Foreword



So many lives pass us by, oblivious of their struggles and victories, pains and joys. We meet them and pass them, without having learnt even an inkling, of who they actually are or were. If we have had the possibility of having lived with some, then we may have probably ended up making either a judgement of them, through our own limited lenses, or merely settling for a superficial acquaintance. When realization dawned that, the subject of this biography, was no ordinary person (though he may appear to be) but pages, from a history book, it imposed upon me to record those few pages from him.

Sri Lanka may be for many, a ‘tourist paradise’ but that, is just one side of the story. Many are unaware that, this country has seen a bloody past, torn by civil war for nearly twenty-six years. Many are ignorant that, this island once shocked the world for being an unholy ‘boys paradise’.

Yet, on this emerald island, you will find many an emerald that have lived and worked, for the upliftment of its people. Frankly, I know of just a few; committed teachers, doctors, nurses, religious and lay, but it would be a lie, were I to claim that, I know them well.

Heaven wished that, our paths should cross, and so be inspired by this man, known as Bro. Gabriel. It started with just a small spark about Bhutan, and I realized that much of history would be lost forever, were his life’s account, be ignored.

A sincere thanks to Ms. Nancy Thatcher, for

editing the work.

George Rodrigues

***The Moulding Years***

Amidst the bombs exploding all over the country during World War II and not sparing even Roverto in the Province of Trent, a small cry of a baby born on 25th November 1943, to very industrious parents was hardly heard, save to the members gathered around Mrs. Giustina Pozzer the mother and Mr. Charles Garniga the father. Their pain mixed with joy taking into consideration the circumstances the child would find himself in those early days. The tiny baby had to be carried from place to place to protect him from the incessant bombings that had disrupted the peaceful life of the village. Little did they know that this was no ordinary baby but one called from his mother’s womb to travel overseas as a well-bred and convinced Salesian, whom everyone would lovingly call Brother Gabriel.

Little Gabriele or *bambi* Gabriele as they would say in Italian grew under the care of his two aunts. The aunts were actually Ursuline lay religious who never married and would have regular prayer meetings in the house. This was providential as both the parents were at work during the day. However, every evening the aunts would complain to the tired mother about the children, whom they sought to discipline, but she wisely listened, without a word, knowing she was helplessly dependant on them.

The mother, though a supervisor in a cigarette factory, never made bones about it nor carried herself with airs, but sought a humble, and a pragmatic existence. She would work in the morning then cook and wash in the evenings. She had more than enough to keep her busy. Gabriele’s birth could not have added or reduced any of her chores, for time and the daily practice of taking care of eight of his older siblings; five brothers, and three sisters, had made her sturdier than even she might have expected. All in all Gabriele being the youngest among the boys was the pet of the house.

Mr. Charles, the father, was an ordinary labourer who worked in a saw-mill. After returning from the mill, he would work on the farm, but both were God-fearing and reared their children in the fear of the Most High.

Around the age of eight in 1951, Gabriele made room for the Lord in his heart, receiving his first Holy Communion. These were times of peace as the war had ended in 1943 and life had returned to normal. He attended the primary school in the village and repeated his fifth grade with the intention of scoring better. Then early in the sixth grade comes, the angel Gabriel calling, in the guise of Fr. Mario Simoncelli, a Salesian, who in the summer had come to his village for the holidays. The day before he was to leave for Turin he comes to chat with his father and while leaving, but still conversing with his father spots the red-haired, hazel-eyed Gabriel and asks rather nonchalantly, “and what shall we do with this fellow?”

Mr. Charles glances at him and replies with a smile, “let him do what he wants.”

“Then would you like to come to Turin?” suggested Fr. Simoncelli, to the ruddy-faced Gabriele, “you could learn a trade and if you wish, you could later join the seminary”. The proposition was immediately appealing to the boy, as he was keen on learning a trade, even though the history of his older siblings should have left him in a quandary of indecisiveness.

One of Gabriele’s older brother - Francisco had gone to the aspirantate and then returned as he felt called to work for his living rather than study. He soon found work in an insurance company, but sooner than expected he realized that without qualification his chances were rather dim in procuring a white-collared job. He decided then to pursue his studies and joined the night school. This opened doors to success leading him to be not only the Bank Manager in his own village, but also being blessed with a woman who would be his wife.

Another of his older siblings named Giuseppe had also joined the seminary, but he too had left to become a teacher for disabled children. Only his older sister Lina, (‘Dame Inglesi’ today known as ‘Congregatio Jesu’) and brother Luigi, (diocesan priest) pursued their calling.

The parish priest was counting on him to join the seminary, but Gabriele was still left with two minds, though the early seeds of a calling had already taken root in him, through the humble interaction of this same priest – Fr. Giuseppe Pederzini.

Fr. Giuseppe Pederzini, the parish priest for thirty-two years in Lizzana, Gabriels home town, had a brother Fr. Carlo Pederzini, a Salesian priest who was a missionary in Perambuco, Brazil. When he last came home for his holidays, found his brother so sick that it weighed on him to stay back and help him. So, he became kind of a temporary parish priest, in place of his brother.

When he wanted to return back to Brazil he was forbidden to do so having advanced in age. He was therefore confined to a Salesian house in Trent, where he died at the age of 93. Gabriel remembers him well because he would always send a parcel of coffee, from Brazil for Gabriel’s family. But it was Fr. Giuseppe that Gabriele loved because of his sensitivity.

As an altar server, recalls Gabriele, the priest noticing his small stature, and the difficulty he had in carrying the missal from one side of the altar to the other - as the custom was in those days - had bought a smaller one so that Gabriele’s small hands could easily carry it. Hence, seeing his eyes brighten with interest Fr. Simoncelli suggested the he learn a trade and, in the bargain if interested, join the seminary.

Fr. Simoncelli was already a professor at UPS (Salesian Pontifical University) which was in Rebaudengo, but he would later on, also become the secretary of the provincial of UPS. At Gabriele’s consent he went back to Turin and made arrangements with the rector of the aspirantate to accommodate the new entrant. But what trade was he going to learn there? “Carpentry”, was the ready reply, probably because of seeing his father working with logs, but this was not in God’s plan, and the rector had to disappoint him, as all the seats in that section were occupied. So he chose the next option - a ‘General Mechanic’. This was a blessing he recalls, for two years later the carpentry section was closed for good.

So, in 1956 at the tender age of thirteen when his whiskers had not even sprouted, he packed his bags and left for a strange place. There in Turin he was not only busy learning a new trade but also keeping a third eye on everything going on around him. The house held a combination of three communities; the aspirantate, the magisterium- having around seventy brothers from different parts of the world, as well as a section of the UPS that taught pedagogy and psychology.

The aspirantate itself housed around two hundred and twenty aspirantes and came under the Central Province, that had six aspirantates; three for brotherhood (Rebaudengo being one of them) and three for priesthood. Gabriele’s rector, Fr. Geremia Dalla Nora who was also the professor of pedagogy in the UPS was appointed rector. He being a visionary immediately set the ball rolling to qualify the institution.

So, Gabriele’s batch became the first that went for the three year examination that earned them a recognized diploma from the State. This opened avenues to the institution as also to Gabriele to proceed for the two year specialization in technical trades, which was successfully completed,

In the meanwhile, he kept nurturing the desire to imitate the brothers there who were instructing them tirelessly day by day with countenances that exuded joy and love. One thing was sure, he felt loved and being an excellent athlete, also recognized and appreciated for his gifts and talents. He recalls with some pride, that, “only another cleric could compete with me”. On completing his specialization and the aspirantate he naturally opted for the novitiate.

However, at the conclusion of the annual retreat in February brought with it a cyclonic change. Their last batch had fourteen young men for brotherhood but after the retreat, seven sought permission to leave and seeing the group cut to half gave the rector Fr. Geremia Dalla Nora, such a shock that he was confined to bed for a couple of days. Few days later when he recovered and came to class, Gabriele vividly recalls his words as he said to the remnant “don’t be afraid, little flock.”

In the end only two survived and went to the novitiate, he and another companion. So attached had he become to the house, the atmosphere and his superiors that the time of parting became a sorrow too heavy for him to bear and he burst out crying, knowing that he would forever miss the warmth and recognition he had found there.

Recalling that emotional farewell he reminisced that the only other times he had had such an emotional breakdown was when his father’s cousin Mr. Mario Garniga, expired and when the parish priest who cared much about him Fr. Giuseppe Pederzini, was called to his eternal reward.

In the novitiate recalls Gabriele humourously, they were the ones who actually trained the novice master since, the humble Fr. Beniamino Listello was new to the job. From Rebaudengo, there were just two of them for brotherhood who entered the novitiate, and after two months even the other brother said goodbye, leaving him alone with the forty-six novices from the other aspirantates.

Since, those for brotherhood made a large number, classes for them were held in the study hall while the clerics had classes in the basement. In the end out of the forty-six novices only twenty-one made their profession, and one made it later for he was still underage. Still, they could claim that they were a specially blessed batch because one among the clerics named Milani - a late vocation, went on to become a bishop in Argentina. Milani was a late vocation who had left his medical studies in the second year of University and entered the novitiate.

What appealed the most to Gabriel in the novitiate was the fact, that in the farm both the brothers and their instructor, joined hands at work. There were no paid cooks, as this task was also done by one of the brothers.

It was here in the novitiate, that while his fingers ran over the keys of the piano, which he learnt with ease, his mind kept playing with the desire for the missions. However, not wanting to impose his will on the Lord he refrained from making a request to his superiors. He sought rather to wait and see if that really was God’s will for him, proved only, if explicitly expressed by his superiors.

On the day of their vestition, a few days before their first profession, Fr. Giovanini, the superior of the technical school vested the brothers with a medal and the clerics with the cassock, and on 16th August 1962, Gabriele professed the vows of; chastity, obedience and poverty.

Novitiate complete he was then sent to Don Bosco, Rebaudengo, for the magisterium. Here he qualified technically as well as in religious formation for four years. He was then sent to Cumiana, a technical school for practical training, for a year, since he had a degree in technical instruction.

While there during the summer camp of 1970 he was informed by the rector that the provincial wanted to see him. He presumed that the provincial would request him to go to the missions, a dream he nurtured but would not express, but he instead was informed that they were in need of a qualified teacher in Rebaudengo.

So back again to his old place, he is appointed as assistant at the magisterium and teacher of the technical school. He remained there for quite a while, right up till 1972, applying himself wholeheartedly to his teaching and to assisting the boys, but while there he still remained registered in Cumiana as they could not find an alternative to replace him.

When he returned to Rebaudengo he found time to learn the pipe organ, he was already familiar with the harmonium and the piano and so playing the new instrument came quite naturally to him.

Back at the aspirantate recounts Bro. Gabriele, his first rector had been Don Biancotti, who was later transferred as rector of the Basilica of Mary Help of Christians. Gabriele recalls with a smile that on the feast day of Don Bosco the technical school band under his tutelage had gone to the Basilica to play.

After Mass, Don Biancotti, (as was the custom) was waiting expectantly at the altar of Don Bosco with the relic in hand. As they stood in queue with the others to kiss the relic, Don Biancotti on seeing Gabriele was so overcome with joy, that then and there he let his feelings take charge of him and forgetting the moment and the congregation waiting, began effusively thanking Gabriele the musician for animating the Mass and the music with all their instruments that they had carried for the occasion.

Meanwhile, there came the subtle demand order from the Government for upgrading its teachers. They impressed upon the Salesians that their teachers could have their salaries during the holidays of three months if they attended at least one refresher course in their trade. These were courses that were held for upgrading all the Salesian teachers in the technical schools.

One of these courses was in their school in Rebaudengo and hence they were asked to learn the use of the new machines for numerical control. The institution was then supplied the machines freely by the government which at that time cost 50 million lire. So, they were promptly sent to the Olivetti Company, to begin their training. Gabriel’s responsibility was to teach the programming for the machine.

So in a day he had nearly eight hours of classes, and at the end of two days, found himself completely exhausted, and without the use, of his vocal chords. But the students were very diligent at their work and responsive too.

Being found very industrious and practical by his superiors he was then sent to Verona to train the lay instructors to evaluate the fitting section.

When the dean of studies at the magistero – in fact, the first coadjutor to occupy that position in Rebaudengo – Bro. Dalla Torre an electrician, was sent to the missions in Thailand, he would keep in touch with Gabriel. He kept inviting him to help as he needed a hand at the mechanical workshop. So, Gabriel applied to go to Thailand as a missionary.

That year he missed the solemn procession of Mary Help of Christians, as the following day, Fr. Tohill - the superior of the missions, going by his request, had summoned him for a meeting. Requesting the keys of the car from the rector he proceeded to see him. There in his office, Fr. Tohill pointed to the world map and spoke about Bhutan and Fr. Dominic Curto’s immediate need of personnel there, leaving him with just three days to decide.

Gabriele on his return immediately went to confer with Fr. Geremia, his former rector, spiritual director and confessor. This was the very priest that Gabriele had interacted at the outset of his calling in Rebaudengo. He felt connected to him, for the priest had been ordained, in the very same year 1951, that Gabriele had made his first Holy Communion. This apart, Fr. Geremia was known for his kindly ways, wrought out from his experience with pain and sorrow. He had lost his twin brother while still a cleric and had suffered a nervous breakdown in the aspirantate at the mass exodus of half the aspirants.

The confessor had this to say, “Gabriele were you to ask me to go to America, I would say no, but to Bhutan I say yes go, you will be happy”. That clinched it, and he, without further hesitation returned to Fr. Tohill and confirmed his readiness to go to Bhutan.

***To the Land of ‘The Thunder Dragon’***

In October 1972, he was presented the crucifix at the Mary Help of Christians Basilica by the Rector Major himself, Rev. Fr. Luigi Ricceri. He then went home and on the first of November 1972 left Italy for Bhutan.

On reaching New Delhi he remained there for two days and went on to see Agra with a priest who organized a trip to the world heritage site – the Taj Mahal - the enrapturing mausoleum built by Shah Jahan for his most beloved wife Nur Jahan. From Delhi they proceeded by train to Siliguri where he is met by Fr. Taverna. Recalling that journey he remembers being very surprised seeing just two tractors all along the trip.

Another impact that that journey had on him was the spicy food that was served. Food in India is made tasty by adding a variety of spices which is far from palatable to any European whose diet does not include the same. Naturally he landed a bad stomach and from then on, to avoid further mishaps, had to resort to bananas and curd rice.

Fr. Phillip Giraudo was there faithfully waiting to pick them up at Hasimara to take them in his jeep to the land of the ‘Thunder Dragon’. They reach Phuntshilling - Bhutan at night but find no one to greet them. The hostel boys having had a holiday had gone for a picnic.

Fr. Phillip Giraudo - the rector took him around the next morning to see the workshop and on the day following introduced him to his teaching career here. The only hitch was that he knew not a word in English. Fr. Dominic Curto taught him a few words to help him out to teach welding but that was insufficient. So, when he was free from classes, he would be studying English by listening to the Linguaphone. Later he was sent to Sonada, to learn the language but this had to be cut short to only a month, reason?

The community in Bhutan, consisted of Fr. Zanghellini, Bro Joseph Pakma and an ex-Salesian cleric K. S. Paul, as the Dean of studies. Now this cleric (who formerly had been denied admission by the provincial of Guwahati) when admitted to the priesthood by the new man, returned to his province, and Bro. Gabriele had to be called back, to take his place.

So, at one time he found himself shouldering multiple responsibilities that included; in-charge of the technical school, warden, instructor and the dean of studies, without knowing either; English nor the local language ‘*Zonga*’.

In those days he found himself sleeping just two hours in the night, and involuntarily grew a beard having no time even to shave, while assisting, teaching and maintaining the discipline of the three hundred and seventy boys.

This subtly took a toll on his spiritual life and at one time letting frustration get the better of him found himself seriously contemplating suicide, but the power of the Word and prayer came to his rescue. When granted his holidays for home he spent three days with Fr. Curto in the Philippines, before proceeding to Rome, giving himself enough time to nourish, both body and soul. He would sleep the whole day and would wake up only for Mass and for meals, trying to catch up on both sleep and spirit that he had lost. He was supposed to fly to Rome via Hongkong but there being a storm, flew directly from Manila to Rome.

Apart from being teacher, assistant and warden, he was also required to help out in the project work with an English man, a representative to the UN, for in 1971 Bhutan had joined the ranks of the UN.

Back then it was enough for the boys to do about three months of training and then get a job from the government. However, Fr. Phillip and Fr. Curto were keen in seeking better qualification for the boys. So, they would prepare the boys for matriculation exams, which these boys would qualify in Shillong. There in Shillong they were also exposed to the mammoth work of the Catholic Church, and some influenced by its vibrancy, wished to adopt the faith. These same boys went on to become doctors and engineers as they continued their studies in India. All sponsored by the Indian government.

One among them was Kinley Tshering who had been with the Jesuits and had requested them for baptism, but the Jesuits knowing the repercussion that they may have to face had refused to do so. When he came to the Salesians, Fr. Phillip saw in him a sincere Catholic that the Spirit had inspired and so without a second thought to his own safety, took him out of the country and had him baptised.

His however, was not the first baptism, secretly he had baptised a young man named Dominic Savio the first Christian and true to his name he himself would go around and share with the other boys, his faith. This indeed, was discreetly done, often times while going out for walks when they would sit in the quiet of the forest and proclaim the good news. Their numbers grew slowly but steadily as the influence of these young committed Christians grew, bearing much fruit.

Kinley Tshering went on from there to become Fr. Kinley Tshering s.j., the first Bhutanese priest, ordained in 1986 a Jesuit. However, the going was not all that easy. After his secondary education, he wanted to pursue his higher studies and so applied to the Education department for scholarship. The Government Education Department was run by an Indian who was a devout Hindu, and when he learnt that Kinley Tshering had become a Catholic lost no time in informing the second sister of the king and minister for education. She in turn passed on the news to the young king, His Royal Highness Jigme Singye Wangchuck, then only eighteen and the most powerful man in the State.

The king was in no way disturbed by his becoming a Christian but could not bring himself to accept the fact that the young man had also chosen to be ordained a priest.

The young king was actually familiar with the Salesians and even played basketball with them. However, the policies of the country were Buddhist, and defend its policies he must, being the victim of his own throne.

On Christmas Day he had Tshering invited to his palace and then unsuspectingly taken for a walk in the garden where he had lions in a grandiose cage. When through the course of the conversation the king found that Kinley Tshering was determined to pursue his desire to the priesthood, even at the cost of his life, to test him, suddenly commanded that he thrust his hand in the cage of those ferocious beasts, but the lions showed no interest in Tshering. Presuming it to be mere lethargy that prevented the lions from reacting, he ordered the guard at hand to do likewise, but this time the lions immediately sprang up to attack. The guard withdrew his hand at the nick of time shivering in fear, but leaving the king convinced of the authenticity of the young man’s faith.

Then 1972 brought storms of change and distress through the newly elected provincial of Guwahati, Rev. Fr. Pullingathil– for reasons best known to himself - appointed Fr. Mario Porcu in-charge of Bhutan and crisply asked Fr. Phillip to step down. The shocking news of the transfer, given all of a sudden, at the retreat in Dibrugarh, without any consultation, or reason, left Fr. Phillip in a broken state of heart and mind.

Bro. Gabriele present there at the same retreat saw the pain carved on his serene face but heard not a word of either complaint or accusation.

The travel back by train to Hasimara - the connecting junction to Bhutan, in a reserved compartment was a journey of no word spoken, no signs exchanged. He was not only heartbroken but melted to the very marrow of his bones. He had sacrificed his life for the people in Bhutan from 1962 onwards, and God had raised him up, bringing him before kings and ministers though he bowed not to their control.

All along that eighteen hour journey he remained with an volcanic silence that was perhaps repeatedly asking the question, to that same power that had raised him up once, but now, seemed to have abandoned him with no answer to the question, ‘Why’?

Fr. Mario Porcu’s entry violated the scene. There were with him five other confreres; three clerics, a priest and a brother, where Fr. Phillip had started off practically all alone with only Fr. Curto, who had joined him only later. The others who had been with him earlier had now moved elsewhere. Fr. Zengallini went back to Italy for he could not bring himself to feel at home there. Spurred on by his passion for hunting, which he found very thrilling, he soon formed friends with one of the cousins of the royal family, who like him shared the same thrill.

From Italy he had even managed to get the uniform of the *Carabineri* for him as a gift. His adventurous thirst would make him go from Phuntshilling to Thimpu by bicycle a journey that could take at least eight hours by bus. He would ofcourse, stop in some places on the way. When disorientation stepped in, he decided to return to Italy where he was posted in Rovereto since he was from Trent, and very close to bro. Gabriel’s place.

Fr. Curto who had been working in Assam – India, before, was asked to quit like all the other missionaries from that State, and so he had entered Bhutan, and helped Fr. Phillip for some time. Being an educator by nature he managed to convince Fr. Phillip to send the boys to Shillong for matriculation. However, after a year even his Bhutan visa was denied extension and being a missionary at heart, he opted for the Philippines instead of going back to Italy. Here it was that God wanted him to be for he was made the parish priest of Santa Cruz Laguna where he remained till he died at the ripe old age of ninety-three.

At the Hasimara railway station when Fr. Phillip went to welcome Fr. Porcu, his five new confreres and the provincial with a bouquet of flowers, he was rudely told by Fr. Pullingathil, “You are not supposed to be here.” Hearing this cut him to the heart and within a day or two, through a friend, got a flight ticket and left for Italy for three months. There he let the volcano within erupt, and night after night his broken body, mind and spirit found their expression in the nightmares that for nights would haunt his soul.

A few days after he left for Italy, Bro. Gabriele, was shocked to find that the samples that could be fabricated from the numerical control machine, having six axels, lying on the ground outside while everything else, the hard work and toil of the man who for years had laboured tirelessly to build was found burnt to the ground by Fr. Porcu, who in his ignorance and perhaps coupled with an unknown passion of what he was destroying. Helpless and also heartbroken Bro. Gabriele quietly collected the samples, knowing that either protesting or even explaining their importance would be of little avail.

The hard work of years, the two Zonga dictionaries which Fr. Phillip, had labouriously and painstakingly prepared, were sold for peanuts to the paper vendors. The postcards he had received from Europe, (that he had been saving in an iron box) that he often used as a catechetical means to catechize the boys, were thoughtlessly burnt by Fr. Porcu.

So when Fr. Phillip returned from his holiday, he found nothing of his valued works, and stranger still even his own cassock could not be traced. A strange power had goaded the new entrant to even delete his name wherever it was possible, even extending it so far as to cancel his permit for Bhutan, thus preventing him from ever returning again. No farewell was given, no parting dinner served, no word of either appreciation or a warm hug of thanks rendered; he just picked up the shattered pieces of an experience he would remember all his life and left.

Fr. Mario Porcu left after a year and Fr. A. P. Thomas was sent during the interim period as acting rector till the arrival of Fr. C. L. Thomas.

Reminiscing a humourous incident of the past, regarding Fr. Porcu, often made Bro. Gabriele burst in loud guffaws of crude laughter. When admitted in the aspirantate the superiors had changed his name knowing that ‘Porcu’ (*pig = Italian*) would invite mockery from the others. However, when his father arrived and began asking for the boy, he was told that no one by such a name was registered there. When he learnt the truth, he adamantly proclaimed, “*porcu mio papa, porcu io, porcu mio figlio,”* (Porcu my father, porcu me, porcu my son.)

The new rector for some urgent reason had to leave his former posting in Iran to be posted in Bhutan. He was academically highly qualified with a master’s degree in arts but had no experience of either technical schools or the situation in Bhutan.

When Bhutan joined the U.N., in 1971, projects geared to develop the economy of the country were set in motion to help the development of the country. One such project was the development of the technical school and this was inspected by one of the officials of the U.N., an Englishman.

The first thing they forced the government to do was to change the name of the school which was under the banner of ‘*Don Bosco Technical Centre,*’ to ‘*Karbandi Technical School*’ and then to take over the administration of the school. Next, they barred the students from being sent to Shillong for the Matric exams, and Fr. Porcu accepted it. He had no knowledge of the work that had gone in getting the boys qualified. Then going a step further in nationalizing the school, the education department under the influence of the U.N., without informing the school governing body, informed their collector to advertise for teachers in Calcutta (today Kolkatta) to teach in the school. The Salesians became aware of it only when two of the teachers came for an interview to the school. They realized later that several teachers had already been called for an interview.

When the Salesians requested a meeting with the king they were barred by the authorities. Fr. Phillip who was very much at home with the royal family - both the king and queen - could no longer return to the country. Entry to the Thimphu palace had now turned hostile as though the violence done to an old friend had turned into a curse.

When the house was called for a meeting with the authorities to settle the management of the school, the officials could only refer to Bro. Gabriele, as Fr. C. L. Thomas, could not answer to any of the queries put forward. He was naturally left out of the conversation as everything was being directed to Bro. Gabriele, who had been in the knowhow for years.

At the conclusion of the meeting, Bro. Gabriele could not restrain his Italian temper and on the drive back, shockingly found himself, literally reproaching the rector, not so much for his pretended experience, but at the indignation he felt, at the superiors who had sent someone who had absolutely no idea of the situation.

Fr. Phillip, on the other hand, had been an excellent administrator and had even built a house in Thimpu for residence. The government later procured this place to grant Fr. William Joseph Mackey, a Canadian Jesuit, a permanent residence. Fr. Mackey had worked in India for 17 years, and when he fell out with the authorities there in 1963, he was promptly invited to Bhutan, by His Majesty King Drukgyal Sumpa as a technical consultant for the schools. He was later made the ‘Inspector of Schools’ and in 1985 even granted citizenship by the Bhutanese government.

Shrewdly knowing that the government would one day claim the place, Fr. Giraudo had made sure that he had fully recovered the money from the government, much before he could hand it over to them.

At first the government sought to accuse the Salesians of financial inconsistencies to evict them from the country, but, after two auditors had checked their accounts of four years for two weeks, they found that the house had paid to the government every penny required and owed it not a cent. On the contrary, the house had even contributed to the royal treasury.

The next accusation proffered was proselytizing, but the Salesians refuted that as no proofs were given. Exasperated, they finally pulled out their claws, and gave them a month’s time to evict the school and the country. The vice provincial of Guwahati, Rev. Fr. Thomas Menamperambil, was delegated to discuss the matter and at length was left with the sole alternative of framing a letter to the authorities bidding for a little more time - till the end of March 1983 instead of February end as per the order - to coincide with the closure of the accounts and the works with the financial year ending.

The boys reacted at the closure, but they were warned before hand, through the director of the school, of punitive measures in store, should they do so. They were therefore called upon to stay calm, as any unwarranted reaction would bring down the ire of the government.

Bro. Gabriele was the first member of the community to leave the house and go to Siliguri, the others left later, from there he proceeded to Sonada, and then to Madras where the provincial had his ticket booked for Rome via Colombo. So, it was– Calcutta – Colombo – Rome and back to Colombo and Calcutta.

***Destiny ‘The Emerald Island’***

When he landed in Colombo, in April 1982, he was asked to go to the Don Bosco Technical Centre - Negombo, for only a week but the week became a month and then three and by and by the tourist visa was changed into a residential visa. Before leaving for Colombo, Bro. Gabriele had met Fr. Benjamin Puthotha– then provincial of Madras, at Yercaud for a few minutes at the annual retreat.

What Bro. Gabriele later realized was that both; Fr. Benjamin and Fr. Panakezham, were actually planning to keep him in Sri Lanka, so they had shrewdly planned the trip via Sri Lanka to let him experience at least for a week the situation there.

Bro. Bernard, was patiently waiting to pick him up at the airport and on his arrival hired a taxi for Bro. Gabriele, while he piloted ahead on a motor-bike to Don Bosco – Negombo. Since he went to park the bike behind in the garage the taxi too followed suit and took Bro. Gabriele behind to the garage. So, his first entry to the house was literally through the back door. They were however greeted effusively by the rector – Fr. Kingsley, who all excited about the new member came straight from his bath, wrapped in a towel and hair disheveled, to greet the new confrere.

Bro. Gabriele, was temporarily assigned to lend a helping hand in the technical school in Negombo, but seeing the immense work left to be accomplished, decided not to go home for his holidays, and instead after three months, sent back to Chennai the return ticket that was booked for Rome, to apply himself heart and soul to the work at hand.

He, however, did inform home that he was unable to keep his promise, to meet the family, to which his brother Don Luigi responded, by taking the initiative to come personally to Sri Lanka the same year and visit him, but not empty handed. He brought the first vernier-caliper, a guitar, as also other instruments for the professional mechanic, and musician that were presented by his brother Carlomaria, an experienced mechanic, in *Coffler and Co*. Don Luigi stayed with him for a month, spending a week in Madras – India, where they met Fr. John Peter then provincial, who put at their disposal his own car for them to get around.

Three years later when Fr. Panakezham – the regional visited Sri Lanka he insisted that Bro. Gabriele go home for his holidays, which he joyfully respected.

In Negumbo, the community actually consisted of only two Salesians, the rector – Fr. Kingsley Perera and a coadjutor Bro. Wilfred, (not counting Bro. Bernard who was still doing his theology and was down only for holidays, keeping the accounts).

Seeing the irreverential lifestyle prevalent in the community, he found himself questioning his own Salesian fidelity, struggling day after day with the idea if it was worth being here at all, or worse still if it was even worth to continue as a religious when those around him seemed so oblivious of their vocational calling. But faithfulness to prayer and the Word of God again became his salvation, revealing to him a day at a time the imminent need for his presence there.

So Negombo it was, where he rooted himself and willing obliged to apply himself to whatever task was allotted to him, and it began with the welding section and the lathe machines.

The big shock to him here was that, every three months there were new admissions being registered, as the dropout rate was nearly ninety percent. So tri-monthly admissions kept the numbers going, but made it impossible to bring to a successful completion any of the prevailing courses. So, they decided to take admissions just once a year to bring some order and the completion of each course. This helped raise the standard of the school.

Here again, an erroneous decision had stalled the progress of the work. Those in-charge had wrongly presumed that the prevailing power supply would not be sufficient to run both the sections; the welding as well as the lathe. So, the method used was to hold up one section while the other was at work. Only when the jobs in one section, namely that of the welding section were finished, would the other lathe machine section be set in motion.

However, practical it may have sounded it created a deadlock, as those students in the lathe machine section were invariably delayed causing disorientation and drop-outs. When realization dawned that there was in reality absolutely no need to delay one for the other, due to the power-supply which could sustain both the sections, he made sure that those that had not completed the lathe machine training would come in the evening while the day time was occupied with the welding and lathe machine training of the other batches that were lagging behind.

Mr. Cyril, a carpenter for many years, would also help out in the mechanical workshop, so in the morning, Bro. Gabriele would be working in the mechanical section and in the evening, Mr. Cyril would be working to help in the lathe machine operation course. This helped break the deadlock and also clear all the students whose completion of the course had still been pending.

One experience that he enjoys recalling was seeing the surprise on the faces of the congregation, when he accompanied the Singhalese hymns on the harmonium in the school chapel, leaving them to conclude that he knew their language, but this was one thing he admits he could never master. Quick hands yes, quick tongue no.

When Fr. Kingsley took off, leaving the congregation for family bliss, Fr. Janze was appointed as the new rector. Later, Bro. Wilfred too left the congregation and Bro. Gabriele was left there to serve practically alone for nearly eighteen years. The rectors would come and go but he remained as though glued to the same grounds, tirelessly offering himself for the boys and the mission.

Apart from the ones already mentioned, there followed Fr. Bernard, and then Fr. Joseph Fernando who also left the congregation making it expedient for the superiors to appoint Bro. Gabriele himself as director.

Then came new winds of change, in January 2000, Fr. Pinto, a qualified mechanic having completed a course in Lathe machines in India, was appointed as administrator and then later in-charge of the workshop.

In 2002 when Bro. Gabriele and he approached the American Embassy for help, to upgrade the standard of the technical school, they were taken aback when the official there suggested that, should they start employing themselves, to freeing the boys caught in the sinister web of prostitution, they could intervene and render some substantial help.

Fr. Pinto shaken and ashamed that something so devious was taking place right there in their vicinity, lost no time in contacting immediately the boys in the oratory to verify the truth. True, they agreed, confirming the same, acknowledging the fact that it was an open secret here that was left unchecked, as they brought in the dollars. The youth, nevertheless, agreed to help and decided on a public demonstration in Negombo. They had posters made and a day fixed to stage the demonstration.

The news, on reaching official ears, had the DIG of police from Colombo rush down to Negombo to stop this public display. He immediately called for a meeting with all the leaders of Negombo town, but on the day appointed, found the proponents of the idea - the Salesians missing. There and then they sent a police van to Don Bosco with an appeal to the Salesians to attend the meeting. So, Fr. Pinto picked up his friend, the parish priest at Grand street St. Mary’s Church, and attended the meeting.

At the request of the DIG, the demonstration was called off, but the entire community was asked to lend a helping hand. Seventy young boys were rounded up who were regularly involved in the sex trade. These were ultimately instrumental in exposing the paedophiles.

The officials, knowing that this task was not going to be easy for untrained uniformed personnel, asked the Salesians to do the rehabilitation of these sex workers. At first it was just for a month and then extended to three months and more as the boys kept coming in one by one. There were even threats made to Fr. Pinto by those involved in the devious trade but the network of people, that included the local leaders and hoteliers, helped keep a watch on any such suspicious activity and report it to the Salesians. It became a community endeavour.

Seminars were held for the parents who till that day saw only the green notes the boy brought home and felt no scruples about an abused boy who could not in any way get pregnant and shame the family.

The Government put at the disposal of the Salesians an infamous house in Katana, which was once discreetly used by the government as a correction centre for revolutionary groups that were threatening the government. The Salesians utilised the place till the Archbishop put at their disposal the house of the Nuncio at Uswetakeyawa.

The Nuncio had built that house for himself but on government orders had moved to Colombo where all other State delegates were housed. This was then handed over to the archbishop, who made it available to the Salesians as the rehabilitation centre for the boys abused. A few years later, since they wanted to do some developmental work through the intervention of some benefactors, the Salesians purchased the house from the archbishop and on Easter Sunday the boys were shifted to the new place. Today it remains the property of the Salesians.

When the bubble burst, news reached the Vatican and had Bro. Gabriele invited to report to the families gathered in the Vatican Square of the prevailing situation. After rendering the report, he was honoured when asked to meet the Holy Father John Paul II, present there who presented him with a medal. The Italian media as well would not leave the opportunity and invited Brother for an interview on prime-time television.

In 1993 when the emerald island was declared as a Provincial Delegation, Fr. Jaime was announced as its first delegate. He was the rector at Kandy as there were five brothers doing theology there, the civil war barring them entry to India.

The development of the vice-province historically began with his commitment and dedication, to it. He immediately appointed Bro. Gabriele to be the economer, knowing his caliber and above all his transparency and meticulous concern for details.

Though miles apart, Fr. Jaime in Kandy and Bro. Gabriele in Negombo, their work went on without a hitch, for the wheels were well oiled, by trust and faith. Only when Fr. Jaime was appointed rector in Uswetkeyawa did they come together, so that naturally became the first Delegate house.

He continued to remain as economer with Fr. Benjamin Puthota, 1996 and again when Fr. Pinto, was appointed the first provincial of the newly erected, vice-province, in 2003. Under Fr. Pinto he remained for the next three years, after which Pisana, demanded that a new economer be appointed but Fr. Pinto aggressively supported the imminent need for Bro. Gabriele, to be retained.

The change ultimately came with the selection of Fr. Shiran, with the appointment of Fr. Nihal, as provincial, in 2009, to the much awaited relief of Bro. Gabriele, who had served at that post for nearly sixteen years.

Those years proved his mettle as earlier the province had only two institutions, Negombo and Kandy. Through Bro. Gabriele’s good offices and the kind intervention of Fr. Zuffetti the economer in the Philippines he managed to extend the building at Negombo then part by part the aspirantate of Dankotuwa (1994), and Palliyawata. Then came Kotadeniyawa (1995), Elpitya (1996) a parish and a boarding house, that the Salesians, not having enough personnel, later handed over to the diocese. Then followed Arambegama (1999), and Nochiyagama (2000) and Bibile (2001), and Dungalpitya (2001) followed by Murunkan (2004) and Metiyagane (2010) and Mankulam (2014) constructions that came forth akin to the golden eggs of the fabled goose.

The first floor of the provincial house of Dungalpitya, was a family venture, as his own brother Don Luigi, had contributed out of his own personal savings.

Not all these edifices today display a board or a plaque of either grateful acknowledgment or the identity of the man behind the scene, but the fact of his tireless work remains undeniable even though it may over the years be forgettable. Be it the time of the ghastly civil war that lasted for nearly twenty-six years (1983 – 2009) or the disastrous tsunami that nearly swallowed the island in 2004, the “Golden Goose” kept delivering the works allotted to his care, never for once thinking of the risk that went with the assignments, often times carrying material through battle zones relying totally on the protection of Mary Help of Christians alone.

Three years later - 2012, Fr. Nihal wanted Bro. Gabriele back but Pisana would not permit it, so the post remained vacant. Two of the confreres had refused because they knew that the financial situation was now hanging in a balance. Then one day as he drove to his destination, he learnt through the grapevine that he had been reappointed again. Only later does he receive an official call from Fr. Nihal who wants him for a meeting. However, the hour being late meets him on the following day to be informed what he already knew. No one else was willing to do the job as the financial situation had nearly crippled and so the onus had fallen on him. Faith made him accept it even though he knew that he would have to rebuild all that had been mislaid.

Around the fourth year of his term, Fr. Nihal, sought resignation from his office, but at the guidance of Fr. Maria Arokiam – the regional, he shouldered his post for another year till, the appointment of Fr. Almeida – 2015, could materialize.

Bro. Gabriele, convinced that the new provincial should have his own team, graciously resigned, leaving the option to the new provincial to choose his own man. In reality, he was only wanting to save himself from embarrassment should the new man, ask him to step down.

His had not been a very positive experience, having seen the refusal made, when one of the provincial councilors, in the second half of the then provincial’s term, was asked to resign. The councilor defending his post, on the grounds that he was elected for three years, claimed the right to continue till he finished his term.

Remembering that scene left him wiser, and so offered his resignation a day after Fr. Almeida took over the reigns of the vice-province. Pisana accepted Bro. Gabriele’s resignation, and after the required consultations selected Fr. Felix.

However, to quell the upheavals that followed had, the Pisana delegate Fr. Piotr from the economer general’s office and subsequently for a change in personnel. The ensuing confusion saw a lot of mud-slinging and accusations of mismanagement of funds (while in office) brought against both Bro. Gabriel and Mr. George from India - who had been employed to work for the province at the request of the former provincial Fr. Pinto.

At the team visit in India, of the Rector Major – Rev. Fr. Angel Fernandez Artime, with the provincials and the economers of South Asia, sought for clarifications, on the above matter. Finding no one who could either clarify or clear the accusations, he proceeded to have the matter be sorted out fairly and objectively once and for all. To avoid any biased views, it was considered best to resort to Swiss auditors to verify the matter against Mr. George and the ‘Golden Goose’ who had laboured for nearly thirty-seven years by the sweat of his brow.

The Swiss auditing company finally handed over an objective and clear report of the accounts in question to the Rector Major, who immediately informed the provincial – Fr. Almeida and cleared both Bro. Gabriel and Mr. George of any misdemeanour they were accused of. The same information was circulated to all the confreres in the province. The only regret that remains till date, in the recesses of his seventy-seven year old mind, is the absence of an apology denied, to either of them.

Pisana invited Fr. Elson Barretto, from the province of Mumbai, to manoeuvre the administration but, finding much apathy, left after two years, in utter frustration, to return to his province. Fr. Sagayaraj, from the province of Trichy was then asked to carry the burden presently.

Not much need be said of the caliber of the ‘Golden Goose’, who tirelessly and faithfully had tied himself to a post that had in a short time seen four different faces.

Though the years have taken a toll on his strength, and the betrayals, on his enthusiasm, it has not touched the core, where even today; be it a holiday or a working day you will still find him making time for his Lord and his religious commitments, in simple and humble fidelity.

Others, would delight to see their names in gold and black for recognition from posterity, but not the ‘Golden Goose’, whose basic principle even today remains unchanged, ‘work discreetly for the bread of heaven’. Or rather lightly speaking for the ‘pasta’ of heaven.

Every confrere that presently passes Don Bosco Tech Centre -Jaffna, to pay their respects to him, leave, only after they have enjoyed, that delicious tongue-licking dish, prepared by those huge generous hands.

A hearty laugh explodes from that big heart when playfully suggested that the institution be re-christened as ‘Don Bosco Pasta Centre’.