there. The brutal guards stripped him of his red garment leaving him only some shorts. His hands were tied behind his back while his arms were fixed to the short crosspiece of the gallows that had already been prepared. The sufferer's legs were bent backwards and tied together. John Gabriel was nearly on his knees on the cross. Hoisted scarcely a few centimeters above the ground, he was now ready to be sacrificed.

It was about noon when the executioner arrived. He stood behind the cross, passed a cord around the neck of the condemned man, and he fixed it to the wood. Three times he twisted it using a short bamboo stick, closing off his throat. Then he relaxed the pressure to allow him to breath. A second time he did the same thing. The third time he nervously held the cord until death arrived. John Gabriel gave up his spirit to God. To make sure he was dead, a guard gave him a violent kick in the stomach. The onlookers present noted that the face of the priest remained peaceful despite his suffering and death.

## **Seed for eternity**

The next year his punishment was remembered and certain ones recounted what has come down to us today. "When he was martyred, a large luminous cross, well drawn, appeared in the sky. A great number of the faithful saw it ... and many pagans also witnessed this prodigy ... (some) even embracing Christianity. Bishop Rizzolati baptized them ... In addition, the bishop questioned the Christians who had known Fr. Perboyre, and they all declared that

they had always held him as a great saint.” Some others saw this same cross shining down on the cemetery where John Gabriel had been laid.

After the final punishment, the Christians were able to secure the body of him whom they were already calling a “martyr for the faith.” They washed his body and clothed it with new garments. As custom demanded, they placed a fine veil over the face of the departed, and then they celebrated his funeral.

Early in the morning, André Fong and four Christian companions bore the coffin to the cemetery on Red Mountain. They laid John Gabriel not far from Francis Regis Clet, another martyr of the Congregation of the Mission, whom the young priest from Quercy had venerated. They buried his body with the usual rites, a sprinkling with holy water and a simple prayer, so as not to arouse suspicions.

It was not long before the Christian community began to honor the memory of its new martyr. This honor continues today. God completed it by the canonization of Blessed John Gabriel Perboyre.

Taken from *Une semence d'éternité*, by Jean-Yves Ducourneau  
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(JOHN RYBOLT, C.M., translator)