

TRIBUTE TO THE FALLEN HERO, REV. DR. GABRIEL MASOOANE TLABA OMI (PHD)

Introduction

With a deep sense of loss, we pay tribute to the Late Reverend Father Gabriel Masooane Tlaba, an Oblate of Mary Immaculate (OMI), who contributed a lot in the education of the Clergy, Religious as well as Professionals; in and outside Lesotho. We are saddened by the untimely death of our beloved Father which came sooner than we expected. We were still hoping to have him longer among us. It is unfortunate to lose him during this time of the pandemic; in which many who were unable to go to church depended on his consoling sermons on media. A deep sense of loss was expressed by his listeners by their touching comments on Radio Maria, Lesotho; and on Facebook. Indeed, Fr. Tlaba has touched a number of lives, physically, academically, mentally and otherwise. Some of us were privileged to have known him. Since Philosophical and Theological Studies are integral to Priestly Formation, we recall precious moments we had with him at St. Augustine's Major Seminary, as our lecturer in these fields. Hence, as Oblate Scholastics of Lesotho Oblate Province, who were unable to attend his funeral service, we feel obliged to write this article to pay him tribute for his life of service and self-forgetfulness; always looking for the good of others rather than his own self-interests.

Fr. Tlaba an Educator

As a teacher Fr. Tlaba inspired his students with his simplicity, sense of humour, bold character, encouragement, and appreciation of the work of his students. In seemingly harsh words, during exam times and challenging modules, he would say, "*Ntja e tla ja ntjanyana,*" or "*Mona Thomas o fasitse mokoko banna,*" indicating that it would be tough. But ironically, he always made it easy for his students to comprehend the most complex courses like logic, metaphysics, cosmology, etc. – the foundation of which is well recognized on his students abroad. Fr. Tlaba was gifted with wisdom and he shared his profound knowledge with his fellow Oblates, the students of St. Augustine's Major Seminary Lesotho, the National University of Lesotho (N.U.L.) and the Lesotho College of Education (L.C.E.). Rather than focusing on academics and administrative tasks only, Fr. Tlaba devoted himself to serving the spiritual needs of his colleagues and the scholars/students.

Fr. Tlaba administered the Sacraments of the Church to the students at the Lesotho College of Education (L.C.E.). He received converts from other Christian denominations into full communion with the Catholic Church and, chose some students to catechize and instruct them in the Catholic teaching prior to their reception. It is worth noting that some of these students felt called to priestly and religious vocations and eventually, followed these paths. During students' protests in the Lesotho College of Education, Fr. Tlaba was a renowned mediator between the college administration and the Students' Union. He was admired by both parties (*staff and students*) for his ability to reconcile and settle cases. He touched the souls and transformed the lives of many students who were at the verge of destroying their future by his powerful homilies and acts of mercy. He was gifted in offering counselling sessions. He went to as far as organising pilgrimages

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to the Shrine of Our Lady of Fatima, at Ha Ramabanta, for the students; something which its feasibility was undreamt of among the (college) students. Normally, students in tertiary institutions claim to be tied up so much that they do not have time for religious activities. Fr. Gabriel Tlaba, OMI was able to stimulate and encourage them, to set aside, time for religion. He played so well his role of Chaplain at this tertiary Institution (L.C.E.).

In the like manner, among the 1980's when he was the chaplain at Pius XII College House, a Catholic establishment within the National University of Lesotho campus, catering for the religious needs of the university community (*students, teaching- staff and other workers*), Fr. Tlaba mobilised the sodality of the Children of Mary (*Bana ba Maria*) not to be ashamed to put into practice, their religious beliefs.

Fr. Tlaba the Mariologist and the Holy Spirit (C.10)

It is worth noting that Fr. Tlaba was mostly engaged as a professor in Philosophical subjects in the said institutes; holding a PHD in Philosophy from the University of Ottawa. People marvelled at him for his ability to balance a critical mind and devotional life to Mary Mother of God. He possessed a highly critical mind which could easily be detected in his way of speaking, having been a teacher of logic for a long time. Thus, it was unthinkable of him to have a deep conviction about **Mary**; the **Holy Spirit** and the **Holy Eucharist**; which are the issues in our Catholic Faith so vulnerable to critique. After celebrating the Holy Eucharist in a gesture of satisfaction, Fr. Tlaba was fond of saying, "*ke tsoa etsa Mmisa o halalelang*" (I have celebrated the Holy Mass). Father Tlaba was passionately involved with Marian Groups in Lesotho, like the Sodality of the Immaculate Conception and the Legion of Mary as their Spiritual Director; always present in their gatherings, preaching to them with conviction about Mary. He was famously known by saying, "*Ke tlo le fa 'Ma-lona* (I am going to give you *your mother*)," when preparing to preach about Mary to the faithful, to emphasise the importance of Mary as our Mother. His devotion to Mary was also seen in his writings, among which were; *Maria ke 'M'aMolimo* (Mary is the Mother of God), *Maria le Moea o Halalelang* (Mary and the Holy Spirit) etc.

Fr. Tlaba had the same involvement with the Movement for Charismatic Renewal, since its arrival in Lesotho, and became a convincing preacher about the Holy Spirit in the movement. In all these scenarios, one would just marvel how such a critical mind could be so deeply convinced with spiritual matters. He conveyed his teachings with conviction; a sign that he walked his talk. He was both a sign and witness; not just a teacher. There is also a quote remembered of him saying, "Observe the difference between foolishness and humility." Perhaps this is the statement that can help us reconcile his intelligence and his devotional life together with his humility, which seldom abide in one person.

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Fr. Tlaba Advocate of Peace and Justice

Fr. Tlaba was a selfless and faith-filled man; inspired by the Spirit of the book of the Prophet Isaiah 1:17, which says, “*Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow*”. He ceaselessly fought for justice among Basotho Nation without seeking any political advantage. For continuity’s sake, Fr. Tlaba participated in the establishment of a non-profit making organization known as the Transformation Resource Centre, which aims at promoting and advancing peace and justice in the Mountain Kingdom of Lesotho; bearing in mind that, ultimately, his time would come to meet his Saviour. Thus, as the member of the O.M.I. and Chairman of T.R.C., Dr. Tlaba embodied the T.R.C. Mantra of, “If you want peace, Work for Justice”. Hence, during political turmoil and instabilities in the country, Fr. Tlaba always availed himself to console with faith-filled words the political victims. He used to give an encouragement that as responsible citizens, we should not be afraid of the political leaders, but respect them while standing for the truth. So, if they go astray, we must be bold and show them their mistakes. He did all these good deeds bearing in mind that; “*people must let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never failing stream!*” Amos 5:24.

His Oblate Life

Despite his busy schedule, Fr. Tlaba never neglected his religious and priestly duties. He was not a man of excuses. He created time for his private devotions, while remaining faithful to his priestly and religious practices. He tirelessly undertook to preach the annual retreats to his Oblate brothers; normally in two batches, whenever he was asked. His last years’ personal motto was: “**Service**”. He kept on reminding his brother Oblates that they are *called to serve, not to be served; like their divine Master* (cf. Mt. 20:28). One of the recent memories of his teachings to his Brother Oblates is when he expounded on the Oblate Motto, “*Laudetur Jesus Christus, et Maria Immaculata!*” With an open heart he also accepted other tasks he was assigned to in the operations of the Province, and despite the heavy pile already on his desk, in consideration to Constitution 37; he was still connected with his local community, daily sharing the bread of life with his Oblate brothers, so much that on the day he collapsed, according to the report of the Infirmarian, he was on the way to the chapel as the main celebrant of the day. A great oblation indeed! In the love for the congregation, he was actively involved in the recent provincial congress (2019 August, 23). And, still in his busy schedule, he accepted the task of serving in the Provincial Council, holding the position of Vicar Provincial, until death snatched him.

Faithful to his vowed life, Fr. Tlaba maintained a simple lifestyle, bringing his income to the community; not even daring to change his old corolla model car which he used for years. When asked how much he was selling his books, he used to say, “I’m not interested in how much money the books make, but I’m interested in delivering the Good news to the people of God.” Even so, Fr. Tlaba would not spare any moment to grab the opportunity that knocks at his door to preach about Church doctrines and about Mary, with whom his heart was. By so doing he fulfilled the

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Sacred Scriptures where it says “*Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also*” (Mt. 6:21). Thus, the African Proverb has it all when it says, “when an elder dies a library burns to the ground” – we have lost the whole book on the Church teaching and on Mary, the Mother of God. Nevertheless his writings remain a legacy for us and future generations.

Conclusion

Father Tlaba left us a legacy and a consolation that everything with God is possible. His dedication to prayer and his untiring labour for the well-being of the church left us a living example of zeal for the salvation of souls; as a lecturer not sparing any effort to preach retreats for different groups in the Church irrespective of his preoccupation. His life was a constant reminder that we, Oblates of Mary Immaculate, are called to serve, not to be served. As we let Fr Tlaba go, our hearts are filled with pain as if we are the ones who breastfed him. With silence, he closed the door of life, and departed. Our life without him in our midst will not be the same in many respects.

In the words of Albert Einstein, “The value of a man resides in what he gives and not what he is capable of receiving”. Two words that summarize his life are humility and generosity; always serving people with love and patience. He truly manifested in his life the words of St. Thomas Aquinas saying, “It is better to illuminate than merely to shine, to deliver to others contemplated truths than merely to contemplate.” A figure of wisdom is resting; a life that shed light so that others’ ways may be bright, has come to rest. *Mosotho oa khale o ne a opile khomo lenaka ha a re, “tsoku ea e-shoa, lekoko le sale le alloa bana;” ha Batswana bona ba re, “Marope a bagale a bonwa ka molora!”* – we will remember you through your works!

All in all, the life of Fr. Tlaba teaches us that, we should always remember that we will not live forever in this world, and we have to leave some remarkable works for the good of our congregation and the future of the Church of God. Together with St. Eugene de Mazenod, Bl. Joseph Gerard and all Holy Oblates, under the banner of Mary Immaculate on whose intercession we rely and whom we earnestly venerate, we beseech God to receive his soul; as he had a deep faith in Eternal Life. Rest in Peace, Mofokeng!

Having said all these, and aware that not everything about Father Gabriel have been recounted, we wish all those into whose hands this “eulogy” will pass, the best of the Lord’s abundant blessings during this Lenten Season and a Blessed Easter!!! To you, Brother Oblates in the Lord’s vineyard, we appreciate your tireless work. **Continue to be close to the people you serve.**