

16 August

Br FRANZ GABRIEL

1 October 1919 – 16 August 2009



Oskar Wermter writes:

Franz Gabriel was in his quiet, smiling way a man of great charism. His mere presence had a positive, healing effect on the community and on the mission of its members. Not a priest yet he had a great influence on priests and young Jesuits studying for the priesthood. The question whether the Society, a priestly order, needs non-ordained members was rendered irrelevant by a man like Franz who lived his vocation so convincingly. His very person put an end to the argument. So many Jesuits owe him so much, for his presence, his smile his sober, unsentimental prayerfulness, his great ability to listen to, and to empathize with, people, his wonderful ability to make people feel at home and his ability to make friends high and low.

Born into a family of five in Gross- Doebam, Upper Silesia near the border with Poland. He entered the Society in 1937. His novice Master was Otto Pies who later survived years in Dachau concentration camp. In 1940 Gabriel was called up for service in the navy but was dismissed because he was a Jesuit and so ‘not worthy to defend the Fatherland.’

He trained as a tailor but had many other skills including being a cook. In the novitiate in Berlin, he did all the buying and made friends with the traders and shop assistants. He had a keen eye for any Jesuit suffering physically or psychologically and would get them to the right doctor. He served in existing and new novitiates in Germany until his ‘moment of deliverance’ when two novitiates amalgamated and he was free at last to go to the missions, something he always wanted. He was now 52 and set about learning English.

From 1971 to 1990, he served the Sinoia/Chinhoyi community as a gifted guest master. Many a weary missionary would arrive at Canisius house during the war, stressed out by the tension, and be revived by Franz with a cup of the best coffee. And that would be just the beginning of his welcome.

In 1990, he moved to Arrupe House, where this writer was in charge of a programme for young Jesuits that included learning French so as to study philosophy in Zaire (the Congo). He was ever patient and welcoming and tried to get the measure of the young men coming from diverse English-speaking countries. In 1992, he returned to Germany, now united, and was once again minister in Biesfeld in east Berlin. He rejoiced to do what he could to assist in rebuilding the church in the east. In 1995 he was again working in the novitiate in Nuremberg and in 1998 was recalled to Zimbabwe! First, he helped at Arrupe College and then returned to his old work at Canisius. After four years, he returned to Germany and was guest master at the Mission office in Nuremberg. Finally, in 2006, he retired to Peter Faber house in Berlin which he had helped to build many years earlier. He died in his 90th year after a severe stroke.