

A life of service to God and humanity

Gabriela De Mello, a committed schoolteacher, made life-long impressions on people wherever duty called. ELAINE AZINGE, one of her charges at Queen's College, Yaba, Lagos pays tribute to the inspirational American who passed on in December 2004 aged 57.

24/06/2005

Queen's College, Yaba, Lagos. 1974.

A girl runs frantically into the dormitory, and announces, “Miss De Mello is coming!” There is pandemonium. Some girls dive under their beds. Others run into the wardrobes. Some, not knowing where to run to, freeze on their beds, while others feign an illness instantly. After a few minutes, Miss Gabriella De Mello walks calmly into the dormitory. “Wake up, Hetty! Angela, wake up, we’re late for the club”.

Diminutive, pretty, slim girl from Boston, Massachusetts, in her twenties was coming to form the Ripples Club in Queen’s College, Yaba, under the auspices of Opus Dei. Opus Dei is a prelature of the Catholic Church founded by St. Josemaria Escriva in 1928 to spread the message of the universal call to holiness. As teenagers, this message of Opus Dei, which Gabriela De Mello brought to us on a platter of gold,

was taken in the usual teenage style. Those who escaped the Ripples Club on Thursday would not escape the monthly retreat on Sunday. This was held at Animashaun Street in Surulere. Here, Gabriela and the other members of Opus Dei would have arranged a day of meditations, talks, confessions and Mass for the Catholic girls of Queen's College, Lagos.

We, on our part, listened and appreciated the monthly days of recollection. Our only grouse was that we went to the retreat on empty stomach. As a rule then in Queen's College, Catholics attended Mass without having breakfast, since we had to observe the fasting period necessary for the reception of the Holy Eucharist. On days of recollection the authorities did not take the different and more extensive programme into consideration, so off we would go to

the retreat just like on any other Sunday and as we listened to the message of Christ our stomachs rumbled almost louder than the message.

Even if we did not fully comprehend the message at that stage of our lives we listened and allowed the word of God to pass into us. We listened to Rev. Fr. James Chapuli. The girls also liked to hear Rev. Fr. Robert Lozano, and even the Protestants attended his catechism sessions held on Wednesdays.

So, quietly, jocularly, reluctantly, we received deep moral, religious and spiritual formation, which was to be our source of strength in future years when faced with the realities of life. Life outside the grey walls of Queen's College. For most of us trials surely came and this formation, which we took for granted at that stage of our

lives, made us stand where we would have baulked.

Gabriela De Mello followed me to the University of Lagos. I remember her advice on many issues. You could not stop her; she would fish you out wherever you were. In my home everyone knew of Miss De Mello. She moved to Ibadan after a while to teach at the International School of the University of Ibadan. Within a few weeks of her arrival, my sister, Irene, who was studying at the University of Ibadan called. “Guess who came to my room today?” “How would I know?”, I replied. “Miss De Mello!” she said.

So it was that Gabriela De Mello , quietly and silently, touched the lives of many teenage girls of that period. She and the members of Opus Dei entrenched in us the Catholic faith, as we could not have received it anywhere. They taught us to be

Catholics who understood the faith. They made us Catholics who would not run from pillar to post in times of trial.

Gabriela moved back again to Lagos where she was among the pioneer staff of the Lagoon Secondary School. Here also she set about the task of organizing the school in great detail in her characteristic manner. At Lagoon, she moved happily into the formation of children whose parents she had helped to form thirty years previously. My daughter in Lagoon School would mimic Miss De Mello's voice so perfectly that you would think that Gabriela was in the room with you. "Girls, I'm sorry we are going to have a slight change in the timetable." Rumblings from the children would meet that announcement. I told my daughter that I hoped they were not doing to Miss De Mello what we did to her thirty years previously.

On the 1st November 2004, I spent about thirty minutes with Gabriela discussing my children who had gone to University a month ago. They were having their first unaided struggle against malaria and hunger put together, having left home for the first time. While I was suggesting, as part of their needs, cornflakes, milk and sugar, Gabriela was, in her usual decisive manner, telling me that garri, sugar and bottles of groundnuts would be a better option. It was ironical that the conversation took place on All Saints Day. She patiently sat with me helping me with financial manipulations that would enable me to best manage my funds for the education of my children. I never knew it was the last conversation.

She devoted time to me on that day for old times' sake. I was devastated to hear on the 30th December through a text message that Gabriela

had died that morning. I never knew she was ill. I did not realize I was speaking to her for the last time. So decisively, quietly, in her usual manner she slipped away from us back to her creator. That very evening she was laid in state in the Chapel at Wavecrest. Hundreds of women, young and old, whose lives Gabriela had touched all came to pay their last respects. Masses were said continuously for the repose of her soul. It was touching to see Gabriela lying serenely, the battle of life over, as people wept in total disbelief. The next day, in a similarly calm and serene manner very typical of Gabriela, hundreds of people trooped out for the funeral Mass at Wavecrest after which she was interred at the Ikoyi cemetery amidst angelic songs rendered by her family in Opus Dei.

My teenage son who went with me to the funeral commented as we left Ikoyi cemetery that this is how a

Christian should be buried. On the 31st December 2004, Gabriela was buried. She didn't want to encroach on our New Year celebrations and so she bade us farewell on the last day of the year 2004.

As my children shopped for items to take back to school on the 3rd January 2005, I told them that whatever they bought, they had to include garri, sugar and bottles of groundnuts in memory of Gabriela De Mello.

New Age, Nigeria, by Dr. Azinge.
