

A TESTIMONY BY FR ARCHIBALD GONSALVES (Superior, Carmelite Monastery, Margao-Goa)

The last days of Fr Gabriel Dias...

On account of his ill health and his family living in the vicinity, Fr Provincial decided to give Fr Gabriel Dias conventuality in Margao. Before definitively coming to the monastery, Fr Gabriel did spend a couple of months at home with his family. The community willingly offered him the first room in the fathers section and provided him with all the necessary facilities. In spite of his feeble hearing and other challenges, Fr Gabriel regularly offered daily mass in our chapel, participated in the community activities, bought a number of books to read and a desk top computer to write articles.

I did recall my good old seminary days at Carmel hill, Mangaluru, when Fr Gabriel and I used to celebrate our birthdays together, as he was born on 8th of July and I on 9th of July. Last year, Fr Gabriel turned 60, so we had a mega "Shastipurthi" celebration with his family members. History repeated itself, when we celebrated our feast day - Feast of the Archangels - on 29th of September together. During our student days, as Superior at Carmel Hill, Fr Michael used to celebrate his feast day along with Gabru and me (Raphael).

The year that followed was a memorable one as Fr Gabriel felt very much at home in the community as he was being constantly assisted by Fathers and Brothers. He confidently went to Vailankanni with his family members for the feast. It is good to remember, while in Goa, in the past, he used to accompany train full of pilgrims to Vailankanni every year and celebrate Mass for them in Konkani. Now, it was his initiative that led to the celebration of the feast of Our Lady of Vailankanni at the monastery on 8th of September, for which, he even procured a statue from his friends. To our great surprise, our church was packed with devotees.

Fr Gabriel had lost cent per cent hearing in one ear and seventy per cent in another. When his expensive hearing aid from Canada did not help him, he succeeded in getting another from the local ENT surgeon. When that too failed, he was taken to the 'Speech and Hearing Institute' in Mysuru. Fr. Gabriel was very happy with this new set, as he was able to take part in community recreation and watch TV. In this regard, very often Fr Mark Furtado's engineering skills came handy.

These happy days did not last too long, as on 28th of October 2015, Fr Gabriel suffered a mild stroke in his room and he was immediately rushed to the Apollo hospital, where he stayed till 5th of November. After his physiotherapy treatment in the monastery, on 27th of November he was taken home by his brother Mr Carmo to try some alternative medicine in Halga, Karwar. During our frequent visits, on several occasions, he expressed his desire to return to the monastery. Finally on 18 January he was brought to the monastery at about 6 p.m.

After supper he expressed his desire to be taken for a walk on the corridor. He walked slowly being assisted by one of the postulants. All of a sudden, due to a stroke, he collapsed right inside the walker he was gripping on. He was immediately rushed to the hospital. The MRI showed multiple clots in the brain. Dr Tellis, his physician, called in Dr Figureido, the brain surgeon, who operated on him and a team of other Doctors kept constant vigilance. While in ICU, on a couple of occasions, his condition was very critical and then he was put on ventilator. As he never regained his consciousness, on 25th of February he was brought home. In order to facilitate medical care and visits by family members, he was placed in the room very next to the hall on the ground floor. Both in the hospital and while at home, the community members, especially our brothers took turns to look after him round the clock.

Now as he required technical assistance and constant monitoring, the community decided to hire a full time nurse. Initially he was assisted by Mrs Juliana and thereafter he was being looked after by Mr Pradeep, who showed exceptional qualities in nursing. Sometimes, Fr Michael Morris' efforts to cheer Fr Gabriel with his melody, "Gabru my darling I love you" was responded feebly by the opening of his eyes.

8th of July, 2016 being his 61st Birthday, the community invited his family members for a celebration. The mass in the evening was followed by the recitation of the rosary in his room. Then Fr Gabriel's mother cut the cake in his room, which was followed by dinner with his family members. This gesture by our community has created a lasting bond with Fr Gabriel's family. All through this arduous journey, the community was in touch with the Provincial, who visited Fr Gabriel and his family a couple of times. He always appreciated the good work of the community.

In the morning hours on 20th of July, Fr Jossey Rodrigues noticed some unusual changes on Fr Gabriel's face; however, this was not taken seriously. In the afternoon, Pradeep suddenly noticing no signs of life alerted Fr Ajith Rodrigues, who in turn sent word for Dr Tellis. After the check-up Dr Tellis declared, "Fr. Gabriel has just breathed his last". By then the time must have been ten minutes to Four.

The community decided to keep the body in a mobile morgue in the Choir. On Friday, 22nd of July at 2.00 p.m.; the body was placed in the coffin and moved to the Church. All through, relatives, friends, political dignitaries and well-wishers from near and far came in large numbers to pay their last respects. Various church organizations conducted prayer services and prayed for Fr Gabriel. On Friday, when the funeral mass began at 4.00 p.m., the church was packed. Archbishop Filipe Neri Ferrão presided over the Eucharist, along with Fr Provincial, representatives from various communities of our Province and the local clergy both diocesan and religious. His two nieces working in the United Kingdom managed to arrive during the celebration of the Eucharist. Choked with emotion and grief, they along with Mr Carmo (brother of Fr Gabriel) expressed the sentiments of the family and what Fr Gabriel meant for them and thanked all the Carmelite friars who attended to him so lovingly during his illness.

At the end of the Mass, Fr Provincial thanked the local community (fathers and brothers) for extending exceptional brotherly care towards Fr Gabriel, especially in the last 7 months. He offered his condolences to the bereaved family and led the prayers in the Church before the mortal remains were carried to the monastery. After the final funeral rite conducted by Fr Archibald Gonsalves, he was interred in a newly constructed grave next to late Fr Jerome Braganza.