

## **Sr Gabby RIP**

It would be very easy for me to tell you all about Sr Gabriel's life: where she was born and grew up, her youth, her life as a Brentwood Ursuline, her teaching years, and so on; but many of you will already know these outer facts. Also, others – including a member of the family – will pay their own tribute to Gabby at the end of the Mass. The best thing for me to do, I'm sure, is share with you a little of the Gabby I knew – not so much the outer facts, important though these are, but the inner landscape of the person I experienced her to be, because obviously we all knew her in a different way. The best thing, yes, but the hardest; because – with apologies to our Lord Jesus – which of these is easier to say: 'She was born in Carrick-on-Suir, County Tipperary' or: 'Let me tell you what I think nourished her heart.' But that you may know I came to understand a little of this extraordinary woman, let me suggest that her heart was nourished by beauty. I suppose we can say that

about every human being to a greater or lesser extent, but it can be said of Gabby in a very particular way.

Each one of us is brought into the world to walk a very personal byway of one of the great classical paths to God; and there are as many byways as there are people to tread them. To my mind, it is a byway of the path of beauty that Gabby was called to walk: the approach to God as the source and origin of all beauty. The historian George Bancroft said: "Beauty itself is but the sensible image of the infinite".

From Plato and Plotinus of the ancient world, through Augustine and Aquinas, to Heidegger and Roger Scruton of modern times – to say nothing of theologians – philosophers of every age have wrestled with the great aesthetic questions. Very sensibly, Gabby didn't have time to wrestle with the great aesthetic questions – she simply knew that wherever one finds beauty, one sooner or later stumbles across God. In art, music, poetry, literature

and human relationships – which are capable of the greatest beauty of all – *Deus ibi est*.

Her face would become radiant before a masterful painting – I know, because I was there on more than one occasion; she could become utterly still listening to a piece of music, and she was at once reader, lover and teacher of the great works of literature – in which her beloved home country is so conspicuously rich. I was once walking along one of the corridors in the Grange, singing to myself very *sotto voce* the opening line of some song or other when, suddenly, and to my complete surprise, I heard a soft voice somewhere behind me sing the next line. It was Gabby, of course. I'm not going to tell you that the song was *Im Wunderschönen Monat Mai* from Schumann's song cycle *Dichterliebe* – that would be far too pretentious... and one thing that Gabby wasn't is pretentious. She wore her many-faceted erudition lightly.

She was a natural teacher, delighting in the passing on of experience and the knowledge that experience brings. I know there are many of you here who were her pupils at one time or another, and you will know her commitment, dedication and love of the work. Gabby was at different times a teacher of German and French, Head Teacher, Community Superior and a worker in the Youth Service; the fact that she contributed so much to Walsingham House when it was at Chingford and the number of girls here today from the Ursuline School is a testimony to the prolonged youth of her own heart. She remembered all her past pupils and was genuinely interested in their post-school lives. She loved young people, encouraged and inspired them and was so good with them – almost certainly because in a very delightful way she remained a young person herself. The approach to God as beauty requires a wonderment of heart: the willingness to be open to receive the world and its hundred thousand things with unwearied eyes, as if for the first time. The enemy of such wonderment is cynicism, which is why – whatever

she was – Gabby was never a cynic. Young people responded to and loved her authenticity – and there’s nothing like a young person for instantly spotting a fake. Gabby wasn’t a fake – she was 100% real.

One of Tipperary’s best contemporary poets, Michael Coady, who comes from Gabby’s own home town of Carrick-on-Suir, captures perfectly this attitude of genuine wonderment and openness to what is fresh and new, when he writes:

‘I know you were always someone with a heart  
for the true thing,  
For a child or a saying, for another person,  
a flower or a song,  
Life that came dancing through fingers was most  
of your praying  
And your darkness redeemed in the shape and  
surprise of the word.’

If Gabby had had a Twitter account, she would have thousands of followers, indubitably; I do think,

however, that she would have difficulties limiting herself to Twitter-length observations – because, like her famous compatriot Oscar, she loved to talk. And talk she did: informatively, illuminatingly, wittily, entertainingly. She could always be relied upon – and often was – to enthrall a guest who knew nobody. This ability went down very well at the nine o’ clock club, I must say.

Ah, the nine o’clock club! This was something I started with the help of several sisters, including Gabby. She and I, together with Teresa, Imelda and Sarah, would sit one evening a week in a shadowy corner of the refectory at 9.00pm, and I would bring a couple of bottles of red wine and some nibbles; there we sat and sipped and speculated how the world might best be put to rights. Once the wine had been appreciatively consumed, it didn’t seem to matter whether the world was put to rights or not. Occasionally, we extended an invitation – properly written out on a little card – to another member of the

community, but mostly it was Gabby, Teresa, Imelda, Sarah and me.

Gabby went through her own bitter waters; again, I know this, because I was there. Especially some time after she had given up the Headship, there was an extended period of what can only be called depression; sometimes its was deep and biting, at other times less so, but it never entirely subsided. Even when she was at Chingford – where she very generously gave of her free time to teach my German niece English – there were shadows still gathering. I think this is inevitable in one who is called to approach God through beauty – simply because the work which God assigns to such a soul is often made painful by the darkness that surrounds us. The lover of beauty is called upon to uncover whatever is lovely in this darkness – and in doing so, to draw the attention of the world to divine beauty at its heart. Sometimes this can shape a melancholy character; on the other hand, it can be a character which rejoices in every moment life gives. Sr Gabriel was just such a

one. Even when she was struggling against depression, she was exhilarated by life and relished each day as a blessing. In the low times, the bleak hours, she was consoled above all by poetry. She loved poetry. She once founded her own 'Dead Poets' Society'.

Finally, for Gabby, I would like to share the great prayer of Fr Bede Jarrett OP, which refuses to concede any substantial reality to death:

'We seem to give them back to thee, O God who gavest them to us. Yet as thou didst not lose them in giving, so do we not lose them by their return. Not as the world giveth, givest thou O lover of souls. What thou givest thou takest not away, For what is thine is ours also if we are thine. And life is eternal and love is immortal, And death is only an horizon, And an horizon is nothing but the limit of our sight. Lift us up, strong Son of God that we may see further; cleanse our eyes that we may see more clearly; draw us closer to thyself that we may know ourselves to be nearer to our loved ones who are with thee. And while thou dost prepare a place for us, prepare us also for that



happy place, That where thou art we may be also for  
evermore.'