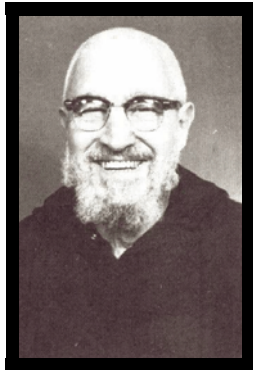


Neerology

Gabriel Badalamenti 1905 - 1997



I knew Gabriel most intimately when I became his legal guardian at Moroun Nursing Home, Detroit, Michigan. Unfortunately at that time Gabe had lost his memory and mental abilities. He had a very pleasant disposition, docile but quiet. Conversations with Gabe were a struggle. I remember once driving Gabe home from the doctor's. There was the usual silence in the car. I came to a stop sign. Gabriel looked, said: "All clear.". End of conversation. All the years I was his legal guardian, I was "Joe" I don't know how much more he knew about me. When I entered his room or the lounge, I was usually greeted with a smile and maybe a short wave of the hand. All the questions about the quality of his food, the condition and quantity of this clothing, his health was simply answered "Fine."

This man who in his youth was known as a scrappy fighter, a tough, later a hard hitting handball player even in his seventies, became a docile, gentle, quiet person at the end of his years. I think we carry the depth of our spirituality with us. To me, Gabriel lived on a deeper level than manifested by his external behavior. In the confusion of the day lounge — the TV blaring some mindless soap, the chatter and laughter of the aids on a break, the conversations and shouting of the patients living in another world at a different time — amidst all of this, Gabriel sat quietly. I remember one evening sitting with Gabriel in the lounge. The aids where gone. The two women sitting before us were having a lively conversation with each other but neither one connecting. The noise level of the room was quite high. I asked Gabriel how he could stand such racket. He just smiled. I believe Gabriel was living in another world. Not in some distant past or place but the world within, the inner world where God dwells, a world he became very familiar with after forty years of religious life.

On a popular national evening TV news program, there is a segment entitled: "In his/her own words." It is the personal commentary of one effected by the event of the day. Fortunately for me, Gabriel left an autobiography, a "In His Own Words." He titled it "Sicilian Vespers". What follows is Gabriel's "In His Own Words."

"I was born in the slums of St. Louis, and weighed in at fifteen pounds. My mother tells me that as soon as I was able to raise my little fat arms, I began beating up other babies. Ma and Dad were born in Italy, in a little town in Sicily. Petria was only fifteen years old when she fell in love with Joseph, one of the poorest of the poor and married him, here in this country. I was their second born in the slums of St. Louis, and I learned early that being poor meant often fighting for life.

“Grandpa was a fruit peddler. So were my uncles. They made good money and had a lot of the good things of life. But my father was a day laborer, and worked on the tracks or digging ditches. He earned enough to buy food and clothing but not much of anything else. The first thing I can remember is that I used to go to the market with a little sack to beg for whatever I could get.

“When I was five or six we moved to Detroit. I remember how I cried when I got on the train with my mother and sister, Mary, because Dad had to stay behind. But he followed us soon to Detroit and got a job there working on the tracks. They found a place for me in St. Francis Home, in the heart of Detroit, where I lived for the next six years. It was there I learned to love Holy Mass and to say my prayers every evening.

“When I left St. Francis' to return to my parent's home, my struggle for life began in earnest. I started selling papers in the early mornings before school hours to help support the family. We were seven children by then, living together with our parents in the house my Grandma bought for us. During my years in school I often begged for fruit and clothing for my little brothers and sisters. Many were the times I led my wagon full of the scrapwood I found in alleyways to feed the kitchen stove.

“Early in my teens I began working for my uncle driving a truck delivering produce. Long hours of labor left me exhausted each night. But on weekends I joined my Sicilian friends. They called us "Dagos" and we resented it and made it our business to take nothing from anybody. It wasn't the right way to live, I know now, but I had forgotten everything the good Sisters of St. Joseph had taught me — save one, Almighty God. The one thing they taught me that I never forgot was never to crawl into bed without saying my prayers. If the thought came to me when I was already in bed that I had forgotten them, I rolled out onto my knees and said them. I often said the rosary, but all I could remember was the Creed, Our Father, Hail Marys and Glory be's. I knew nothing of the mysteries or about meditation. And often I had good reason to examine my conscience.

“As I said, I took nothing from anybody. Small as I was, if I lost my temper, that was it — I clipped the man who got funny with me. Regardless of where I would work or live, I used to get into trouble with someone and became known -- wherever I went as one -- who was not to be fooled with. Though I never used anything but my fist, in all the street fights I had, I lost only two, and one of them because I refused to use the stiletto.

“Yes, I got into trouble, but my troubles brought me back to the sacraments. Yet I was still a roughneck and would take nothing from anybody. For some reason or other I didn't like that characteristic of mine. So I said to myself, "Maybe it's the company I'm keeping." You know the saying I had heard so often, 'Bad company makes bad boys, like a bad apple in a bushel.' So I made up my mind to chum around good boys. I changed my companions, and for a while everything went fine. Yes, everything was going fine, until one night in a beer garden I saw a big fellow picking on one of my friends. He was six feet four, but I told him to go outside and argue. (I wanted to get him outside. No one was going to pick on a friend of mine!) Once I had him outside, I clipped

him. They didn't believe a little fellow like me could beat up such a big one like him, so they made everyone stand back and told the big fellow to give me the works. He didn't. I did.

“Once again I regained my old reputation. I didn't like it, but I kept hanging around with the boys. After a few more fights, I asked myself, ‘Will I never learn?’

“Finally I figured there was only one thing to do — leave town and leave everything behind. Maybe it was the city I was living in. So I told the boys I was leaving but kept my reasons to myself. I got a job driving a car to San Antonio. There another driver helped me find a room and a cheap place to eat, and he even bought me a beer. There I was, eighteen hundred miles from home, but I sure was happy! So the first thing I did was to go to confession at old St. Francis' Church next morning, then Mass and Holy Communion.

“For the next six months I lived in San Antonio. I had five trips towing cars from Detroit, then landed a job as a salesman in a department store. It didn't pay much, but it kept the wolf from my door. Every morning I went to Mass and Holy Communion in St. Francis Church, just half a block from the place where I worked. After my lunch during the noon hours, I would go to the church and stay there the rest of the period. Everything was going fine, it seemed, but I still wasn't the boy I wanted to be. What a struggle it was to remain in the state of grace! I didn't know anything about St. Paul, but the sting of the flesh was my great trouble. Yet every time I fell, I would go to confession.

“Then I got into another fight. This time there was a politician involved. So I left town, again for Detroit. With five dollars to my name, I took a three o'clock bus out of town — but no further. I hitch-hiked the rest of the way. One night when I was near dead on my feet, a fellow came up to me in a restaurant where I was having a bite to eat and asked me if I wanted a place to sleep. I said, ‘No thanks,’ but he was so nice about it that after he turned away I went over and asked him how much it would cost for a bed. ‘Nothing’, he said. Thank God for his kindness. I had a good night's rest and again I was raring to go.

“The next morning a Jew (a nice fellow) took me to Chicago. I made the big city after dark, and wired my mother that I would see her the next day. That night I got a ride to Cleveland, changing off driving with the owner. The next morning I reached Detroit and boarded a Fourth Street street car at eight o'clock, just a half hour from home! Home, then Mass, then back to the place where I used to work, and again I landed my job.

“One night on my way home, a friend of mine gave me a pamphlet. It was on the Third Order of St. Francis. After reading the pamphlet something came over me. Maybe it was the prayers of our Blessed Mother, or St. Joseph or my guardian angel. A complete change came over me. March 1, 1939. The month dedicated to St. Joseph. I went to Mass and Holy Communion. (Today, March 25, 1954, I am still going to daily Mass and Holy Communion!) Next Sunday, I went to the Franciscan Monastery and met the Third

Order director. He arranged for my general confession. After that I became a familiar figure around the Third Order Hall. Everyone there was so nice to me, that I was never so happy before.

“Every morning from then on I rose at four o'clock to attend or serve three Masses before going to work. I kept this up for eighteen months, and nearly lived in the Third Order Hall. I always had some work to do for the Franciscan Friars! I tried to be everyone's servant and tried to take everything from everybody, disregarding who it was. Although I didn't know much about it, I tried to be humble.

“Then the war broke out, and I got ready to go ‘over there’. An evening before leaving, I mentioned it to one of the friars.

“‘I'm going to war. You know I can do some work for God there too’, I said to him.

“‘Oh no, you're not.’ he replied. ‘You're going to Guam!’

“I thought he was kidding me and tried to forget it, but couldn't. I told my confessor about it. He said the friar didn't mean it, and that he was kidding me. So I went to the friar (Alvin) and said: ‘Father, that wasn't nice, kidding me about going to Guam.’

“‘I wasn't kidding!’, he replied. ‘Go and see the provincial!’

“It didn't take long to learn it was true. He took me with him to the missions.

“It took us twenty-one days to reach our missions in the Marianas, and there I stayed, working on Guam till the war broke over our heads and the Japanese invaded the island. I was taken to Japan with the rest of the missionaries, a prisoner of war. During our days in the prison camp, my old Sicilian temper flared up again several times, once when one of the other prisoners tried to take our small coal bucket, and another time when one of the Spaniards interned with us started to malign the friars. That was the last time I raised my fists, and all I can say is ‘Thanks be to God!’

“We were liberated on Japan on the feast of Our Lady's Assumption, 1945, taken to Okinawa on the feast of the Nativity of Mary, to the Philippines on the feast of the Most Holy Name of Mary, and sailed from there home on the feast of Our Lady of Ransom, September 24, 1945.

“It wasn't long but I was back in Detroit, Since I have become a servant of God, there were times, I had to do some begging and fighting. Just last summer (1953) I had to do some begging for our St. Labre Indian Mission in Montana.

“Much to my surprise, I found myself back at St. Francis Home begging for old beds for our Indian Mission. Mother Superior gave us fifty old beds and mattresses, and forty old desks two trucks filled to the top!

“Yes, I told Mother and the sisters of St. Joseph, I was still their little boy. I always felt that God gave me a vocation because of their prayers. The sisters are wonderful.

“Yes, begging, like fighting, remains to this day part of my vocation. Only now its begging for God as a mendicant son of St. Francis, while the fight is with myself, my old self. To which, if I fight a good fight, may Christ the just judge, give the victory and crown.

Gabriel, known as "Sammy," had a close friend, Stanley Galup. Sammy and Stanley had a small business together — a hotel, bar and restaurant in Mt. Clements sometime in the 30s. The business did not last long — too much work and long hours. Sammy became a professional boxer and Stanley a lifeguard at Belle Isle. They spent many hours at Belle Isle and were part of a group of twelve who called themselves the "Wolf Club". Swimming at Belle Isle and playing handball were their favorite pastimes. Mr. Galup recalls that Gabriel loved dancing and swimming and was well loved by his Belle Isle friends. Stanley remarks that Gabriel was financially generous offering to give his car, a LaSalle, to Stanley.

Mr. Galup concludes his remarks about Gabriel by saying that "although his early life was shaded with some acquaintances, he lived his life as a professional boxer and bouncer." He was also employed by the old Packard Motor Company. We knew, that by the grace of God and his Belle Isle Beach friends, especially the "Wolf Club", his life turned around for the better, resulting in his entrance into religious life as a Capuchin."

According to Leo Wollenweber, Gabriel joined the Third Order in June 1940 under Alvin LeFeir with whom he had a close friendship. He was professed in the Third Order in 1941 and took the name Gabriel after the Passionist, St. Gabriel of the Sorrowful Virgin. He followed Alvin as a Third Order brother to Guam in 1941. He planned to make a novitiate for the First Order on Guam, but World War II intervened. It was said that he had a novitiate in the Japanese prison camp. In the prison camp at Kobe he showed his heroism, often placing himself in great danger in order to get food and other supplies for the Capuchins. Many times he had to elude the guards, get out of the compound and back in again undetected. Many times he was almost killed in encounters with the guards. He could look back on it all later on as something of a challenge or even as a lark.

Rescued by the American forces after the war, he returned to the States to recuperate. He wanted to return to Guam but the Capuchin superiors wanted him to remain in the province. He threw himself into work with his usual gusto and got involved with gathering together a lot of equipment for our missions in Montana. His impulsive manners got him into trouble with the provincial minister, so he had to leave us in the late 40s. He spent some time with the Fathers of the Belgian Order, Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. He spent some time with this community in Texas.

In the early 50s Gabriel got back with us and was invested as a Third Order brother on January 6, 1951 and professed on December 9, 1952. Sometime later he was given

permission to wear the First Order habit. In 1955-1956, while at Huntington, Indiana, he served as Solanus Casey's secretary and nurse. In Spring 1956 he accompanied Solanus to Detroit and remained with him until Solanus' death in 1957. Leo states that Gabriel could be rather stern with Solanus and insist on his complying with all the doctor's orders out of "obedience". Poor Solanus took it meekly but ruefully also.

Tying up a few loose ends: Gabriel had three sisters and three brothers one of whom, Joe, was killed in World War II. Gabriel entered into marriage while very young. The marriage did not last. One of his sisters said: "They were so young." They had a son, Richard Belmont, who blessed Gabriel with grandchildren and great grandchildren. Gabriel remained close to his son and family. In his younger days Gabriel spent time in Jackson State Prison due to a petty theft of a jewelry store located next to the family home. Contrary to rumors he never was a member of the Mafia. Whenever Gabriel needed a truck to haul donated material to Montana, the Teamsters Union and Jimmy Hoffa obliged. A friend, Marie Oresti, recalls that Gabriel was connected somehow with the Catholic Worker in the early 30s. During one of the labor disputes with the Ford Motor Co., Gabriel helped chair a meeting between the labor leaders and the black clergy to lessen -- if not prevent -- strike violence.

When Gabriel was waked the funeral home overflowed with immediate family, relatives and friends. I overheard one of the friends while looking into the coffin say to no one in particular: "There's a miracle." Gabriel would probably say: "Amen!"

I am grateful to Anthony Thoma, Leo Wollenweber, Gabriel's family and Stanley Galup for input.

Written by Joe Maloney