

REMEMBERING FATHER GILSON

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(English Version)

The year was 1967. I had joined Class X, in the Humanities Section, with an enviable track record of standing last or second last in every class from VI onward. The crowning glory was my failure to pass Class VIII, followed by my close shaves in my second year in the same class as well as in the next class, when I studied Science in the ‘Higher Secondary’ stream, where one had to fight all the time. The other ‘feathers’ in my cap were the several warnings received for ‘poor conduct’, mischief and misbehavior. In other words, I was declared an ideal bad student when I joined, not without trepidation, the first day in my new class.

Everything was strange: the room, the boys, the subjects no physics, chemistry or math, only silly subjects like history, geography and literature. But the strangest was the class teacher Father P.Y. Gilson. I had seen this strange padre in the corridors and had always wondered how this placid Belgian missionary, with such a peculiar French accent and without any noticeable chin, survived the heat of India and the turmoil of unruly boys. I would like to flatter myself into believing that he had heard of me as the quintessential problem child.

Even if he did, he seemed to take no notice of it in spite of my fight with an overgrown Parsi boy right on the first day and its evidence so prominent all over my torn dress. He asked me to move up to the first bench, which was outrageous! And then he proceeded straight into the lessons, little realising that I could hardly understand anything, as I had not studied the basics of these subjects in Class IX. Be that as it may, I was unconsciously drawn into the stories. Which child can resist a good story, that this Father seemed to weave, with his magical voice and funny accent?

His narrative was so life-like that I listened spell-bound, and gently stepped on a magic carpet which carried me over fantasy-lands. His quips had a rare touch of Gallic humour and, for the first time in my life, I was not bored in the class-room. When the period ended, I could not believe myself! I had actually enjoyed literature!

More wonders were to follow, as more stories came out of this magician's hat and very soon, I actually started looking forward to his classes. Perhaps the greatest transformation that Father Gilson induced in me was not only a friendly attitude to his subjects, but towards studies *per se*. And that was only the beginning. As class teacher, he was in overall charge of my scholastic welfare. Between classes and after classes, he would encourage me to meet him for extra lessons to make up for the whole year's study that I had missed at the class IX stage. The special care that he seemed to heap upon me had a soothing influence not only upon my attitude to studies, but to the world at large. No more was it a hostile jungle where only bookworms studied and sissies came first in class.

But, my reverie was soon shattered by the reality of the first class tests. The dread and horror with which I had viewed this 'Inquisition' was reinforced by the sinking feeling that I was condemned to stand last in this class as well, in spite of my brief flirtation with academics. "English Essay" was the first test and I distinctly remember the choking voice with which I told Father Gilson that I had never scored well and that I was always at a loss with words. His encouragement could hardly stop the streams of sweat that flowed endlessly during the exam, as I groped for the right expression and the appropriate word.

But when the results came out you could knock me down with a feather. I had stood fourth in class! My parents were overjoyed, my friends pinched me but nobody realised what it did to my confidence. The next surprise was a 'first' in Arithmetic. Coming from the Science stream to Humanities, it was not so difficult to score and I had learnt to dream. History, Geography and others followed, but there was no way I could stop this new-found excitement of 'topping'.

The rest was just crazy: a small success followed another, of course, with a lot of toils under the constant guidance of Father, dear Father. A few months later, we learnt that Father Gilson was to leave for another school and in a day or two he just left! I wept openly. Nobody had ever treated me like this before. Nobody else could turn around a sad case like mine into a fairy-tale. And thanks to him, I am where I am today: no doubt about that.

A decade later, I was posted as Additional District Magistrate of Asansol and Durgapur in the Burdwan district of West Bengal. I was overjoyed to hear from a friend that Father Gilson was the Headmaster of St. Xavier's, Durgapur. I sought for an immediate appointment. How could I tell him all that I wanted to say? Here was the teacher who had turned my life around so close, after so many years. Would he recognize me? He was the man I had referred to in all my Teachers' Day speeches in the stations where I had served as a Magistrate, and at the dozens of School and College Committees of which I was ex-officio President. I could hardly wait!

The day finally arrived. A strange feeling of nostalgia overpowered me, as the official car drove into the school with red lights, policemen and the other unavoidable trappings of authority. I was ushered in from the staircase and as I walked into Father's room a familiar scent greeted me. He was not there, for he had to take a class as some teacher was absent. But he came in soon and shook my hands warmly. "I am proud of you", he said. He was just the same, a trifle older. But, I was transformed, from a picture of confidence to a quivering, nervous 'student' groping for words.

Even before I could frame my gratitude into proper sentences, the bell rang and Father Gilson sprang up from his chair exclaiming: "Oh my God, there's another class to attend. And the little boys are waiting. Naughty, you know. Like you were. I must go. God bless you, my son. Do well. But I must leave."

The good Jesuit, who I would never see alive again, had no time for my praises and my ever-lasting gratitude. He had other problem children to tend to, to improve, to reform.
