

Joseph Perrier

1930 - 2015



Joseph was born on the 3rd June 1930 in Clermont-Ferrand in the Auvergne deep in the heart of France. At his baptism, he was named Joseph, a name to which he was much attached. In fact, when he was preaching retreats, he always included a reflexion on St. Joseph. One of his brothers had preceded him into the White Fathers. Joseph was a brilliant student at the College Massillon in Clermont-Ferrand. His father taught mathematics (in fact he taught the Michelin sons) and thought that Joseph was going to go for officer training in the Navy Academy. However, Joseph headed

for Kerlois, our house of Philosophy in Brittany where he studied for two years. He revealed intellectual qualities well above the average. He did his novitiate from 1949-50. Fr. Jean-Baptiste Blin (+1977), the novice master noted that he preferred Jean, Joseph's brother, who had preceded him in the novitiate. Toward the end of this year, Joseph was diagnosed with Tuberculosis, which meant spending two years in a sanatorium in Pau. At this time, it was rare for a candidate with TB to be allowed to continue his training with the White Fathers. Exceptionally, Joseph was authorised to continue studying Theology in Strasbourg at his own expense. He joined the community in Strasbourg where he was much appreciated for his cheerfulness, helpfulness, obedience, and respect. He went to class in his gandoura. His health held up and he made solid studies in Civil and Canon Law, and in Scripture. The Society fearing that such a promising candidate could slip through their fingers readmitted him. He took his Missionary Oath in Mours on the 14th August 1956. Bishop Yougbaré, the first Bishop from Burkina Faso ordained him priest on the 10th March 1957 in Strasbourg. It was the Bishop's first ordination cer-

emony and Joseph kept a warm friendship with 'his' Bishop afterwards. Joseph always asked for the Diocese of Koupela whenever he was given the choice of his landfall in Africa. However, his first appointment was to the Biblicum in Rome, three years of hard study to discover the riches of the Bible. They would mark him for the rest of his life. He loved the Bible, reading it from cover to cover and making it loved everywhere he was called to teach it be it Bujumbura, N'Djamena or Gitega.

After this long cycle of studies, Joseph was not appointed to Africa but to France...to promote vocations and the missions! From 1960 to 1965, he crisscrossed France visiting Senior Seminaries, preaching retreats with strong Biblical themes. During his years of training, Joseph loved to animate children's holiday camps and he even had his monitor's diploma. In 1965, he finally got his appointment to Africa. The Senior Seminary of Bujumbura urgently needed a Professor of Bible. Without being able to learn the language, he was nevertheless able to integrate himself with the staff of the seminary a breeding ground for future bishops. His classes were much appreciated.

In 1967, he was part of the support team of the Mega-Chapter of that year. He was an expert at editing texts. He became the youngest

Assistant General of the Van Asten team. He began by doing a stage of five weeks in the USA to polish up his English. In the Council, he was, more or less the speechwriter of the Superior General. His legal training was of great help, never say anything, and never write anything that could be used against you later! He carried out a perilous visit to Burundi in 1972. Accompanied by the then Regional, Louis Quintard, (+ 2012) he visited all the posts, and there were many in those days, to support and comfort all the confreres who were profoundly marked by the traumatic events that were engulfing the country at the time.

In 1975, he was finally able to rejoin 'his' Bishop in Koupela who appointed him to Puytenga. However, the structures of the Society caught up with him again in 1978 with his appointment as French provincial. He served two mandates and the then General, Robert Gay thanked him profusely in 1984 for all the good work he accomplished in the service of the French confreres. He did some months of personal recycling in Paris before setting off once again to Africa, this time to the new Senior Seminary of St. John in Ougadougou. He was to spend there what he called the ten best years of his life in Africa. He got on very well with the young team of formators all of them from Burkina Faso. He gave the best of himself; his

courses were greatly appreciated and many students asked him to become their spiritual director. This fruitful period of his life ended in 1995 when he was asked to return to France to accept the direction of the magazine “Voix d’Afrique.” Here, we touch one of the fundamental traits of Joseph’s apostolic life. He was profoundly free and always had the concern for the seal of obedience on his undertakings and proposals. In that spirit, he accepted an urgent appointment to teach the Bible in the Senior Seminary of N’Djamena.

Joseph accepted an appointment to Burundi in 2001 to teach in the Senior Seminary of John-Paul II in Gitega. It was close to the new centre for promoting vocations and missions in Shatanya. He again got on well with the team of formators. His only handicap was that he did not know Kirundi spoken by everybody except in his presence and in the classroom. In order not to embarrass the Bishops, he accepted an extension to his ministry in the Seminary. His confreres trusted him and he readily gave retreats and recollections. They even chose him as deputy to the Chapter in 2004. He returned definitively to France when he reached 75 years of age. He took on the job of spiritual animator of all the communities in France. He trav-

elled from one community to another all over the country. However, ever so slowly, his health began to go downhill. He got tired and there were little problems more or less serious. He left rue Friant and a network of relationships to reside in Bry-sur-Marne. However, there was an inexorable decline in his health and he became more and more lost, in fact, it was the onset of Alzheimer’s disease. This meant that he was transferred to Pau-Billère, which is better equipped to care for confreres afflicted with this illness. When I visited him in Billère, we were able to talk quite easily about the good old days but his immediate reference points were very disturbed. He died on the 13th December 2015. His lamp shone for many. His last act of fidelity to his patron saint was to ask that his funeral mass be that of St. Joseph. He had noted on a bookmark the word of the prophet Isaiah (43 1-4) “But now, thus says the Lord...fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. ...Because you are precious in my eyes and glorious because I love you.” A great servant of the Word, Joseph contemplates today what the Bible had allowed him to glimpse and to want so much.

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