

- This past week I read that the first canonized missionary priest to China was a Frenchman who was strangled to death on a cross in Wuhan, the originating city of the virus that has plagued our world and locked down our society.
- St. Jean-Gabriel Perboyre was a Vincentian missionary priest who was martyred in Wuhan in 1840 after serving in China for 5 years. He was beatified in 1889, and eventually canonized in 1996 by Pope St. John Paul II.
- Those of you who've been to the tomb of St. Vincent de Paul in Paris may have happened by Perboyre's tomb, as he's buried in a side chapel of that same church.
- What's most notable about Perboyre's suffering and death is how similar it was to our Lord's passion. Betrayed by one of his catechumens for money, he was bound in chains, unjustly mocked and condemned, tortured, and tied to a wooden cross, upon which he was strangled.
- In our current crisis, is there not something poetic in the fact that this martyr of Wuhan should die because he couldn't breathe? No doubt we should be praying to St. Jean-Gabriel Perboyre for all those suffering from the suffocating effects of COVID-19.
- In the year between St. Jean-Gabriel's arrest in 1839 and his death 1840, there was an endless array of humiliations and punishments heaped upon this holy man. Witnesses to his sufferings all attest to the dehumanizing treatment he received.
- It wasn't enough for his persecutors to kill St. Jean-Gabriel. They wanted to rob him of his humanity first – which is something that has happened to so many of our martyrs, not to mention our blessed Lord.

- Ever since the lockdown began in March, I've been asked repeatedly what worries me most about this crisis. Certainly, the loss of health and the loss of life are a concern, but as Christians we know that this life is not what's most important.
- While no one wants to die prematurely, death is not the worst thing that can happen to us, especially if we have faith in our Lord and trust in His mercy.
- Loss of jobs and the ensuing economic insecurity are also troubling, especially since I know many of our fellow parishioners are suffering at the moment. But again, as Christians we know that our security is found in God's Providence.
- No, what troubles me most about our current crisis isn't any of these things, but rather the dehumanizing effects of our societal lockdown.
- Just as St. Jean-Gabriel Perboyre's human dignity was trampled upon by his persecutors in Wuhan, so too has our societal response to combatting the Coronavirus robbed us of our ability to exercise fully our humanity.
- Of course, we can debate at length about the necessity of the lockdown and its benefits of "flattening the curve", and about when it's appropriate to begin lifting restrictions. That's not my point or my purpose here.
- Regardless of whether lives have been saved and hospitals have been rescued from being overwhelmed, there is still a very real cost to this lockdown that goes beyond the economic impact. We've lost more than jobs and freedom, folks. We've lost some of our humanity.
- We've been told we have to socially distance and avoid touching or being too near one another. And yet man was created to live in a family.

- God has designed us to seek out one another, to be in communion with one another – all in preparation for living in eternal communion with our Triune Lord in the eternity of Heaven!
- Truly, hermits are rare breeds! Most of us cannot live in a bubble for long. We need each other, we need to be with each other; we need the comfort of human touch and interaction.
- But what's more, we humans are created to worship – and to do so together! To be sure, above all else that man was created for, he was created to worship and adore God. And this, too, has been taken away from us – or at least seriously limited.
- We've been fortunate here in our diocese that our bishop has encouraged us priests to do as much as we can for our people, given the limitations imposed upon us.
- So many parishes in our city, like our own, are now offering Holy Communion by appointment, confessions, and our churches are open for prayer. Thankfully, you can still get the Sacraments here in Charlotte, even if you can't go to Mass.
- But sadly, there are many dioceses where priests have been forbidden from hearing confessions, anointing the sick, or even opening up their churches for private prayer.
- In losing the right to be together and, especially the right to worship together – even on a temporary basis – we run the risk of becoming a little less human.
- Indeed, if we allow them to do so, these measures that have been imposed upon us can make our hearts grow colder to one another and to God.
- How do you know if your heart is growing colder? There are a few tell-tale signs. If you're finding a lack of desire for prayer, for the Sacraments, or for attending Mass even via livestream, it means your love for God is growing cold.
- If you notice yourself growing more selfish and self-centered, seeking to fulfill your own desires with no desire to serve others, it means your love for God is growing cold.
- If you've put away all good spiritual books and media, and you're allowing yourself to binge on secular media or be distracted by worldly things, your love for God is growing cold.
- So what are we to do? As I mentioned last Sunday, we must be fervent in our private prayer, listening for the voice of our Lord, the Good Shepherd, and following Him when He calls.
- We must introduce some discipline in our spiritual lives, setting a schedule for daily prayer and staying away from those things that lead us away from God.
- We must stay close to Jesus, Who is the perfect man, and allow His grace to restore our broken and fallen humanity that risks even more damage in our current situation.
- And as I've said so many times before in the past several weeks, we must embrace this cross that has been laid upon us, trusting that our patience in the face of trial will make us holier people in the long run.
- Embracing our crosses makes us more human, for it makes us more like Christ!
- Brothers and sisters, we are facing an unprecedented crisis that is ravaging our society physically, socially, and economically. But if we are not careful, this crisis can also damage us spiritually and rob us of some of our humanity.
- And that's a far greater price to pay than the loss of a job or financial security, for the consequences could be eternal.
- Therefore, may we each stay close to our Good Shepherd, and take full advantage of the opportunities we do have to worship Him – even in a limited or truncated fashion. While we may be forced to socially distance from one another, let's never distance ourselves from God.
- St. Jean-Gabriel Perboyre, pray for us!