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John Gabriel Perboyre’s Pastoral Journeys in France

by Philippe Lamblin, C.M.
Province of Paris

Let us take our residence and point of departure to be in the Diocese of Cahors. From there we will do some missions; then we will move on to do others in the Dioceses of Abli, Puy, Autun, Orleans, Versailles and Amiens...¹

1. Montauban

During the course of the autumn of 1817 a major mission was preached at Montauban.² The students of the minor seminary founded by Jacques Perboyre³ attended. On that day they will have heard a passionate sermon by the Abbé de Chiézes.⁴ One of his young listeners, John Gabriel Perboyre, felt deep in his soul the lively flame of the call of God which caused him to say, “I want to be a missionary.” Going to share his joy with Jacques Perboyre, his beloved uncle, he met with a somewhat mocking laugh. At the beginning of the school year, John Gabriel was barely in the fifth class, was just coming on 16 and for his uncle the urgent matter was not this, but rather catching up on his schoolwork. However, the call was solidly anchored in the heart of the adolescent.

The efforts that John Gabriel undertook are considerable. At the age of 16, he was already in the second class and had, to some degree, made up for his late start. He confided his secret spiritual preoccupations to St. Francis Xavier, patron of the missions. Little by little, the light became clearer: not only would he be a missionary but, what is more, he would go to China!

Standing firm once more before his uncle, John Gabriel, impetuous, was more persuasive. Uncle Jacques would himself have dearly loved to go to China. At that time, China represented the missionary ideal, as Madagascar had been for his first confreres in the time of Vincent de Paul: giving one’s life for God’s cause in faraway and “pagan” lands.⁵ Jacques saw now in the clear and assured gaze of his nephew, a manifest sign of the action of God. He told his superiors of it and it was thus that, as the most natural thing in the world, the

² Diocese and Prefecture of Tarn and Garonne.
³ Jacques Perboyre: uncle of John Gabriel, born in Catus, 10 April 1763; received at the seminary in Cahors, 30 August 1783; ordained priest, 22 September 1787; died, 8 March 1848.
⁵ Cf. Letter 23 (8 October 1830) to his brother, Louis and letter 56 (February 1835) and 64 (13 September 1835) to his uncle, Jacques.
young man was officially admitted to the Internal Seminary of the C.M. at Montauban on Tuesday, 15 December 1818, in company with a young man from the Sarl, called Rossignol. John Gabriel would continue his incomplete studies at the same time and would also be given responsibility for teaching some children.

By strength of will and with God’s help, John Gabriel buckled down to this task without encountering any opposition. His companion in the novitiate already saw in him: “the ideal of perfection in a novice.” Supported by the tranquil and effective strength of St. Vincent, like him well grounded in his country clogs, John Gabriel centred his life on that of Christ and forged for himself a solid doctrinal spirituality led on by masters such as St. Bonaventure, St. Bernard and St. Theresa. In this school of life, he learned always to love God for himself and to go forward by love in order to live fully in his saving mercy.

Pray God to forgive my sins, that he may make me know his will and that he may give me the strength to follow him.

In the full bloom of his 19 years, John Gabriel was called to pronounce his vows in the Congregation of the Mission on Thursday, 28 December 1820, in Montauban.

2. Paris

His superiors called John Gabriel to Paris for a new stage. Before this long journey to the capital, Uncle Jacques allowed his nephew a stopover, for two days only, at the Major Seminary at Cahors, in order to see his parents and greet them warmly.

Then the time came for him to take his place in the stagecoach which was to take him, in five or six days, towards the paved streets of the great city. The provincial boy from Montgesty opened his astonished eyes on this capital, which had, until then, been only a name to be learnt and recited at school.

The long journey reached its end before the gates of the Hôtel de Lorges, 95 Rue de Sèvres, which had become, since 1817, the Motherhouse of the Vincentians. This house, although imposing, rivalled the stable in Bethlehem.

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7 Letter 19 (28 November 1829) to his brother, Louis.
8 Cahors: diocese and prefecture in the Lot. The Vincentians were in the seminary from 1643. On the route which took travellers from Perpignan to Paris, the stagecoach passed through Montauban, Cahors, Brive and Limoges.
for poverty, according to the words of the future Superior General M. Etienne. The members of the Congregation who lived there at that time were the venerable old men worn by the sometimes punishing ways of the mission but true stones of refoundation of the “Little Company” as St. Vincent loved to call it.

The instruction imparted at the seminary was, in large part, based on Thomistic thought. St. Thomas proved to be a good master to help one know God better, love and serve him better, as St. Vincent himself had given the example. Humility and prayer were both professed and lived; they became the simple and effective means of getting a better knowledge of God and his will and consequently, of advancing holiness.

It was on Saturday, 3 April 1824, that John Gabriel received the order of sub-diaconate in the chapel of the archbishop’s house at the hands of Msgr. de Quélen.

John Gabriel had now completed his theology programme. He had grown spiritually and his spirit had acquired real maturity. Nevertheless, aged 22, he was still too young to be called to priesthood. He would have to be found a little stopover for the two years to come. The College of St. Vincent in Montdidier, in the Somme, was soon chosen.

3. Mountdidier

This sub-prefecture had a college, which had been directed since 1818 by the Vincentians. It was the first Vincentian College opened after the revolution. Fr. Pierre Dewailly was principal with Fr. Pierre Vivier as Superior. On John Gabriel’s arrival, there were almost 200 students. The young man was given charge of one of the sixth classes, with only eight students. The impression John Gabriel made on his arrival was not, in truth, the best. How, they asked, could a man, so small in stature, so reserved as to be almost taciturn, take charge of a large class?

From the first months, the new teacher of the sixth class knew how to make himself respected and appreciated. From the moment of the new year’s retreat, he was chosen by these same students as director of a little association

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9 Jean-Baptiste Etienne: born, 10 August 1801 at Longeville-lez-Metz; received into the seminary in Paris, 4 October 1820; took vows, 18 October 1822; ordained priest, 24 September 1825; elected Superior General, 4 August 1843; died in Paris, 12 March 1874.
11 Montdidier, sub-prefecture in the Somme.
12 Pierre-Joseph Dewailly: born, 25 January 1759; received into the seminary in Paris, 6 December 1778; 11th Superior General by a brief of Pope Leo XII, 16 January 1827; died 23 October 1828.
13 Pierre-Nicolas Vivier: born 12 October 1792; received into the seminary, 1 January 1821; took vows, 17 January 1823; died in Paris, 9 August 1870.
which they had just formed, in the likeness of that of the older students: the Congregation of the Holy Angels.\textsuperscript{14}

Great joy flooded the heart of the young sub-deacon when he was called to Paris to receive the diaconate in the month of May 1825. On Saturday, the 28\textsuperscript{th}, he received the diaconate from the hands of Msgr. de Quélen, Archbishop of Paris, in the church of St. Sulpice only a few steps from the house of the Vincentians.

At the beginning of the 1825 academic year, M. Vivier, superior of the college in Montdidier, entrusted to the new deacon the philosophy course, newly recognised by the university. Washed by the various currents of thought prevalent in his time he was not removed from the world of his era, nor from its intellectual research. Thus, he writes to his young brother, Louis:

\begin{quote}
It is no small thing to be a teacher of philosophy in an era where each one imposes on this science ideas which please himself; where each has his own system and opinions: where there are as many schools as masters!\textsuperscript{15}
\end{quote}

And trying to focus the thought of his younger sibling and to promote the solid foundations of Thomistic philosophy with him, he indicated further:

\begin{quote}
You will find in the treatise on the existence of God by Fénelon and that on Knowledge of God and self by Bossuet, more metaphysics, and, especially sensible metaphysics, than in all the philosophies of the world.\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

The young professor spent his days working to awaken consciousness of Divine Providence; this had some unfortunate consequences on his personal correspondence which, unfortunately, shows tardiness. Thus, he writes to his father:

\begin{quote}
For us the days regularly begin at 4 a.m. and do not finish until 9 or 10 p.m. Yet our tasks quite often force us to extend them even to midnight.\textsuperscript{17}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{14} 1\textsuperscript{st} Act. In the year one thousand eight (hundred) twenty-five, on the 2\textsuperscript{nd} of the month of January, M. Vivier, superior of the college and the professors, following the retreat given by Messieurs Redon and Lacarrère, took advice on the subject of the establishment of the Congregation of the Holy Angels among the children who had been registered to enter the congregation. The following 24 are chosen to be the first members … (there follows 24 names and surnames) … M. Perboyre has been designated father of this congregation (signatures) A. Liermont (secretary), Frédéric Forest, prefect, Perboyre. There follows 13 acts of the assemblies which J. G. Perboyre has signed. The 14\textsuperscript{th} assembly took place on 15 August 1826. The end of the booklet contains the rules of the Congregation of the Holy Angels, set down certainly by J. G. Perboyre. The register is in the Archives of the Motherhouse.

\textsuperscript{15} Letter11 (24 May 1828), to his brother Louis.

\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Ibid}.

\textsuperscript{17} Letter 5 (24 August 1826) to his father.
John Gabriel, now a deacon, knew that the college helped, by good works, those prisoners who were kept at the nearby Palais de Justice and some needy families in the districts of Montdidier around the college. He then put in place, to complement this help, collections and he mobilised the students to give both their time and themselves to the needy. In this regard, one can hear him say: “I have just done what our Holy Founder did.”

The end of the school year came late as he was still in Montdidier on 24 August 1826. During this sojourn at Montdidier, John Gabriel perhaps set off on foot for Folleville as part of a longer journey. Doubtless he went to admire the Cathedral of Notre Dame at Amiens and to visit the Jesuits of the College of Saint Acheul in Amiens, where St. Firmin, the first bishop, has been buried since the third century. Without a doubt the local diocesan clergy benefited from his theological knowledge and intellectual agility during the deanery meetings which took place at St. Vincent’s College.

From the month of August, John Gabriel knew that he was in demand in many quarters, notably from his uncle, Jacques, who was already feeling the fatigue of advancing years and to whom he wished to make a positive response:

*I had some hope of going to Montauban; my uncle has insisted loudly on having me, but I know that at present I will not be sent there. It seems certain, however, that I will be changed, and even, if certain whispers that have reached my ears are to be believed, I am intended for a place close to Quercy.*

In high places, it was decided that John Gabriel, after his ordination, would be intended for a teaching post in a major seminary.

As his priesthood approached, he wrote to his father:

*It has been decided on and is not far off, my very dear father, that day on which the Lord will place on my head the yoke of priesthood! This day will be the greatest day of my life. The mercy of God must be great indeed to choose such unworthy ministers! You know how little I have deserved this singular favour.*

Faithful to his vocation as a Vincentian, he makes the witness of St. Vincent his own: “If I had understood, before receiving priesthood, what, in the
eyes of faith, a priest is, I would never have been able to consent to the imposition of hands on me.”

Saturday, 23 September 1826, was a great day. It was the commemoration of the priestly ordination of St. Vincent de Paul. Twelve young men, of whom nine were Irish, were to receive priestly ordination from the hands of Msgr. Louis-Guillaume Dubourg, Bishop of New Orleans but newly named as Bishop of Montauban, in the chapel of the Motherhouse of the Daughters of Charity, 140 Rue du Bac, Paris, within which the remains of the Holy Founder were still kept.

His two friends, Jean-Baptiste Torrette, who would leave for China in 1829, and Pierre-Jean Martin were ordained on the same day as he. The Perboyre family lived too far away to be able to attend. Only young Louis witnessed the laying on of hands.

The following day, Sunday, 24 September, the new priest celebrated his first Mass of thanksgiving, on the feast of our Lady of Mercy on the very altar where the body of Vincent lay. Finally he received his letter of mission from the hands of the Superior General to go to the Major Seminary of Saint-Flour in the Haute Auvergne.

4. Saint-Flour

Saint-Flour is a little town of almost 5,000 inhabitants. Some distance from the Cathedral stands the major seminary, which was entrusted to the Congregation of the Mission in 1674. The Vincentians were hunted out of it in 1791 and returned there in 1820. The Superior was Fr. Grappin, a 35-year-old Vincentian. He welcomed John Gabriel there in the first days of October 1826. Restricted to a cramped room, he was to see himself put in charge of

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22Louis-Guillaume du Bourg: born in Santo Domingo, 13 February 1766; ordained Bishop in Rome in 1815; Bishop of Louisiana and then Bishop of Montauban.
23Jean-Baptiste Torrette: born in Brioude in Haute-Loire, 28 November 1801; received into the Internal Seminary, 9 December 1824; ordained priest, 23 September 1826; took vows, 17 December 1826; Bursar in the Major Seminary in Cahors; arrived in Macao, 18 October 1829 where he died, 12 September 1840.
24Pierre-Jean Martin: born in Sainte-Marie, near Saint-Flour, 26 July 1802; received into the seminary in Paris, 9 December 1825; took vows in Carcassonne, 16 April 1827; successor to John Gabriel in the Internal Seminary in Paris; died in Bordeaux, 4 November 1846.
25Louis Perboyre: born 23 November 1807; received into the Internal Seminary in Paris, 9 December 1825; took vows, 23 September 1827; ordained priest, 3 October 1830; embarked for China, 2 November 1830, died at sea, 2 May 1831.
26Cf. Letter 6 (2 November 1826) to his father.
27Cf. Letter 8 (2 September 1827) to Louis.
28Jean Grappin: born 8 December 1791; received into the Internal Seminary in Paris, 1 November 1816; took vows, 27 September 1819; Superior of the Major Seminary in Saint-Flour; Assistant General; died in Bordeaux, 4 November 1846.
29Cf. Letter 6 (2 November 1826) to his father.
the teaching of dogmatic theology. The programme for this first year had as its theme the Treatises on Grace and the Incarnation.

In spite of his youth, his students were struck by his biblical knowledge, notably with regard to the texts of St. Paul. One of the seminarists happily recalled:

“I always remember,” he said, “a magnificent introduction, which he gave us on the subject of the Treatise on the Incarnation, solely by developing the following text from the first letter to Timothy: ‘Certainly, the mystery of piety is great. He was manifested in the flesh, justified by the Spirit, adored on by angels, proclaimed among the pagans, believed in the world, exalted in glory.’”30

Placed at Saint-Flour, John-Gabriel’s desire to see his family became more pressing:

I have already written to Paris to ask permission to go to see you. I hope it will not be refused me.31

The academic year was a difficult burden: While I am not ill, I do feel very tired.32 Keeping abreast of the worries of the family farm and its business, he tried to sell the wine produced there in town but:

I do not see much evidence that your wine will sell here; it is certainly good but transport presents too many difficulties.33

His teaching was based on fidelity to ecclesial authority. He was confronted by Gallican ideas, which he considered harmful to the Church. One can hear him say to his students:

Let us take great care, Messieurs, never to attack the prerogatives of the Holy See. Let us never think that it ever exceeds its power in the decisions it takes, let us recognise all the authority that it claims for itself in all questions, whatever they be.34

Nevertheless, he gives evidence of sympathy for the ideas of Lamennais when the latter defends Christian liberties, notably that of teaching. The paradox, which seemed to arise by his approval of that position, did not pose questions for him and diminished nothing, according to his own words, of his ability as a teacher. When Pope Gregory XVI let it be known, later in 1832, that

30 1 Tim 3:16.
31 Cf. Letter 7 (14 July 1827) to his father.
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid.
the ideas of de Lamennais were condemned John Gabriel complied without saying a word:

Let us pray that God keep us from ever speaking against the words of the Sovereign Pontiff. It was to him that Jesus said: “You are Peter and on this rock I will build my Church and the gates of Hell will not prevail against it.”

The hectic life of a young professor needed some respite. This was finally possible during the summer 1827, at the end of the school year. He hoped to begin his break on 10 August. Permission to go home to Le Puech was doubtless delayed as his holidays began in Saint-Flour about 23 August. From 26 August to 7 September, he stayed with his uncle Jacques in Montauban. On this occasion he attended the end-of-year prize-giving in the minor seminary. From there, with his brothers Jacques and Antoine, he joined up with Jean-Baptiste Torrette, his ordination companion, for three days in the seminary in Cahors. Finally he arrived with his travelling companions to spend ten days at La Puech where he met up again with family and acquaintances after a seven-year absence. After a stay in Toulouse, he found himself at Carcassonne, where he met up with Pierre Martin, another ordination companion and then spent four or five days at Montolieu from whence he returned to the mountains of the Auvergne towards the very last days of September. During his month of vacation, he had covered quite certainly a little more than 1100 km. Returning to Saint-Flour, he arrived into a full dispute. After more than a little equivocation he was chosen from among three candidates to become director of the minor seminary in the town. He announced his nomination to the Rector of the Academy at Clermont in December 1827:

The Superior General of the Vincentians has just called M. Trippier to Paris ... At the request of Monsignor, the Bishop of Saint-Flour, the same superior has placed me at the head of the boarding school which M. Trippier directed ... I have had five years experience in teaching, having successively taught junior classes, philosophy, mathematics and theology in the minor seminary in Montauban, in the college at Montdidier and at the major seminary in Saint-Flour.

36 Cf. Letter 7 (14 July 1827) to his father.
37 Cf. Letter 8 (2 September 1827) to Louis: “You would not believe how quickly I feel refreshed,” he wrote to his brother, Louis, then in Paris at the Motherhouse, “my uncle, the Ursuline Sisters for whom I go to say Mass each day take such good care of me!”
38 Cf. Letter 9 (31 October 1827) to Louis: “My journey has been long, though short in duration, useful, agreeable, not very extravagant.”
39 Cf. Letter 9: “Promoted to power, then removed from it yet and yet now here I am again; one could make a tragedy out it all.”
41 Cf. Letter 9 (31 October 1827) and Vauris, p. 75.
At the beginning of the school year in October 1827 there were 34 students following their studies in the Royal College of Saint-Flour and staying in the boarding school; the number was to increase in the following years approaching 100 at the beginning of the school year of 1829.

Two diocesan priests were given to him as collaborators. This was not sufficient in the face of the size of the task and the difficulties, which were not slow in presenting themselves: the lack of resources, the opposition of the Royal College, which hoped to see an end to this boarding school, the fears of parents faced with the youth of the new director, the demands of work. In the spring of 1828, he wrote with weary pen to his brother Louis, complaining about the absence of news:

Obliged to take four or five classes or repetitions per day. Obliged as director, bursar, etc., etc. to always be all things to all people and everywhere at all times, how would I be able to go from time to time to recreate with you in Paris?

The summer of 1828 arrived. Would he be able to take some days holidays? So few ... on 11 July at 10 p.m. he writes to Louis while keeping watch over two tearaways. We can see he is tired. On 19 July he sends a message to his younger brother, Antoine, his junior by 11 years, called on to succeed his father one day at the head of their work. On 16 August he sent a letter to Louis about the responsibility for the costs of supporting his brother Jacques and his sister and goddaughter Antoinette. On 22 September, on the eve of setting out from Cahors to Saint-Flour, he gave Louis an account of his rest time: 15 days at the Seminary in Cahors, where he made his annual retreat, and four days at Le Puech amongst his family.

On 23 October 1828, M. Pierre Dewailly, Superior General, died. In order to elect the 12th Superior General of the Congregation the 17th General Assembly was to be held in Paris on 15 May 1829. The Vincentian community of Saint-Flour gathered together on Tuesday, 14 April 1829, for a domestic assembly presided over by M. Grappin, superior of the house of Saint-Flour and made up of the confreres of the major and minor seminaries according to the invitation of M. Cochet, Visitor of the Province of Lyons. John Gabriel,

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43 Cf. Vauris, p. 90.
44 Cf. Letter 20 (28 November 1829) to his brother Louis.
45 Cf. Letter 11 (24 March 1828) to his brother Louis.
46 Cf. Letter 12 (11 July 1828) to his brother Louis.
47 Antoinette Perboyre: born in Le Puech, 3 March 1815; Daughter of Charity in 1833; died in Shanghai, 2 October 1898.
director of the minor seminary, was secretary of this assembly. In his minutes,⁴⁹ he notes:

... that by the first ballot M. Hersent,⁵⁰ our dear confrere, had gained the majority of votes which take him to the said deputation, and that faith and law must be accorded to him in the exercise of this important function, although the present act is not set down according to the ancient formula prescribed by the rule, not having been able to find any copy of it.

In his letter of 21 April 1829 to his brother, Louis, John Gabriel also made allusion to this delegation. At the same time, he also reproached him for the scarcity of letters written to him and for spelling and grammar errors:

*I understand that it is not too flattering for a writer from the capital to receive lessons from a minor pedagogue from the provinces.*⁵¹

While John Gabriel is concerned with a good education for all he deplores the fact that his young students are obliged to follow courses at the college in the town,

*where everyday they see the most abominable turpitudes, alas! However they are full of piety and guided by a better spirit, which I regard as a true miracle according to the order of grace, being exposed as they are to the most terrible dangers. My God, have pity on us and give us freedom of teaching.*⁵²

*I am overcome with need. I am extremely tired in spirit and body. I do not know where this general malaise, which I have endured for a long time and which is progressive, will end.*⁵³

Exhausted, John Gabriel no longer knew which way to turn. Indirectly Louis gave him some solace. He felt in himself the call to follow Jesus Christ in China. John Gabriel rejoiced in the missionary choice of his younger brother:

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⁴⁹ Cf. Register of the Minutes and Acts concerning the Priests of the Congregation of the Mission directing the house of Saint-Flour, which are found in the archives of the Motherhouse. This register is of great interest for the Congregation because it contains the definitive commitments of several confreres and formularies of convocations and minutes.

⁵⁰ Jacques-Philippe Hersent: born in Abbeville, 17 September 1796; received into the Internal Seminary, 17 August 1818; took vows, 24 September 1820 and returned to the Diocese of Amiens in October 1836.

⁵¹ Cf. Letter 17 (21 April 1829) to Louis.

⁵² Cf. Letter 28 (20 January 1832) to his cousin, Caviole.

⁵³ Cf. Letter 19 (28 November 1829) to Louis.
I can only approve of and admire your fine resolution to go and evangelise the Chinese... It is in God’s virtue that the missioner’s power resides.  

he assured him, while continuing:

Strive, therefore entirely to destroy in you all that remains of the old man, in order to clothe yourself only in Jesus Christ, to penetrate yourself deeply, to fill yourself well with his Spirit.

And turning to his own path, he looks on it with a melancholy eye:

I greatly fear, my dear brother, that I have snuffed out, by my lack of fidelity to grace, the seeds of a vocation like your own. Pray God that he will forgive my sins, that he will make me know his holy will and that he will give me the grace to follow him.  

During the summer of 1830, Paris underwent the July Revolution. Fear once again gripped many people in the Church. There was a fear that the remains of St. Vincent might be thrown into the Seine. John Gabriel was in mortal fear until the moment that he learned that his brother was safe:

May the Lord continue to favour with his protection both you and all the children of St. Vincent!

John Gabriel praises his brother’s courage. He wishes to follow the same missionary path:

I ardently desire to have the opportunity to see you before you leave for China. Although I am not very far from taking the same route as you, I am not yet ready nor decided enough in myself to set out on it this year.

The call had been heard. Nevertheless, he writes:

I fear that I have not been faithful to the vocation that the Lord has given to you. Pray to him that he may make me know his holy will and make me respond to it. Obtain for me from his merciful goodness pardon for my miseries and the spirit of our holy state so that I may become a good Christian, a good priest and a good missioner.

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54 Ibid.
55 Ibid.
56 Ibid.
57 Cf. Letter 22 (24 August 1830) to Louis.
58 Ibid.
59 Cf. Letter 23 (8 October 830) to Louis.
Louis set off from Le Havre on 3 December, 1830, in company with six Chinese seminarians and four priests from the Paris Society for the Foreign Missions. He carried with him his last letter from his brother, who was conscious of the consequences of this departure that would be without return:

*I can send new farewells to this tender brother who is going to go so far from us, doubtless for a long time, who is going to sacrifice his life for the salvation of souls that Jesus Christ has redeemed by his blood ... In God alone is our hope, our only resource. He is our all; may he be so eternally.*

Among the uncertainties that John Gabriel expresses, there is, equally, the worry which governed French society, always subject to the jolting of a possible new revolution.

Louis was not destined to see the shores of this mysterious and fascinating China. In March 1831, the boat had to stop at Saint-Denis on the Island of Bourbon (now Réunion) in heat to which the Westerners were unaccustomed. They changed boats in order to head for the Island of Java. A glacial wind came from the South and Louis caught a fever. He died at sea on 2 May 1831. The news did not reach France until the beginning of 1832. John Gabriel then wrote to his father and mother as soon as the news of the death arrived. His letter, mingling sadness and hope, is a call to renew confidence in God, which can falter at such moments:

*What dolorous news for you, for me, for all the family! A short life held, for him, all the worth of a long career and, in the flower of his youth, he was judged ripe for heaven ... God’s providence is very gentle, truly admirable towards his servants and infinitely more merciful than we can conceive ... let us cling only to God and to his service.*

On perhaps the same day, he took up his pen in order to confide to his uncle, Jacques, his sadness and his desire to take Louis’ place:

*I do not doubt that Louis is already enjoying the heavenly glory ... May I be found worthy to go and fill the place that he has left vacant! Alas, I am already more than 30 years old, years that have passed like a dream, and I still have not learned how to live! How and when, then, will I learn how to die?*

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60 Cf. Letter 24 (27 October 1830) to Louis at Le Havre.
61 Cf. Letter 29 (15 February 1832) to his father and mother.
62 Cf. Letter 30 (February 1832) to his uncle Jacques.
Louis’ death, so difficult to accept, brought him closer to his other brother, Jacques63 a student in Montdidier, and also became like a light, bringing new certitude to John Gabriel: he would go to China, whatever the dangers and persecutions might be. During the summer of 1832, he stayed for a time at Le Puech. This time was sadder than those before but, finally, his decision had been made. This was the last time that he would see his relatives and friends in Montgesty.

He went to visit his uncle, at Montauban, acknowledging to him his desire, which had now come to maturity. Jacques objected on the grounds of his (John Gabriel’s) health, which was rapidly giving signs of decline, not to mention the climate which would be difficult to endure and, finally, the no-less-considerable risk of death by persecution:

This is all I desire (he would have said) since God desired to die for us, we must not fear dying for him.64

On his return to Saint-Flour, he found a note from his superiors in Paris. Because of his state of health, but also on account of his intellectual and teaching abilities, John Gabriel was to be given responsibility as subdirector of the Internal Seminary of the Congregation in Paris. It was there, they esteemed in high places, his rightful place. The Bishop of Saint-Flour, who greatly valued the director of his boarding school, used all possible means of persuasion to keep him in his diocese but all in vain. John Gabriel had been almost six years in Saint-Flour and had marked forever the history and land of this diocese of the Haute-Auvergne.

5. Paris

My new posting is better than my former for my health, which is quite good now.65

John Gabriel was delighted with his nomination as subdirector of the Internal Seminary with several courses in Holy Scripture for the novices and students. Heexcelled in the commentary on the Gospel of John and the Letter to the Romans. This was a key post that had been entrusted to him. In effect, since the titular director of the novitiate was an old and infirm priest, the weight of responsibility fell on the shoulders of his coadjutor, already well prepared for it by his experience in Saint-Flour. His primary mission was to prepare new generations of missioners. Among the candidates, still not very numerous at that time, coming into the Congregation of the Mission, there were some young

63 Jean-Jacques Perboyre: born 21 May 1810; received into the Internal Seminary in Paris, 25 September 1825 as a brother; ordained priest, October 1843; died in Paris, 16 August 1896. Cf. Letter 31 (23 February 1832) to his brother, Jacques.
64 Cf. Vauris, p. 106.
65 Cf. Letter 32 (12 January 1833) to his father.
men coming from the diocesan major seminaries, but also priests of all ages who desired to join the Company. That meant that it was a very different population to that which had filled the ecclesiastical boarding school at Saint-Flour and, as a consequence, it required a very different form of pedagogy. He continued to write regularly to his uncle, Jacques, asking him to do some favours for him, such as providing some of the older texts of the Congregation, which had escaped the Revolution:

*If, by any chance, you have any older texts which relate to the Congregation, such as books of customs, rules, circulars etc., I ask you please to make me a present of them. In my position, where I have so much need of grace, I need your good advice.*

Scarcely 30 years old, he needed to use all his charisma and energy to assert himself. One priest, a candidate for admission, met him in the rooms of the Procurator General of the Congregation, Jean-Baptiste Etienne, and thought that he was a coadjutor brother. John Gabriel, simply dressed, said not a word and seemed self-effacing and retiring. What must have been this man’s surprise on learning that he was in the presence of his future subdirector! This priest, 13 years John Gabriel’s senior, soon came to know him, and it was said, to appreciate in seeing in him… a saint. Beneath the man’s frail exterior there was hidden, in fact, a will that could withstand any test and a character of steel. In the corridors of St. Lazare, they said of John Gabriel that he had respect for all but that it was difficult, almost impossible, to get him to bend, when he judged that he had to be firm and unshakeable in his decisions. He could be incisive in his replies and other responses since he had a lively spirit. Without doubt introverted, he felt opposition and reproach as a piercing sadness. Nevertheless, knowing how to overcome his disposition, John Gabriel was aware of the heavy responsibility entrusted to him and did all in his power to gain a high level of mastery over his character.

When Adolphe Dubois, a seminarist who was received in Paris on 4 October 1833, experienced difficulty in advancing in the Vincentian way and had some health problems, to the point of leaving the Internal Seminary and returning home to Breteuil, John Gabriel helped him unfailingly, as if such support mattered in high degree to him also:

*Courage... Do not fear neither illness nor death, say only: “I know that this will work out to my benefit... according to my expectation and the hope that I am not mistaken. I believe that Jesus Christ will be glorified in my body, either by my life or by my death, as always; for Jesus Christ is my life and death to me is gain” (Phil 1:19-21)*

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66 Cf. Letter 38 (23 August 1833) to his uncle, Jacques Perboyre.
... He concludes his letter:

_The more pure your soul, the more it will seek to leave this world and be reunited with its God; and the more it experiences this desire, the more it will seek to purify itself._  

Young Adolphe would be readmitted to the Congregation some years later, making his vows in 1846 and dying at Château-l’Evêque on 7 October 1884.

Towards his novices, John Gabriel showed himself to be a true servant of the Lord of the Harvest and of the young labourers who carried the call within. Thus, he has some words of encouragement for one of his former pupils, M. Martin:

_You always persevere according to your first plan and you are, therefore, always full of ardour for the foreign missions ... In order not to lack such a vocation as that to which you aspire, it is necessary to work at becoming saints. Si Deus pro nobis quis contra nos! (If God is for us, who can be against us!)_  

John Gabriel had been brought from Saint-Flour to be subdirector, becoming director of the Internal Seminary of the Congregation of the Mission from the autumn of 1832 to spring 1835. During this short period, the candidates for the missions “ad gentes” were admirably accompanied by their director. He knew how to make the very fibre of this vocation echo through the events which occurred at the Motherhouse. On 23 August 1833, he announces to his uncle that some confrères were leaving to join M. Poussou in Tripoli and that two were leaving for the missions in China: a compatriot from Figeac, Joseph Mouly, a future bishop, who would spend more than 30 years in the Far East, and a former pupil from the college in Montdidier, François-Xavier Danicourt, also a future bishop, who was to return on 6 January 1860 with the remains of John Gabriel. In March of the following year, it was Fr. Jean-Henri Baldus who set off in his turn. John Gabriel availed of this occasion to write

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67 Cf. Letter 49 (30 June 1830) to Adolphe Dubois and Vauris, p.113.
68 Cf. Letter 52 (2 January 1835) to M. Martin.
69 Marc-Antoine Poussou: born at Ste Victoire nears Cahors, 2 June 1794; received into the Internal Seminary, 26 March 1818; took vows, 21 November 1822; died in Paris, 19 October 1860.
70 Cf. Letter 38 (23 August 1833) to his uncle, Jacques.
71 Joseph-Martial Mouly: born in Figeac, 2 August 1807; received into the Internal Seminary, 18 October 1825; took vows, 19 October 1827; ordained priest in Amiens, 2 April 1831; missionary in China in 1834; died in Peking, 4 December 1868.
72 François-Xavier Danicourt: born in Authies, 18 March 1806; received into the Internal Seminary 8 September 1828; took vows in Montdidier, 27 September 1830; ordained priest in Amiens, 24 September 1831; missionary in China in 1834; ordained bishop, 7 September 1851; given the responsibility of bringing the body of John Gabriel back to France in 1859; arrived in Paris 6 January 1860; died in Paris, 2 February 1860.
73 Jean-Henri Baldus: born in Ally, 26 January 1811; received into the Internal Seminary, 11 June 1829; took vows, 12 June 1831; ordained priest in March 1834; missionary in China in 1834; ordained bishop, 19 October 1845; died at Kiou-kiang, 29 September 1869.
to his ordination confrere, Jean-Baptiste Torrette, posted at Macao (an obligatory stopping-off point for the missionaries). He sent some words of regret:

*I flatter myself that I might be able to go and join you later but the uncertainty of my health and, especially, my unworthiness, seem to prohibit me forever from this beautiful destiny ... I will support to my utmost those vocations for China which manifest themselves ... St. Vincent draws many blessings on his family. They reach as far as China since, from time to time, you see worthy missioners arrive.*

China made the heart of the missioner beat faster. Its distant shores attracted men of God. This land seemed the prototype of the lands to be evangelised. One had to cross the seas to bring Christ to the “infidels.” It meant living to the utmost the gift of oneself given to God. To participate in such a fruitful mystery was the secret desire of John Gabriel who never ceased to invoke the saints that he might take this route.

He who attempts nothing achieves nothing. John Gabriel sought to request a posting to China for himself. He could no longer bear seeing confreres leaving without him. The novices had had some wind of this desire when their director spoke to them of a Vincentian martyr in China, presented to them as a really emblematic figure: Fr Francis Regis Clet, martyred on 18 February 1820, the year in which John Gabriel was himself a novice. When he himself was in China, John Gabriel wrote to Fr Jean-Baptiste Nozo, recalling:

*Some years ago, M. Clet, after a career that was both long and full of merit, had the joy of dying a martyr: none of the Christians who knew him can desist from talking about his good deeds and his virtues. We lack neither motives nor examples to encourage and support us. However, weak as I am, all would seem insufficient to me were I not able to count on the powerful aid of your prayers and those of all our confreres and of our Sisters of Charity.*

John Gabriel’s disappointment was great since refusal of permission to go to the mission in China was made known to him from the mouth of his spiritual director: six months of unrelenting requests, only to get a clearly expressed refusal. Until, one day, wearied by this uncustomary stubbornness, he finally gives in: John Gabriel may apply to the Superior General, Dominique Salhorgne. The advice of the General Council is, however, negative — with the exception of that of the Procurator General, M. Etienne. John Gabriel is a good director of novices, he is needed and, in any case, his health, according to the

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74 Cf. Letter 45 (10 March 1834) to Jean-Baptiste Torrette.
75 Cf. Letter 70 (19 December 1835) to Fr J.-B. Nozo.
doctor, is fragile and uncertain. Such a mission involves considerable risks: the voyage is long and perilous; the climate difficult to endure. Let us be mindful of the death of his brother, Louis. But, after a sleepless night, the doctor changes his mind. He no long has any objection to the departure for China of Fr. John Gabriel Perboyre.

The business did not remain secret. The Motherhouse was suddenly buzzing. His heart burning with a new joy, the future missionary of China, hastens to announce the news to his uncle:

_The Good Lord has just favoured me with a precious grace of which I am truly unworthy. When he deigned to give me a vocation to the ecclesiastical state, the principal motive which decided me on responding to his voice was the hope of being able to preach the Good News of salvation to the infidels. Since then, I have never totally lost sight of this perspective and the idea of the Chinese missions especially had always made my heart beat faster. And then! dear uncle, today my prayers are answered. It was on the Feast of the Purification that I was granted the mission for China, which makes me believe that, in this matter, I owe a great deal to the Holy Virgin._

And, following this assurance, he writes again:

_I am going to leave with two of our young confreres and several priests from the Missions Étrangères._

Mindful of the pain that awaited his parents, he asks his uncle:

_I have just written to my parents; I hope that they will know how to make this sacrifice like good Christians. Would you please, when the occasion arises, console them and help them with your good advice._

Preparations for the departure went quickly. It was impossible to return to Le Puech one last time in order to embrace his relations there. He did, however, have the chance to see, with great joy, his young brother, Jacques, at that time a brother in the Congregation, and his sister and goddaughter, Antoinette, a Daughter of Charity in Paris. John Gabriel was prepared for his farewells to his confreres and novices. One of them, M. Peschaud, later recounted:

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76 Cf. Letter 56 (February 1835) to Jacques Perboyre.
77 Joseph Gabet and Joseph Perry.
78 Louis Delamare, Jean Gauthier, Dominique Lefèbvre, Joseph Callery and Joseph Renier.
79 Cf. letter 56 (February 1835) to Jacques Perboyre.
80 Pierre Peschaud: arrived in China, 29 August 1837.
John Gabriel wished to make his farewells to the seminarists but, overcome with emotion, he could hardly say a few words to them, then he went on his knees to ask pardon of them for his bad example and the pain he might have caused us, but all fell to their knees too and asked his blessing.

The final farewells took place in the entry-court of the Motherhouse. In the presence of M. Salhorgne, Superior General, the blessing of God was asked for John Gabriel and his confreres and they were left, finally, to go and join the Edmond, the ship which would carry them from Le Havre to the shores of China.

(EUGENE CURRAN, C.M., translator)